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A mandate for progress, despite financial woes



Gov. Mark Parkinson addressed a joint session of the Kansas Legislature in 2009.

What's the matter with Kansas in 2010?

Well, it's good to put things in perspective:

The state will not face Quantrill's raiders, nor will the sky vanish behind towers of dust.

But that's the good news. The bad news: The state is simply out of money. Recent tax revenue receipts are back to 2005 levels. What's more, by accepting \$600 million in federal stimulus money, Kansas agreed not to cut education funding beyond 2006 levels. That means one third of the budget will have to absorb all of the cuts, likely forcing deep cuts for all levels of law enforcement: highway patrol, prisons, courts, the attorney general's office, all places where recent cuts have already been too deep.

Still, even with this disastrous budget year looming, the Legislature has opportunities to move the state forward.

In the Depression, kids scoured Wish Books. The Kansas legislative session begins this week and what follows is what we wish for:

•**The last should be first.** For too long, the Legislature has made developmentally disabled citizens a low priority. More than 4,200 families are waiting for services. Many learned last week that they'll be losing care they've come to rely on. Caregivers around the state, already poorly paid, will receive even less.

This is a difficult session in which to deal with this issue, but the Legislature created the problem by neglecting the state's most vulnerable residents when money was available. This population must be spared from any more cuts, and lawmakers must come up with a plan for clearing the waiting lists when state revenues finally start to rebound.

•**Smoke gets in your eyes?** It's time for a statewide smoking ban. Kansas is currently one of fewer than 15 states with no prohibition against lighting up in public places.

Besides protecting the public's health, a smoke-free law would improve finances. Analysts estimate a smoking prohibition would save Kansas about \$20 million a year in Medicaid costs.

The state could reap more rewards by boosting its low tobacco tax. A 55-cent hike would bring Kansas to the national average of \$1.34 a pack — and add almost \$90 million a year in much-needed revenue.

•**Money, it's a drag.** For every penny of sales in Kansas on which state sales tax is now collected, two cents go untaxed. Part of the social contract demands that we all pay our fair share for the services we demand, and that's not happening.

The frightening state of the Kansas budget demands a broader sales tax base. Legislators need to reconsider everything, from charitable organization exemptions to business equipment to church-related purchases. Critics maintain this is an unfair tax increase on those used to tax breaks. More honestly, this is a more equitable division of the tax burden that everyone should share.

•**School daze.** The poison pill of stimulus repayment should be enough to keep legislators' razors away from school budgets, but in case it's not: The Legislature must shield schools from cuts that affect educational performance.

The high quality of public education in Kansas is one of the state's greatest assets. As one state budget analyst put it: "All Kansas has in most people's minds is flat land and good schools. You don't want to take the schools out of that equation." Budget crisis or not, it would be foolish to further diminish schools.

•**Where the deer and the antelope play.** The lack of a major national park has gone on long enough. Not only is Kansas park poor, but it's the symbolic home for the most inherently American landscape, the prairie. Earlier, The Star called for a 1 million acre Buffalo Commons national park. While this would be a federal expense, state legislators need to start pushing federal authorities to right a long-standing wrong.

The Star's proposal would see two economically, demographically distressed and water-poor counties, Wallace and Greeley, transformed into a national park.

The creation of such a park would positively transform the struggling economies of surrounding counties.