

## Difficult, old issues are at forefront

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When the 2009 legislative session convenes Monday morning, area lawmakers expect to be dealing with a lot of very difficult and very leftover issues.

None will be more difficult or more leftover than the budget, which is expected to require as much as \$140 million in adjustments merely to get through 2009.

"It's hard for me to conceive of what that will imply," remarked state Sen. Roger Reitz of the reductions needed to match expenditures with revenues in a time of economic difficulty.

State Rep. **Sydney Carlin** couldn't agree more.

"It's not going to be business as usual," she said.

**Carlin's** principal reason for hope is that the money situation will be so bad that lawmakers will be driven to cooperate by a shared sense of crisis.

"We are all in the same lifeboat," she said.

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius delivers her legislative address Monday, and is likely to propose methods of coping with the money shortfall then. Thus far, Sebelius has tried to rule out touching K-12 education commitments in the effort to balance the state budget, but there are divergent opinions concerning whether that will be possible.

**Carlin**, for one, said she "can't answer right now" whether the state will be able to deliver on its promise of \$59 per pupil base funding, although she added that "we're going to do everything we can." She said she wants to protect K-12 funding as much as possible.

"Even the amount set aside last year wasn't as much as our constitution said we should, and if we have to cut we'll really be in trouble," she said.

Reitz speculated that lawmakers may look at "some fluff ... regarding K-12, although I don't think it will be close to \$140 million."

But if the needed cuts have to come from sources other than K-12, that could be bad news for things such as higher education. Sebelius last summer instructed state agencies to prepare scenarios to make cuts of several percentage points.

"That has to come into the equation," Reitz said. While lamenting that higher education "has been put on the back burner an awful long time," **Carlin** noted the contingency reduction plans already in place, suggesting they'll be implemented. Both also noted that the cut situation could be even worse next year, when the projected deficit grows to as much as \$1 billion. "Their toughest time will be next year," **Carlin** said of the Regents institutions. While promising to "do what I can do," she described herself as feeling "pretty powerless at this point."

Both lawmakers hope the legislature will make some progress this session on development of a comprehensive energy plan, an issue that got sidetracked in 2008 during the debate over approval of two coal-fired units in southwest Kansas.

"I would hope we would get an energy policy established, and it has to relate to a 1.5 percent increase in energy needs over 10 years, and that means all the options are on the table," Reitz said. While to him that includes wind, solar and eventually nuclear energy, for now "the only game in town is coal."

Reitz also expects to hear more about immigration policy, and **Carlin** is hopeful that transportation needs will be looked at. She noted that such a plan would provide jobs. On that score, though, Reitz agreed with state Rep. Richard Carlson, who told city officials last week that he does not see the money for a new transportation plan emerging from this legislature.

None of that falls under the heading of new initiatives. In fact the only new initiatives that do come up share a common denominator: they don't cost anything.

Reitz wonders whether this might be the year the Senate opens discussion on staggered terms. At present, all 40 senators are elected in the same year, meaning it is at least theoretically possible that a substantially new Senate with new leadership could be seated. That could be a problem. "Maybe in 2016 we say half the Senate would just run for two years, then the terms would be four years thereafter," he said. In that way, the

maximum Senate turnover in any election would be 50 percent rather than 100 percent.

**Carlin** wonders whether the legislature might consider delaying the completion of the Senate rehabilitation project, which has been going on for six years. She notes that a legislative planning group has recommended halting the project at some logical point, probably linked to the next issuance of bonds. While she's not committed to calling a halt to the project, she's open to discussing it, given the difficult financial circumstances.