



Capitol Newsletter

Weeks 10-11: March 15-24, 2010

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AT THE STATEHOUSE

I was pleased to have many Manhattan visitors in the Capitol recently, giving testimony and expressing their views. Clinton Owensby, KSU, and retired KSU Forester Gary Naughton, (my brother) came to testify on SCR 1623 regarding the importance of burning the Flint Hills pastures. Usha Reddi and many USD 383 families, students and teachers came for the education rally, and Robbin Cole came to talk with me about the Community Mental Health Centers. I also recently spent time here with Lori Feldkamp of Big Lakes about the problems they are facing with regard to the 10% Medicaid cuts. Also, I was happy to see former Secretary of Wildlife and Parks, Spencer Tomb and Ron Klataske all came to support the current rules for selecting the Secretary of Wildlife and Parks in the future. Also, Dr. Doug Stigge spent a day in the Capitol with the Optometry Association.

I have had two recent groups of Pages working for us in the capitol. On March 4, I was pleased to have Lauren Robbin and Joslen Anderes. And, on March 16 I was pleased to have Bryan Armbrust, Carter Nelson and Eric Fliter. I received many compliments from my colleagues on these students industrious and courteous behavior. Thank you!

This week the House will be on the floor all day Monday-Wednesday in an effort to get as much done as possible before the end of the regular session. We will not convene on the floor Thursday and Friday, although conference committees will continue to meet. Things tend to move quickly in the last two weeks before Drop Dead Day, as any

bill that has not passed both House and Senate chambers can no longer be debated after this deadline (although certain bills, such as the budget, are exempt). I will keep you posted as we work through important legislation.

TRI CARE AND U.S. HEALTH CARE REFORM

One of my constituents passed along to me an email message regarding fears of losses of services in TRI CARE with the new Federal Health Care Reform legislation. I contacted the Health and Human Services Secretary, Kathleen Sebelius, office and received this important response back which I am sharing with you:

“Sydney, Thanks for passing these concerns along. As I’m sure you’ve heard Administration officials say, those who depend on TRI CARE should rest assured – TRI CARE will not change under health insurance reform. President Obama stands firm in his commitment to veterans, and that is why he has provided an historic increase in benefits for our veterans and has upheld every pledge to protect the benefits our veterans have earned in service to our nation.”

You can also check out this link from the Speaker’s office for more information specifically about veterans’ health care included in the legislation passed on Sunday:

<http://www.speaker.gov/blog/?p=2206>

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHILDREN, TEACHERS, AND FAMILIES RALLY AT THE CAPITOL FOR EDUCATION FUNDING

1,000-plus people attended an education funding rally in Topeka today. Advocates estimate 150 to 200 people from the Manhattan area attended the rally from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesday on the east side of the Statehouse. People from at least 30 communities attended. The group web site is www.saveourneighborhoodschools.com/

Why such a rally? Many school districts are already experiencing loss of state funding and parents and staff are fearful that more cuts for next school year will be catastrophic. Due to the state’s budget crisis, Lawrence board members last week approved \$4.6 million in budget cuts, including increasing the student-teacher ratio by one student; eliminating 21 teaching jobs; cutting \$914,195 in administration and clerical support; gutting the district’s learning coach program; and moving an early childhood center into an elementary school. Although the district’s 30 teaching retirements will offset much of the teacher job cuts, the district still expects to make some layoffs. Speakers at the rally included: Gov. Parkinson, Senate President Steve Morris, R-Hugoton, and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Sen. Tom Holland, Baldwin City.

MENTAL HEALTH DAY

About 300 people were here on Thursday for the Kansas Mental Health Coalition's Mental Health Advocacy Day. I visited with Robbin Cole, the Pawnee Mental Health Center Director. Those taking part were advocates for the mentally ill, as well as people who've been treated for mental illness and their families. The coalition is concerned about a 10% cut in reimbursements to health care providers under the Medicaid program which also affects those under treatment for mental illness. Members also lobbied for a proposed amendment to the Kansas Constitution to protect the voting rights of the mentally ill.

HOUSE REPUBLICAN LEADERS BUDGET PROPOSES \$200 MILLION IN CUTS TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Despite the fact that the budget has been dramatically cut six times in the last 18 months, the majority party continues to assert that Kansas can cut more spending. Ten weeks into the legislative session, House Republican leadership finally offered an FY 2011 budget proposal. They have rejected any change in tax policy as a means of filling a projected \$400+ million budget gap.

The House GOP unveiled their proposal on Thursday, which cuts approximately \$361 million from essential state services, in addition to \$200 million in cuts to Kansas public school districts. Here are some key components of the proposal:

- \$200 million in cuts to Kansas public education;
- \$5-7 million in cuts for mental health programs impacting 90,000 Kansans who need mental health assistance;
- A 5% across the board salary cut to all state employees except for employees of the Regent's system that are not statutory positions (there is also a proposal to begin closing state offices at 3:00 p.m. on Fridays, to give employees the time that they are not paid for - which is essentially 12-days of furlough during the year);
- \$37.9 million freeze on KPERS employer contributions;
- 1% cut in all state agency budgets, resulting in more layoffs and service cuts;
- Increased premiums for children's health insurance.

While I am deeply concerned about the proposed cuts, the budget debate is just getting started. This proposal will go to the House floor for full consideration early next week, at which point we will have opportunities to try to add amendments. Whatever passes must be reconciled with the Senate budget bill and signed by the Governor. We will then reconvene in late April- after the most recent revenue estimates are announced- to make more adjustments through the Omnibus Budget. We have a long way to go.

TAX POLICY DEBATE

Last week, a number of different tax proposals went to the floor for consideration. The debate began with House Bill 2549, a bill that sought to raise state revenues by removing exemptions to the state sales tax. The legislation was eventually gutted after passing several amendments that changed the initial intent of the bill, including removing all references to churches and 501C3 non-profit organizations.

Before taking a final vote, a motion was made to table the bill until May 3rd, when the Legislature reconvenes for Veto Session. At that time, new revenue estimates will provide a better picture of the budget gap and allow for a more accurate assessment as to what revenues will be needed. The motion passed 64-57. The entire debate was a game of political hot potato, not a genuine dialogue about tax policy.

Throughout the course of Tuesday's debate, many House Republicans voted to double the state deficit by attempting to push through over \$350 million in tax breaks for wealthy citizens and corporations. This debate was clearly not about filling the budget gap.

I have said all along that compromise will be the key to balancing the budget. We certainly can't tax our way out of this financial crisis, but too many Kansans depend on public services for us to cut our way out either. The deficit can only be eliminated with a healthy balance of what the state needs to survive this difficult time, what we can afford in the current economic climate, and what Kansas communities are willing to invest in their future.

STATE EMPLOYEES SHARE CONCERNS WITH LEGISLATORS

More than 250 members of the Kansas Organization of State Employees (KOSE) came to the Statehouse on Wednesday to visit with legislators. Since state employees receive their paychecks directly from the State of Kansas, their jobs, wages, and retirement are directly linked to what happens in the Capitol.

It is important to remember that "Kansas government" is not a conglomeration of faceless agencies, organizations, and bureaucrats. State employees work in every county of Kansas. They work in agencies that keep our state running efficiently. They include social workers, psychologists, mental health techs, correctional officers, transportation workers and investigators, to name a few.

Unlike the private sector, demand skyrockets in the public sector when times are tough. Unfortunately, Kansas is near the bottom in state employee wages. In 2007, research found that 1 in every 3 state employees were more than 25% below market. Their paychecks have remained stagnant for several years as the cost of living has significantly increased. The Legislature made a promise to these 40,000 workers that we would make market adjustments to their salaries over a five-year period. The current budget proposal breaks that promise by suspending \$6.4 million in state employee longevity payments. In addition, \$37.9 million in KPERS employer contributions have been frozen, which dramatically affects the long-term stability of the

fund for future retirees. All of this, coupled with an additional 1 percent across-the-board cut to state agencies, results in even lower pay, furloughs and layoffs for state workers. If we continue with these cuts we can expect to wait longer for public services.

All of this is yet another example of long-term, trickle-down effects of irresponsible budget slashing. There is a difference between cutting government waste and cutting government jobs. Kansas taxpayers cannot receive their money's worth if quality state employees are not kept on the payroll to answer the public's call.

Chris Biggs appointed Kansas Secretary of State

Citing his experience, professionalism and dedication, Governor Mark Parkinson named Chris Biggs as Kansas' Secretary of State. "Chris has been in public service for more than twenty years, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to our state, our citizens and our future," Parkinson said. "Chris will bring his forward-looking vision to the Office of Secretary of State while increasing the efficiency and participation in Kansas' elections."

Biggs currently serves as the state's Securities Commissioner, where he most recently, and successfully, prosecuted the founder of a bankrupt theme park in Wichita which had defrauded investors of millions of dollars. "Protecting the integrity of our state's securities has been my mission for the past eight years. I bring that same experience and resolve to protect the integrity of our state's business filings and electoral system. I am honored, and truly humbled, to be selected for this new post," said Secretary Biggs.

Prior to being named Kansas' Security Commissioner in 2003, Biggs had served as an attorney in public service, including 14 years as Geary County Attorney. Biggs is a graduate of Kansas State University and KU Law School and lives near Manhattan in rural Geary County.

KANSAS HAS THE BEST HIGHWAYS

Gov. Mark Parkinson joined two former Republican governors at a state highway maintenance shop to tout a new analysis suggesting Kansas has the nation's very best highways. The No. 1 ranking for Kansas is based on an analysis to be published in Reader's Digest. The study factored safety statistics, pavement condition, bridge status and urban freeway congestion. Rounding out the Top 5 were Wisconsin, Montana, New Mexico and Utah.

Parkinson and former Republican governors Bill Graves and Mike Hayden joined forces at the Kansas Department of Transportation shop in Topeka to urge the adoption of a new multibillion-dollar highway construction and maintenance program and approval of necessary tax increases to finance the endeavor. During the 2010 session, Parkinson has struggled to obtain traction for his plan to add 1 cent to the statewide sales tax to fill a budget hole. After three years, under the governor's plan, two-tenths of the 1 cent bump in the sales tax would be retained for financing a new third comprehensive transportation plan. The first two plans were passed during Hayden's administration

and Graves' administration. "For Kansas to remain competitive, we must maintain our exemplary transportation system," Parkinson said.

Graves, president and chief executive officer of the American Trucking Association in Washington, D.C., was governor when the Legislature approved the 1999 program that invested billions of dollars into projects intended to upgrade the state's highway, rail and aviation systems. "Raising taxes for this purpose was a necessity. You can't have something for nothing," said Graves, his remarks mingled with the rushing sound of large trucks passing on Interstate 70 to the south.

Hayden, who is the secretary of Wildlife & Parks, said the condition of Kansas road surfaces in the 1980s was so brittle and unsafe that he dedicated himself as governor to gaining passage of an improvement program. "We had a pretty damned deplorable transportation system," Hayden said. Also yesterday, the Senate Transportation Committee began consideration of a blueprint for raising taxes to support a multi-year statewide construction and maintenance program.

"The very best road system in the country," Parkinson said. "Something like this can't happen overnight." The governor said a tax hike to remedy immediate budget woes and long-term financial obligations remained a realistic expectation.

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, State Capitol Building, Topeka, KS 66612. You can reach me at (785) 296-7657 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