

## Legislators: Stimulus good, but not enough

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A Band-Aid over a broken leg.

That's how some local legislators Saturday described the almost \$1 billion in federal stimulus money pegged for Kansas as a result of President Barack Obama's American Recovery Act. The state's 2010 budget, energy and health care were among the other topics covered during 2009's first "Eggs and Issues" breakfast series, a monthly opportunity for locals to hear directly from elected officials.

Acknowledging the \$300 million reduction in the state's fiscal year 2009 budget, legislators spoke of the progress and challenges in addressing a possible \$1.2 million deficit in 2010.

In a budget proposal released Feb. 28, Gov. Kathleen Sebelius recommended the state take advantage of federal stimulus dollars, as well as making \$600 million additional cuts in state-funded programs.

Using federal stimulus money has numerous strings attached that would limit the percentage cuts legislators make to agencies receiving the aid. For example, K-12 education funding must be maintained at fiscal year 2009 levels to be eligible, and higher education funding must be maintained at levels equal to fiscal year 2006.

State Rep. **Sydney Carlin**, D-Manhattan, said the House Appropriations Committee, on which she serves, is faced with recommending 10 percent across-the-board budget cuts for the 17 state agencies that concern it.

Some of those cuts, she said, were higher than the governor's proposed figures.

"(Sebelius) doesn't think it is necessary to make such large cuts if we use the stimulus money," **Carlin** said, adding the stimulus money should be used to "protect jobs and avoid deeper cuts in the budget."

"It's a tough time, and it will take over a year for us to feel the impact (of the cuts we are making) right now," **Carlin** said.

State Sen. Mark Taddiken, R-Clifton, agreed the federal stimulus dollars should be used toward offsetting the state's projected \$1.2 million deficit, which he broke down into \$400 million of "spending more than we have taken in," and \$800 million "caused by global economic problems."

Taddiken said 10 percent cuts may come close to resolving the \$400 million deficit, but acknowledged those cuts would be too severe for some agencies, such as education.

"That's where the stimulus money comes in, so we won't have to make those cuts and we can still fill those holes," he said.

Taddiken did, however, advise the state "proceed very cautiously" when deciding how to use the stimulus money. He said that stipulations directing how the money can be used might be restrictive or significantly increase the cost of some projects.

"We're going to take (the money), there's no doubt about that, but we have to be very careful about how we

plug it into the budget," he said.

Richard Carlson, a Republican representative from St. Marys, said he had "serious doubts" about the long-term success of the federal stimulus package.

Carlson, who described himself as "a strong proponent of free enterprise," said while the short-term infusion of stimulus money will help, "the economy is slowing down, and that is a three or four year process."

Sen. Roger Reitz, R-Manhattan, agreed that problems will be heightened when the stimulus money runs out.

"Salaries (for those in higher education) might be very secure for the next two years," he said, adding "in 2012, we're all going to be wondering what to do next."

Also discussed at Saturday's meeting:

Holcomb coal plant

Reitz urged audience members to consider the Holcomb coal plant as necessary to address western Kansas' "base-line energy needs."

"We talk about wind and sun, but the best we'll get from those is 20 percent," he said.

Reitz said coal was the best short-term tool to combat rising fuel costs in the western part of the state while other technologies - such as nuclear power - are developed.

Reitz acknowledged that so-called clean coal technology is "still in its infancy," but said the more pressing problem to him was securing affordable energy.

"When you turn on the lights, think coal," he said, "because that's where it's coming from."

**Carlin** said she thought the real issue was adequate regulation on air quality and rates. She said she voted against an energy bill that did not make adequate provisions for those factors, and believes the Holcomb bill is facing "almost certain governor veto."

Health care

Reitz said health care issues "cost money and are not being talked about" at the state level. He did, however, offer some advice to Sebelius, recently-appointed health and human services secretary, in her quest to fulfill Obama's promise to provide universal health care.

"She will have to find a way to adequately compensate primary care physicians," he said.

Using as an example the reimbursement amount paid to doctors who provide services for Medicaid patients, Reitz said low compensation amounts discourage medical students from choosing internal medicine or family practice because "it won't be enough to compensate them fairly and cover their student loans."

"If the idea is to improve preventive health care or fight an infection early we have to find a way to remunerate the first line... the person who refers you to a specialist," he said.

"Those people should be considered an important part of the health care team, if not the most important."

Reitz, who said universal health care was needed to combat escalating health care costs, said he hoped to

share his thoughts with the governor before she left for Washington.

"It will have some growing pains," he said. "I am hoping to meet with her... if she will meet with me."

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