

From The Statehouse
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Week 1: January 11-15, 2010

In This Issue

- Governor Parkinson's State of the State
- FY 2011 budget debate begins
- Legislator Furloughs
- Public safety a big concern in budget discussions

On Monday, January 11, the Kansas Legislature convened for the 2010 legislative session. We have experienced challenges in the past, but the current financial crisis is by far the most severe situation we have faced since the Great Depression. Even after five rounds of crippling budget cuts, revenues are still too low to keep the state operating at current funding levels. A \$400 million shortfall is anticipated.

The next few weeks we will be extremely busy as bills are introduced and committees begin their work. Complete daily calendars are available at www.kslegislature.org along with other useful information.

I am privileged and honored to be your voice in the Kansas Capitol. If I can ever be of assistance to you, please feel free to contact me at home or in Topeka.

Governor Parkinson's State of the State

On Monday, Governor Mark Parkinson delivered an extremely unique State of the State address. In the few short months since he's held the office, Governor Parkinson has proved time and time again that he does business differently from any governor we've had in the past.

The Governor outlined his legislative agenda and a specific FY 2011 budget proposal. Included in his budget recommendations was a revenue package. Discussions about taxes are never popular and Governor Parkinson proposed a budget that he believes will see this state through this financial crisis in the most responsible way possible. After one week and one proposal, it is premature to throw support behind or fully reject any proposal. However, Governor Parkinson made it very clear that he is open to new ideas and I look forward to working with him and my other colleagues to find the best solution possible.

The Governor also outlined a 2010 legislative agenda. He is in support of a statewide clean indoor air act, which gained significant traction in the Legislature last session and has been supported by a growing number of cities and counties across the state. Additionally, he announced the creation of a statewide task force to further grow green jobs in Kansas. Finally, he announced his support for the establishment of a "Rainy Day" fund, which would require the state to set surplus money aside in good economic times, helping avoid budget shortfalls such as the one we currently face. I will have more information on these initiatives throughout the session as we move through the committee process.

FY 2011 Budget Debate Begins

State revenues have declined four straight years; this has never happened before. There have been five rounds of state budget cuts in the last 18 months, equaling a total spending cut of a little more than \$1 billion. Unfortunately, we haven't yet hit bottom. The consensus revenue estimating group is predicting yet another \$400 million revenue shortfall in the next fiscal year.

An occasional review and trimming of state government services and programs is both healthy and necessary. It is critical that we be responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars. However, we are long past the point of “trimming the fat.” This is about public school teachers being laid off, your child in a classroom with 33 other students, offenders released early from prison and with no supervision, skyrocketing tuition for college students, to name a few. These are not abstract “what ifs” on the distant horizon. This is where we are today.

Among his budget recommendations, which received mixed reviews, Governor Parkinson proposed a 1% sales tax increase and a tobacco tax increase as a means of partially filling the budget hole. It is important to note that this budget proposal does not increase state spending. No matter what passes or fails, I appreciate our governor’s effort to keep this focused on Kansans, not on political gain. Tough choices are inevitable, so I am willing to keep an open mind and have honest discussions with my colleagues. You elected me to make reasonable decisions that protect our communities and grow our economy. In that effort, I am willing to give every proposal fair consideration. Governor Parkinson’s proposed budget is a good starting point for this discussion, but we are a long way from a final package.

Legislator Furlough Proposal

This week, Republican leadership proposed a legislator furlough package as a means of saving the state money. If it passes, lawmakers in both houses will be furloughed without pay during the next three Fridays of the session. The legislature will formally adjourn on Thursdays and resume on Mondays, though some legislators may work in committee meetings during the adjournments. In addition, the proposal contains a 5% pay cut for legislators and rolls back the daily food and lodging allowance. I am fully open to reviewing the Legislature’s budget from top to bottom in search of opportunities to cut expenses. The Legislature needs to play by the same rules as every other state agency.

I am more than willing to do my part to see the state through this difficult time; my concern is whether the majority party is using this proposal to set the stage for more extensive state employee furloughs later in the session. That proposal died last year because we did not have legislation in place to allow it. This proposal puts that necessary legislation in place and it is going to be very hard for Any Legislator to vote against the proposal. But, passing such a bill could have a dramatic impact on more than 40,000 Kansans who keep the state running on a day-to-day basis.

Public Safety a Big Concern

As we talk about funding cuts and filling the budget gap, I am particularly concerned with the impact of these cuts on public safety. The Department of Corrections testified in my committee me regarding the specific impact these cuts have had on local communities and the Kansas corrections system as a whole.

In an effort to lessen the impact of reduced funding, the Department set their priority cuts based on the impact to public safety. First to go were things that had no immediate impact, specifically surplus beds at three smaller prison facilities which were closed. Then the Department cut things such as programs or facilities serving lower risk offenders (boot camps and the remaining small minimum facilities), or things that would be impacted in the future, such as some education and treatment programming. The Department tried to retain staff in whom they had invested a great deal of training and skill development because they estimated it would take at least five years to recruit new staff, train them and get them to the same skill levels of the current staff. Some contractual services were cut instead, as those can generally be recovered more quickly.

Department officials indicate that the next round of cuts will mean early release of prisoners (there is no statutory authority for this early release) or dramatic reductions in the intensity of parole supervision. As we move through the budget debate, it is critical to remember that further budget cuts will have a direct impact on you and your family. State government serves important functions in every Kansas community.

I would appreciate your comments regarding future solutions to these difficult issues. As you can see, we have our work cut out for us over the next few months at the Capitol. The time has come to lead a real conversation about the challenges and responsibilities we face in Kansas. Vigorous debates lie ahead, but our most passionate debates are usually the most important. I welcome your feedback on these important issues or any other issue that impacts you and your family. This is the time for legislators to put aside political labels and do what's best for Kansas. With hard work and dedication, we will transform the challenges of 2010 into new opportunities for 2011 and beyond.

Keep in Touch

It is a special honor to serve as your state representative. I value and need your input on the various issues facing state government. Please feel free to contact me with your comments and questions. My office address is Room 451S, Docking State Office Building, Topeka, KS 66612. You can reach me at (785) 296-7567 or call the legislative hotline at 1-800-432-3924 to leave a message for me. Additionally, you can e-mail me at Sydney.Carlin@house.ks.gov . You can also follow the legislative session online at www.kslegislature.org . and review my website for updates from time to time at www.sydneycarlin.com .

Rep. Sydney Carlin