

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Picking Kansans' pockets

Legislature eyes theft of agency funds to pay for gov's tax plan

Welcome to the era of pick-pocket governance.

Gov. Sam Brownback's master plan to eliminate the state's income tax has yet to clear the Kansas Legislature, and already residents are finding unwelcome hands rooting around in their pockets, looking for money to cover the tax cut's costs.

Out of the gate, Brownback's income tax plan required keeping in place a sales tax that was set to expire this year. Designed as a temporary fix for an emergency situation, the tax now may remain in place forever – not to pay for roads or schools or even incentives for “job creators” – but to finance a tax cut for people who have paid a modest rate all along.

The sales tax alone, however, may not be enough, forcing legislators to dig even deeper for extra money.

They also have set their sights on the state's highways, well known for their high quality and the steady stream of cash needed to keep them in good repair.

One proposal has sought to grab some of the sales tax revenue scheduled to pour into the T-WORKS program, which develops highway projects that deliver the most economic benefit for communities and the state. The measure would strip \$382 million over two years from highway funds to pay for the governor's income tax-free utopia. That measure was rejected this week by the House, in the face of strong protests, but the proposal likely has not seen its last days.

But there's more.

The Kansas Turnpike Authority has money sitting around for its road system, and the state also is eyeing that pot of gold.

Then there is the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks – an agency primarily paid for

through the license and permit fees of those who fish, hunt and camp.

Shortly after his election, Brownback stood with the Kansas Flint Hills as his backdrop and talked about the undervalued resource Kansas offers in its parks, lakes and other public lands. He even moved the Department of Tourism under KDWP's umbrella as a testament to his belief that the outdoors and tourism were one in the same.

That, however, was before he had to pay for an embarrassingly flawed tax plan. Now KDWP is being eyeballed like a fully-stuffed piggy bank that should be cracked open so its years of savings can be spent on a frivolous prize that we'll all soon regret. KDWP stands to lose \$500,000 to Brownback's tax cut, and it's largely money outdoors enthusiasts pay to ensure access to high quality hunting, fishing and camping.



BROWNBACK

In all, the House Appropriations Committee has identified upwards of \$18 million in various agency funds that would be plucked to help offset the cost of an income tax-free Kansas.

There will be other grabs as well, from other departments or directly from taxpayers in the way of increased fees for licenses or services. Thanks to the aggressive cut in income taxes, and proposals for even more, every single Kansan could continue to pay a higher sales tax; history has shown that an increase in property taxes for farmers, landlords and homeowners is certain to follow.

Legislators are working as hard as they can to dig through Kansans' pockets and seat cushions to find every dime they can take. But they can't explain how stealing from ourselves makes us richer, and they can't explain how hurting ourselves makes us stronger.

READER OPINIONS FROM HUTCHNEWS.COM

• “I’m going need a cut in state taxes to help pay the increase in my insurance premiums because of the new health-care mandates. It’s already happened.”

• “No, your premiums are higher because of the cost of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and joint replacement – i.e. aging Americans.”

• “Once again it has been proven that it doesn’t take any relevant education or intelligence to criticize the efforts of others. I need that tax cut to help offset the sales tax increase to pay for the new jail.”

• “Picking Kansan’s pockets and using the word ‘theft’ are outrageous and deceiving headlines. The more accurate and correct headline should read, ‘The legislators balancing agency funding and spending.’ If the Dems were in charge, you would see something like the suggested headline.”

• “But legislators are NOT ‘balancing agency funding and spending.’ Rather, they are robbing Peter to pay Paul. If an agency sets

up a reserve fund or saves money to pay for a large-scale one-time project, they are NOT mishandling their money. Rather they are handling it wisely. The legislators merely want to grab that money because they have not been fiscally responsible. Frankly, I’m appalled at the poor decision-making in Topeka...”

• “So I’m guessing that will cut into the walk-in hunting and fishing lands. Can’t wait until our roads (are) as bad as Oklahoma’s. We’ll spend more in vehicle repairs, but, hey, once it all trickles down from the rich receiving their tax breaks I should have plenty to join the hunting and fishing clubs I’ll have to join and the extra cost of maintaining a vehicle on the rougher roads.”

• “You’re right on as usual.”

• “Welkom to life in Brownbackistan! It is quite clear that our governor is mad as a hatter and all for the glory of losing to the Democrats in 2016. Let’s just ask the Koch Brothers for the money instead of wasting it on Governor Brown-shirt’s losing campaign.”

WESTERN FRONT

Letting children down

Heat Start and Early Head Start programs are facing devastating budget cuts that will slam shut the window of opportunity for nearly 70,000 at-risk children. By failing to avert the budget sequester, our elected officials have missed the opportunity to lead by example and place the most vulnerable among us on a pathway to lifelong success.

As the mother of three in the Heat Start program, I can tell you that these cuts will be particularly catastrophic to the poor children and families who are served. For nearly 50 years, Heat Start has been getting results in preparing for school our children who are most in need, and leading the early-childhood field in innovation and quality, through both high standards and relentless insistence on excellence. Here in Kansas, sequester means at least

500 fewer children can be served by Heat Start and Early Head Start.

Head Start and other non-defense discretionary programs – at 3.4 percent of the budget – are not the cause of our growing debt. Congress needs to act quickly to restore fiscal stability and maintain funding for Kansas’ at-risk children. Our nation’s budget simply cannot be balanced on the backs of poor children.

STEPHANIE KING
Hutchinson

ELECTION LETTERS

The deadline for letters written in support of candidates and issues appearing on the April 2 ballot is noon March 27. Letters should be limited to 150 words or less.



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COLUMNISTS

Ideology stifles real work

Community columnist



Jack Wempe

Recently a university class visited our state legislature. The chairman of Senate Ways and Means addressed the group and took questions. One of the student questions expressed concern about the effect on local budgets that would result from a proposal redefining tax-exempt manufacturing equipment. Projections indicate the proposal would devastate the tax base in some counties.

“That isn’t a budget question – its ideology,” was the response. And that pretty well sums up the level of today’s political discourse.

Steven Brill, in his recent “Bitter Pill” article, not only details an exhaustive measure of research into the out-of-control medical cost situation which confronts our nation, but suggests some ideas for consideration which might be helpful in gaining a degree of control. After all, most of us are very good at identifying problems – few of us are equally adept at finding solutions.

Brill suggests that some of our problem is not accidental, but has been deliberately created by Congress. Prohibiting Medicare and Medicaid from negotiating drug costs or soliciting bids for the purchase of durable medical equipment simply reflects the influence of special interests. It would make little sense out here in the real world.

Three years ago, policy experts were pushing for provisions in our health care laws which would expand comparative-effectiveness research efforts. An effort would be made to determine the comparative effectiveness not only of drugs but also of procedures like CT scans. Such information could be provided to both medical providers and to the public. Congress, of course, came to the rescue. Provisions were added to restrict use of the information, including a statement that “findings shall not be construed as mandates for practice guidelines, coverage, recommendations, payment, or policy recommendations.” It’s all right to know that one drug

or another is more effective and perhaps even cheaper but no one is allowed to do anything about it.

Another initiative suggested was to allow Medicare to pay for a doctor to provide counseling on end-of-life care. The “death panel” demagoguery soon buried that idea. Much was made of the threat of take-over by Medicare bureaucrats. The truth is that most of the work of Medicare is contracted to private contractors. There are 8,500 private employees administering Medicare – 700 government workers.

A Brill suggestion involves the pattern of some with Medicare to seek constant doctoring for a variety of ailments. Some consider the casual use of medical care, particularly by some of us elderly folks, to be rooted in a social context. For those with a solid supplementary plan, visits to the doctor’s office are virtually free. Brill suggests that some patient payment responsibility, perhaps based on ability to pay, would tend to reduce overall health-care cost by encouraging patients to be more selective in their visiting of medical providers.

He also suggests a “too much doctoring” problem. Apparently in some large hospitals, attending physicians simply “cruise the halls to check the people who came in over the weekend.” Each visit is charged even if the patient’s ailment is unrelated to the visiting doctor’s practice. Given the doctors I know, such happenings seem unlikely but Brill is emphatic that they exist in some hospitals.

Other Brill suggestions include tightening antitrust laws to prevent a single hospital organization from

becoming overly dominant in a region so that insurance companies are unable to negotiate, to tax hospital profits heavily, even those acquired by “nonprofit institutions,” to assist in paying for health-care programs, to outlaw the “charge-master” and require billing that reflects actual and transparent costs and to amend patent laws to limit the way drug companies exploit drug monopolies.

He further suggests a real tightening in the amount Medicare pays for CT or MRI tests and even limiting what insurance companies pay for them. He also recommends embarrassing Democrats into stopping their fight against medical-malpractice reform and instead provide safe-harbor defenses for doctors so they can limit the current practice of defensive medicine.

“Over the past few decades, we’ve enriched the labs, drug companies, medical device makers, hospital administrators, and purveyors of CT scans, MRIs, canes and wheelchairs. Meanwhile we’ve squeezed the doctors who don’t own their own clinics, don’t work as drug or device consultants, or don’t otherwise game a system which is so gameable. And of course, we’ve squeezed everyone outside the system who gets stuck with the bills.”

Unfortunately these ideas aren’t even being heard in Washington or Topeka. Fighting to either gut or protect Obamacare has been the battle for four years. It is apparently going to continue. It’s more fun to fight futile partisan battles than to address the really significant issue of cost. And such battles really, really do fire up the political base. Just like the tax guy says in Topeka, “it’s not a budget question – it’s ideology.”

Jack Wempe grew up in the Hutchinson area and is a former educator, state legislator and member of the Kansas Board of Regents now living in Lyons. E-mail: jwempe1@cox.net.

The GOP’s strategic failure

WASHINGTON – Recent brutal attacks on the GOP have claimed that minorities often think that “Republicans do not like them or want them in the country.” That younger voters are “rolling their eyes at what the party represents.” That former Republicans view the party as “scary,” “narrow-minded,” “out of touch” and populated by “stuffy old men.”

But these were not Democratic attacks. The quotes come from the Republican National Committee’s “Growth & Opportunity Report,” which, as far as I can tell, is unique in the history of party-sponsored self-reflection. Losing parties generally look in the mirror and see the need for cosmetics. This report calls for reconstructive surgery. In the aftermath of the 2012 election, it describes a party unpopular with the public, fading in must-win states and progressively marginalized at the national level.

Yet this analysis should be encouraging for Republicans in the same way that a reliable medical diagnosis is encouraging – it provides the basis for aggressive treatment.

The report, inevitably, set off an internal GOP conflict. This is not so much a matter of ideology; a number of politicians with tea party roots, such as Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, have fully internalized these political realities. The emerging argument is between political realists and ideological entrepreneurs.

All conservatives believe in the power of markets, which is explanatory in this case. The RNC is attempting to reach the market of gettable voters in Ohio, Colorado, New Mexico and other electorally strategic places. Other conservatives target the markets of talk radio listeners or CPAC attendees. The RNC report engages this divergence of purposes in a forthright manner: “We have become



Michael Gerson

expert in how to provide ideological reinforcement to like-minded people, but devastatingly we have lost the ability to be persuasive with, or welcoming to, those who do not agree with us on every issue.” The role of a political party, the report insists, is different from the pursuit of “universal purity.”

This declaration of independence is accompanied by a serious reassertion of the role of the party itself. The document calls for more purposeful outreach to minorities, improved campaign mechanics and a more rationally designed presidential primary process. It criticizes the proliferation of primary debates, as well as redundant or unhelpful campaign expenditures by lone-wolf advocacy groups.

But the report recognizes that Republicans require more than changed tone or technique; they need relevant, appealing policies. Here, the GOP is making some preliminary progress. The two early rivals for presidential buzz, Rubio and Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, both support variants of comprehensive immigration reform. Republicans who oppose gay marriage, such as Rubio, and those who support it, such as Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, are now agreed on marriage federalism – respecting the rights of states to make their own choices.

Still, these efforts merely clear the decks of some existing objections, not dramatically expand Republican appeal. The 2012 election revealed insufficient GOP enthusiasm among working-class Americans and plummeting support

among rising demographic groups, particularly Asians and Latinos. Appealing to these voters will require more than repetition of the Republican economic message circa 1980. They want the reassurance of a modern, functioning safety net and the realistic hope of economic and social mobility. Republicans have yet to effectively address either priority.

This is partly an institutional problem. A smattering of conservative policy experts is working on these issues – conservative alternatives on health and education reform or promoting social capital and family stability. But the major conservative think tanks tend to be driven by ideological and donor priorities. Few conservative institutions operate effectively at the confluence of policy and politics.

Democratic reformers in the 1980s and ’90s had the Democratic Leadership Council to help reshape their identity and lay the policy foundations for Bill Clinton’s presidential run. Britain’s Conservative Party has the Centre for Social Justice, which in the last year has produced policy documents on fighting modern slavery, addressing child poverty, breaking the cycle of domestic abuse and strengthening marriage. Where is the Republican equivalent?

Major Republican donors seem perfectly willing to support the presidential races of quixotic candidates. They foot the bill for television attack ads. They seem less interested in funding the revival of ideas and policy that is a prerequisite to re-establishment of a GOP majority. It is a strategic failure of the first order.

Those concerned about the Republican future hope for the arrival of a transformational candidate. But he or she will need something compelling to say.

Michael Gerson’s email address is michaelgerson@washpost.com.