

# From The Desk Of...

## Jay Scott Emler

Kansas Senate 35th District

~Week of January 8 - January 12, 2007~

- **GOP Protects Education Funds**

In a swift and decisive move, the Senate passed on Tuesday a proposal to set aside enough money from this year's state budget surplus to fully fund all three years of the school finance law enacted last year. The measure, Senate Bill 30, was sponsored by all 30 Republican senators and was approved 37 to 1. Our hope is that the House also will act quickly so we can make it clear that we will meet our education promises and put this issue behind us and focus on other matters for the remainder of the 2007 legislative session.

- **GOP Helps Families with Kids in College:**

Among priorities announced this week by Senate Republicans was helping middle class Kansas families afford the cost of sending their kids to college in Kansas. This week, legislation was introduced to provide a tax credit to every Kansas family who sends their kids to a Kansas college or university. The credit would be up to \$250 the first year and \$500 each year thereafter. Unlike the governor's "scholarship" approach, this initiative would help every Kansas family with kids in college, not just those whose kids receive "scholarships." The bill is pending in the Tax Committee.

- **GOP Helps Senior Citizens**

Another Senate Republican priority is helping senior citizens on fixed incomes by stopping the tax on their Social Security benefits. This bill also was introduced this week and is pending in the Tax Committee. The governor did not announce any similar priority.

- **Inauguration Ceremony**

Inauguration ceremony: About 700 people watched Monday as 5 state-wide offices were sworn in as well as new members of the State Board of Education and Justices of the Kansas Appeals and Supreme Court.

- **State of the State Address**

The governor Wednesday night delivered her State of the State address, outlining several proposals she wants the legislature to consider this year. The tone of this year's speech was more cooperative than in years past, and on the substance, most -- though not all -- of the ideas she outlined were previously outlined already in the Senate and House Republican leadership agendas. All of that is good news. It means the Senate, the House and the governor all are roughly on the same page in terms of state priorities for this year, and that should be a formula for compromise and accomplishment.

- **Twelve Republican Priorities for Progress**

On Tuesday, Kansas Senate Republicans unveiled our legislative priorities for the 2007 session. Most of our caucus priorities are in line with House Republican priorities and with the governor's stated priorities, so there should be ample room for agreement, compromise and progress this year. Our priorities are listed below:

### **Priorities for Progress**

#### **Public Education**

**Keeping our promises:** To ensure that the three-year school finance law enacted last year is fully funded, our first legislative priority this year will be establishing a trust fund to set aside \$122.7 million from this year's budget surplus to fully fund next year's final school finance installment.

**Reforming math, science, and early childhood:** We are establishing the Senate President's Task Force on K-12 Education. This task force will recommend how to ensure at-risk dollars reach the kids who need them, how to promote coordination and efficiency in early childhood programs, how to better support our best and brightest students, and to attract our best and brightest into teaching, and how to improve math and science education in our K-12 system. Senator Nick Jordan will chair this task force.

**21st century colleges and universities:** We are establishing the Senate President's Task Force on Higher Education. This task force will recommend how to address deferred campus maintenance needs, the rising tuition burden on Kansas families, and the overhaul of our vocational and technical education system. Senator Jean Schodorf will chair this task force.

#### **Health Care**

**Fundamental reform:** We are establishing the Senate President's Task Force on Health Care. This panel will consider the current status of the uninsured in Kansas, review actions of other states (including Maryland), discuss the possibility of expanding coverage through existing programs, consider other options such as portability and purchasing insurance with pre-tax dollars. They will also explore public health issues such as newborn screening and pandemic flu. Senator Jim Barnett will chair this task force.

#### **Government Reform and Reorganization**

**Government for the 21st Century:** We are concerned about the rate of growth in tax-supported government jobs and about the cost of maintaining government programs and agencies that may be outdated or inefficient. Kansas needs to undertake a comprehensive review of the structure

and efficiency of our state government. The state's "top to bottom review" of 2003 was a promising initiative that produced only limited benefits. Unfortunately, most reform efforts stall in the face of entrenched interests and a mentality that "we've always done it that way." Therefore, we propose to create a new, statutory commission -- modeled after the successful Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission at the federal level -- to conduct a comprehensive, independent and fair review of Kansas state government and to recommend the closure, reorganization, or consolidation of outdated, ineffective, or inefficient state agencies, programs, or positions. The commission's recommendations would receive an up-or-down vote in the legislature and could provide a roadmap for government reform over the next several years.

### **Energy**

**Generation capacity:** We believe Kansas must again become a net exporter of energy. To achieve that goal, we favor construction of additional electrical generating capacity, further incentives to conserve energy, and more investment in manufacturing biofuels from Kansas agricultural products. To coordinate our energy agenda, the Senate President has asked the chairmen of the three standing committees of jurisdiction - Utilities, Agriculture, and Environment & Natural Resources - to act as an informal Senate Energy Council, coordinating the work of their committees and developing and advancing an energy agenda for the entire Senate. Senators Jay Emler, Mark Taddiken and Carolyn McGinn will lead this effort.

### **Business Climate and Jobs**

We are concerned by recent reports that Kansas ranks poorly among the states in the rate of private-sector job creation. We have taken pro-business steps in recent years, but more progress is needed. To continue improving the state's business climate, we propose:

**Unemployment tax freeze:** The unemployment trust fund has ample resources. We believe businesses contributions to the fund should be suspended.

**Franchise tax:** The corporate franchise tax is an outdated ancestor of the corporate income tax. We believe it should be adjusted over time with an emphasis on relief for small businesses.

**Rural development:** We are alarmed by the continued population decline in rural Kansas and believe the state must develop a comprehensive rural development policy. We favor establishing an Office of Kansas Rural Development to assist with the special development needs of rural communities. We believe incentives for investing in housing in rural communities are a key component of rural development policy.

### **Public Debt**

**Comprehensive debt policy:** We are concerned about the growth of public debt in Kansas at both the state and local levels. The effect of incurring debt is to require our children to pay later for public services we consume today. We believe the state must develop a comprehensive policy on the management and limitation of public debt. As resources allow, we support efforts to prepay some of the state's existing debt. The Senate Commerce Committee, co-chaired by Senators Karin Brownlee and Nick Jordan, will lead this effort.

### **Life Sciences**

**Animal Health Initiative:** Kansas has been a leader in investing in the life sciences. We believe the next logical step is for Kansas to identify a specialty within the broad scope of the biosciences. Because of the agricultural infrastructure already in place, we support designating the region between Manhattan and Kansas City as the "Kansas City Animal Health Corridor" and

declaring it to be the national center of the animal health industry. We also favor related efforts to provide tax and financial support for this Animal Health initiative.

### **Seniors and Retirees**

**Protect Social Security income:** More than a dozen states exempt Social Security payments from state income tax. To provide greater independence and security for fixed-income senior citizens, Kansas should stop taxing Social Security income.

**KPERS Reform:** The Kansas Public Employees Retirement System requires substantial reform to ensure that it remains secure and solvent for future Kansas state employees and future retirees. We believe reform should be accomplished this year, without further delay.

### **Immigration**

**Benefits and consequences:** We recognize the importance of immigrants to the Kansas economy and to the future of many rural communities. We support and encourage legal immigration, and we also support the rule of law. Our general view is that people who come to the United States in violation of immigration laws should face consequences for their illegal actions. We recognize that regulating immigration is principally a federal responsibility, but we also acknowledge that several states have taken steps in recent months to address the problem of illegal immigration. Therefore, we intend to conduct this session a comprehensive review of options available to the State of Kansas to combat illegal immigration, starting with a review of actions taken by Colorado and Arizona. We will also consider consequences for employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants in violation of law. The Federal and State Affairs Committee, chaired by Senator Pete Brungardt, will lead this effort.

### **Environment**

**Parks funding:** The Senate last year overwhelmingly passed legislation to create a permanent funding source to operate and maintain our state parks and to reduce or eliminate park entrance fees for all Kansans. We strongly favor that approach.

### **Public Safety**

**Prison capacity and corrections:** Expand the capacity of state prisons to accommodate the projected need over the next decade. Establish drug-treatment services for inmates to break the cycle of addiction before they are released from prison. Incorporate key recommendations from the Criminal Justice Recodification, Rehabilitation and Restoration Project Committee to reduce the rate of repeat offenders.

**Punish felons who use firearms:** Establish a mandatory sentence extension for criminals who use a firearm to commit a felony, including drug felonies.

**Methamphetamine registry:** Require convicted methamphetamine manufacturers to register on the state's offender registry.

### **Campaign Finance and Elections Reform**

**Broad reform:** Kansans must be assured that our democratic system of electing public leaders is free, fair and conducted in the sunlight of public disclosure. Last year, the legislature by wide margins passed legislation to ensure integrity at the polling place and in advance balloting, provide better public disclosure of the financing of elections, and regulate telephone messages on behalf of candidates. The governor vetoed this important public integrity bill. We continue to believe reforms are needed, and we intend again to advance ideas from this vetoed bill and other public integrity proposals developed after the 2006 election cycle.

- **TOLL FREE LEGISLATIVE HOTLINE**

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