

Commissioners need to hold the line on spending

On the
Prairie Dog
Steve Haynes



County commissioners across the state are expecting a tax “windfall” next year from increased assessments on agricultural land. Some are already making plans to spend it, but that might not be the best idea.

For one thing, tax windfalls have a way of disappearing as fast as they appear. A county that spends a windfall to fix roads, buy equipment or give employees raises often has to raise taxes later to sustain the spending.

And that leads to unhappy voters.

Whether that will happen this time is anybody’s guess. Commissioners have been complaining for some time that ag land was underassessed, even on the “income” formula the state uses to set its value. But that same formula can produce dips in valuation as well as increases.

Assessors tell us that part of the increase this year is due to changes at Kansas State University, which does the math on land values for the state. That part of the increase might be permanent, at least until the formula changes again. But it’s only part of the increase; increases in farm income account for the rest.

And farm income comes and goes. It’s known for wild swings.

So the likelihood of this windfall disappearing, or shrinking, a year or two out is great. Plus, it’s a windfall in name only. Even if tax rates stay the same, the farmers and ranchers who own this land will have to pay real, larger tax bills that may not make them too happy. That could lead to more assessment appeals, unpaid taxes and unhappy voters.

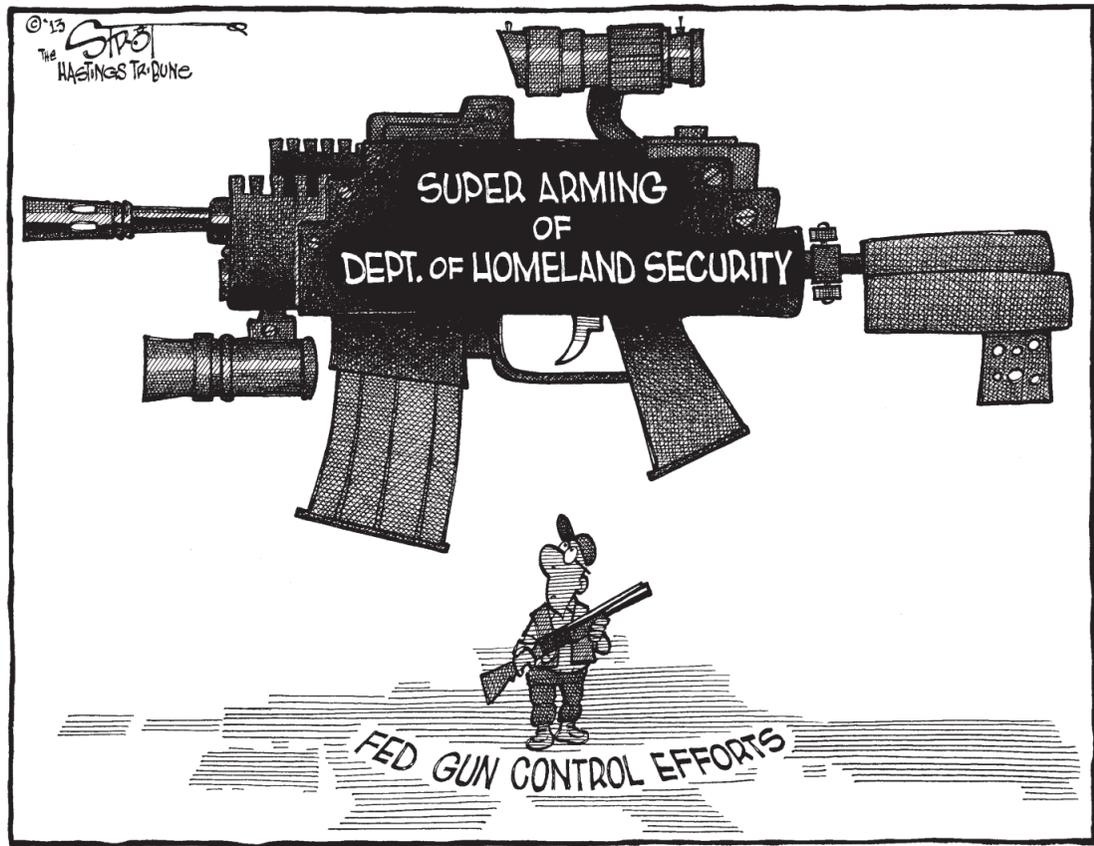
A safer course for counties would be to hold the line on spending and let tax rates – gasp – go down. Voters are almost sure to approve. That would give everyone, even the farmer with an increased assessment, a break.

No doubt, there are a lot of demands on county government, especially from new programs pressed on counties by the state and federal governments. But the mood of voters in this state is pretty clear: they’ve elected the most conservative, anti-tax governor and legislature in anyone’s memory.

Commissioners will be tempted to increase spending next year, given the situation, but it might not be wise, given the times. It might even invite a return of the old tax lid or other limits on local spending which we’d be better off without.

For now, the ball is in the commissioners’ court. We advise due caution, conservative spending and listening to the will and mood of the voters.

– Steve Haynes



There really is no place like a home

Out Back
Carolyn Plotts



After a week in Guatemala I can say this is the most beautiful place I have seen. It also has some of the worst poverty in the world. But, like Mexico, the people are kind, generous with what little they have, and very grateful for our presence.

The Casas por Cristo team we worked with was from Monticello, Ill. There was a retired police chief; his wife, a retired first grade teacher; their daughter; a school district employee; a commodities trader; an IT guy; a single mom working on a college degree; and five high school students.

It’s amazing how, in one short week, you can really bond with people. Working and sweating side by side kind of puts everyone on the same level. Add in sharing meals, bathrooms and space in the truck and you understand how close everyone can become.

The family we built for was a man

and his wife, Marvin and Erma. We learned they had lost their first child, but are expecting their second. Marvin worked with our team every day. The day we finished the house, Marvin’s family invited the entire team to have lunch. We knew the meal probably cost them a week’s wages and eagerly accepted. What a feast it was. Chicken, rice, potatoes, tomatoes and, of course, homemade tortillas. Jim discovered something new - lime juice on raw tomatoes. The meal was preceded by the mandatory firecrackers. It seems Guatemalans

really like their fireworks and use every opportunity to set them off.

No matter how many house dedications I am involved with, each and every one is special. Many tears are shed as we present the keys and a Bible to the new homeowners. We look forward to seeing Marvin and Erma and their new baby again.

So, here we are, in San Raimundo spending the night with a young couple who live here full-time. They have a lovely Spanish style house outfitted with all the modern conveniences and genuine hospitality. They are gone to the airport right now, picking up another volunteer, a woman we know from Canada, who will be working with another group next week.

By this time next week we will have another house built and be back in the USA. As much as I love doing this, there really is no place like home.

It’s twister time again so pay attention and be safe

Insight
John Schlageck



If you’ve ever heard the stampeding sound of a tornado or been close enough to see fence posts, the side of a building or the steel of a grain bin twisting furiously as the dreaded black monster gobbles up the countryside, you’ll remember it always.

Kansas ranks third in the nation in the number of tornadoes with an average of 61 per year since 1950, according to figures by the National Weather Service (NWS) in Topeka. The most tornadoes occurred in 2008 when more than 180 tornadoes ravaged the Sunflower State. The fewest recorded were 14 in 1976.

Severe weather generally begins sometime after the first week of March in Kansas. Last year the tornado season began February 28. Unfortunately, one of the eight tornadoes occurring that day struck Harveyville resulting in damage, injuries and one death. The last tornado of the year touched down in Shawnee County on September 17.

April of 2012 was a record month in terms of tornado count. The 52 tornadoes logged surpassed the old April record of 46 set in 1964.

April 14, 2012 will go down as one of the more prolific days in severe weather history for central and southeastern Kansas. Twenty-four twisters touched down across 26 counties. Of these two

dozen tornadoes, one was rated an EF4 (winds up to 199 mph) and two were rated as EF3s (winds up to 167 mph).

One surprising and fortunate statistic from this major storm outbreak was the lack of injuries and fatalities considering the significant structural damage to several homes and businesses. Each of the tornadoes classified as violent or strong were reported up to one mile in width at several points along their particular paths.

Last year, 94 tornadoes tore through Kansas. The longest tornado tracked for 50.3 miles April 14 while moving through Rice, Ellsworth, McPherson and Saline counties.

The most costly twister occurred in Sedgwick County resulting in \$500 million in damage including 38 injuries on April 14. Rush County reported the most in one county with 12.

And while no amount of structural damage will ever trump the tragedy of lives lost, the worst tornado, as far as

loss of human life, occurred on May 25, 1955 in Udall, Kansas. On that fateful day 80 people died and 270 were injured, according to NWS records.

Andover ranks as the second worst storm on record. Seventeen people died and another 302 were injured on April, 26, 1991.

When it comes to safety during tornado season, the bottom line remains staying informed of possible severe weather conditions. Remember to listen to or stay up to date on conditions in your area, especially when severe thunderstorms and tornadoes are possible across a wide area.

Tornado warnings are issued with Doppler radar that indicates tornadoes are forming or a tornado has been sighted by a trained weather spotter. This warning will tell the location, and if possible, movement, estimated speed and towns located in the tornado path.

Think ahead during this severe weather season. Listen to forecasts daily, key into local weather conditions and know where the nearest shelter is. And remember, when a tornado threatens immediate action may save you and your loved ones’ lives.

Pay attention to the weather around you. Stay informed.

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