

The Topeka Capital-Journal

One-fifth of legislators decline at least part of session compensation

Eighty percent take full salary, stipend in record-long session

Posted: [June 13, 2015 - 8:49pm](#)

By [Tim Carpenter](#)

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One-fifth of the Legislature voluntarily declined all or part of state compensation during an elongated session made politically complex by a budget deficit resulting in passage of large state tax increases.

As the gavel fell in the House and Senate on Friday, 129 of 165 members had decided to accept all their daily salary of \$88 and the \$129 per day allocated for motel, meals and other expenses.

Twenty-six representatives in the 125-member House and 10 of 40 senators filled out paperwork to deflect pieces of their compensation package. All but three were Republicans.

Three legislators, Reps. Randy Garber, R-Sabetha, Becky Hutchins, R-Holton, and Fred Patton, R-Topeka, rejected both salary and stipend as of May 17 once the session hit the standard length of 90 days. Rep. Lane Hemsley, a Topeka Republican, declined salary and stipend as of May 19.

Sen. Les Donovan, R-Wichita, was the only senator to turn aside both types of compensation, making that determination June 9. He served as chairman of the Senate's tax committee, and requested a few days earlier to be replaced after planned debate on a tax bill was called off.

"I'm ashamed to be associated with a group that won't act any better than this. This is crazy," Donovan said.

Once the session reached the 90-day benchmark, Sen. Vicki Schmidt, R-Topeka, joined with 18 colleagues to decline the salary portion. She said members of the House and Senate essentially entered into a contract with voters to finish in the days designated, she said.

The 2015 session, however, was the longest in state history. It clocked in at 113 days because of reluctance to vote for legislation elevating state taxes more than \$400 million to close the deficit. The previous record for a Kansas legislative session was set in 2002 at 107 days.

This year's legislative showdown cost Kansas taxpayers nearly \$1 million more than budgeted. The daily rate, after most legislative staff departed on the 90th day, was \$42,000.

Democratic Rep. Barbara Ballard, who continued to receive salary and stipend throughout the session, said her constituents in Lawrence expected her to work for as long as it took to finish the job.

"I'm expected to carry out my responsibilities as a state elected official," Ballard said.

Rep. Peggy Mast, R-Emporia, declined a salary after May 26, surrendering about 2½ weeks of pay.

"I don't want to charge the taxpayers any more than necessary to be up here," Mast said.

Legislative reports indicate the following legislators declined a salary as of May 17: Rep. Steve Alford, R-Ulysses; Rep. Steven Becker, R-Buhler; Rep. Rick Billinger, R-Goodland; Rep. Lonnie Clark, R-Junction City; Rep. Blaine Finch, R-Ottawa; Rep. Shannon Francis, R-Liberal; Rep. Don Hill, R-Emporia; Rep. Don Hineman, R-Dighton; Sen. Tom Holland, D-Baldwin City;

Rep. Russell Jennings, R-Lakin; Rep. Greg Lewis, R-St. John; Sen. Jeff Longbine, R-Emporia; Sen. Carolyn McGinn, R-Sedgwick; Rep. Tom Phillips, R-Manhattan; Rep. Susie Swanson, R-Clay Center; Sen. Caryn Tyson, R-Parker; Sen. Richard Wilborn, R-McPherson; Sen. Kay Wolf, R-Prairie Village; and Schmidt.

Those rejecting salary at some point after May 17: Rep. Sue Boldra, R-Hays; Rep. Will Carpenter, R-El Dorado; Rep. Les Mason, R-McPherson; and Mast.

Legislators declining both salary and stipend May 17 or at as some point later: Rep. Carolyn Bridges, D-Wichita; Rep. J.R. Claeys, R-Salina; Donovan; Garber; Hemsley; Hutchins; and Patton.

Legislators rejecting salary or stipend for dates ranging from three days to three weeks: Rep. Barbara Bollier, R-Mission Hills; Rep. Mark Kahrs, R-Wichita; Sen. Ty Masterson, R-Andover; Sen. Rob Olson, R-Olathe; Rep. Virgil Peck, R-Tyro; and Rep. Ed Trimmer, D-Winfield.

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-13/one-fifth-legislators-decline-least-part-session-compensation>

Kansas tax cutting model tarnished by sales tax increase

Brownback's cuts seen as 'cautionary tale' across nation

Posted: June 14, 2015 - 4:04pm

By [John Hanna](#)

The Associated Press

Gov. Sam Brownback's signature personal income tax cuts emerged mostly intact from a grueling legislative fight to close a budget deficit that arose after revenue failed to match the conservative governor's predictions of an economic boom.

Brownback and his GOP allies managed to avoid backtracking on past reductions on income tax rates. But they had to slow down future rate cuts with the proviso that if revenues grow they could be restored. And they agreed to a small tweak to business tax breaks that are a central plank of his strategy to spur growth.

Instead, they raised the state's sales tax to one of the highest rates in the nation and smokers will be paying 50 cents more for each pack of cigarettes. Republican legislators cobbled together a mix of tax policies to both balance the budget and attract just enough votes for passage, but it isn't yet clear whether they have created long-term fiscal stability.

Brownback's allies engineered a more conservative Legislature in the 2012 elections, ousting most of the moderate state senators who had resisted his push to slash personal income taxes. Those political successes boomeranged this year, as Republicans, who dominate the Legislature, repeatedly said it wasn't in their DNA to raise taxes, and disagreements among multiple GOP factions made the annual session the longest in state history, at 113 days.

The Republican governor gained national attention for the state's aggressive tax cuts and touted his experiment as a model for other states — and perhaps the federal government in Washington. Less than a year after Brownback was narrowly re-elected by assuring skeptical voters that economic growth would preserve funding for schools and government programs, his aides warned GOP lawmakers that draconian cuts would result if they didn't pass tax increases to backfill the budget gap.

Kansas found itself in such a deep budget hole because the tax cuts implemented in 2013 initially led to a steep fall in revenue that has still not reversed as much as Brownback had hoped. For the fiscal year beginning next month, the state estimated in mid-April that it would face a shortfall of 12 percent of its general fund budget.

“Taxes matter, but so does responsible budgeting,” said Joseph Henchman, a vice president at the Washington-based, nonpartisan but conservative-leaning Tax Foundation. “You can’t just cut taxes and keep your spending the way it is and expect some sort of magic to balance it.”

Other states struggled this year with budget problems, several after cutting taxes in previous years, including Louisiana, Oklahoma and West Virginia. Louisiana lawmakers raised their state’s cigarette tax, scaled back business tax breaks and raised a fee on car dealers.

Two bills approved by Kansas legislators in the waning hours of their session will raise \$384 million during the fiscal year beginning July 1, to avert a deficit prohibited by the state constitution. The sales tax will rise to 6.5 percent from 6.15 percent and the cigarette tax will jump to \$1.29.

Democratic state Sen. David Haley, of Kansas City, publicly wished Republican colleagues well in trying to explain to voters one of the largest tax increases in state history.

“Personally, I’m going to miss serving with some of you, because I doubt they’ll return you,” he said.

Republicans who pushed the plan said its tax increases have to be seen in the context of the income tax cuts in 2012 and 2013, which the Legislature’s top tax analyst said could be worth \$900 million annually.

GOP lawmakers are likely to make that point repeatedly in seeking re-election next year. Republican senators briefly hashed over possible campaign talking points in a meeting before their last crucial vote and also are likely to argue that the state has suffered because the national economy isn’t yet robust.

“We’re saying, ‘Wait a minute, we probably overdid this a little bit and we’re running short of money,’ not necessarily because of what’s going on in the state,” Senate tax committee chairman Les Donovan, a Wichita Republican, told his colleagues.

The plan approved by Republican legislators contained a modest income tax increase for 281,000 business owners and 53,000 farmers who stopped paying income taxes on their profits under a 2012 policy championed by Brownback. But the increase represents about 11 percent of the tax break they received — and critics suggested it will be relatively easy to avoid.

Brownback said in a statement that GOP legislators’ plan “keeps the state on a path of economic growth, creating well-paying jobs.”

Mike O’Neal, the president and CEO of the Kansas Chamber of Commerce and a former House speaker, said afterward that the state remains on Brownback’s promised “march to zero” income taxes.

“Sometimes your legacy is not fully appreciated until after you’re gone,” O’Neal said of Brownback, who is term-limited and will leave office in January 2019.

But Henchman predicted in an online posting after legislators’ final vote on the package that they will be addressing budget gaps in future years.

Matthew Gardner, executive director of the left-leaning, Washington-based Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy said Kansas’ experience makes it more difficult for other states to pursue aggressive income tax cuts. In South Carolina, Republican Gov. Nikki Haley couldn’t pass income tax cuts even after declaring, “We are not doing what Kansas did.”

“It’s clearly a cautionary tale for other states to have in mind,” Gardner said.

<http://cjonline.com/news/business/2015-06-14/kansas-tax-cutting-model-tarnished-sales-tax-increase>

Dozens of Kansas legislators violate no-tax pledges

Only six Kansas lawmakers hold to vows on tax policy

Posted: [June 14, 2015 - 7:44pm](#)

By [Tim Carpenter](#)

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More than 50 Kansas legislators made no-nonsense promises to agitate against state tax increases and comply with pledges that served as currency to secure endorsements from conservative political groups.

The compacts delivered the kind of small-government credential proven to be part of winning campaign strategies in red-state Kansas.

In all, 53 of 165 legislators signed pledges since 2012 offered by Koch-affiliated Americans for Prosperity, as well as Americans for Tax Reform, led by devoted tax-cut crusader Grover Norquist.

Only six kept their word by voting consistently against a package dramatically expanding the annual tax liability of Kansans.

Twenty-nine representatives and 10 senators — all Republicans — entering into formal anti-tax arrangements ended up voting to provide the majority necessary to send the largest tax increase in Kansas history to Gov. Sam Brownback.

Seven legislators voted for at least one of the companion bills, while one pledge-club member was absent at crunch time.

Intense pressure was applied to legislators by House and Senate GOP leaders, as well as by Brownback, who begged for new tax revenue to close a budget deficit. Cash problems arose after Republican lawmakers agreed in 2012 and 2013 to slash income taxes in a supply-side bid to fire up the economy.

Adjustment of the state revenue stream became the political duty of the GOP, which holds a 32-8 edge in the Senate and 97-28 advantage in the House.

Democrats resisted appeals to help bail Brownback out of the budget quagmire. When House Minority Leader Tom Burroughs, D-Kansas City, rallied Democrats before a pivotal floor vote, he sent them off with this admonition: "Make them own this mess."

Doubling down

GOP Sen. Rob Olson, of Olathe, was among 14 lawmakers who signed both the ATR and AFP pacts. Olson affirmed in an April interview he wouldn't ignore those commitments.

"I'm not going back on the no-tax pledge," Olson said.

He wasn't in Topeka one week ago when the Senate endorsed House Bill 2109, which formed the skeleton of the tax-hike deal.

He was present Friday when the Senate adopted Senate Bill 270 to flesh out a package featuring \$384 million in tax increases in the fiscal year starting July 1 and requiring Brownback to trim spending \$50 million. Combined with a new \$47 million tax on managed care organizations in Kansas, state revenue growth next year was pegged to grow by about \$430 million.

The bill would raise the state's sales tax from 6.15 percent to 6.5 percent, end nearly \$100 million in itemized income tax deductions, boost the cigarette tax by 50 cents a pack to \$1.29 and embed in law a collection of controversial tax policies.

With the Senate vote snagged at 20-20, Olson stood.

He flipped his "no" vote to "yes" to provide the minimum 21 necessary to place the package on the governor's desk.

Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, said an affirmative vote on tax increases, rather than budget cuts, was "in clear violation" of the pledge.

Legislators who declined to divorce themselves from the anti-tax agreements: Rep. John Alcalá, D-Topeka; Rep. Travis Couture-Lovelady, R-Palco; Rep. Pete DeGraaf, R-Mulvane; Rep. Kevin Jones, R-Wellsville; Rep. Mark Kahrs, R-Wichita; and Sen. Dennis Pyle, R-Hiawatha.

House thinking

Rep. Steve Brunk, a Wichita Republican, signed both anti-tax pledges.

During the 2014 election cycle, Brunk said, his mind hadn't yet absorbed the uncomfortable reality that budget cuts alone couldn't resolve a projected deficit in the upcoming year of more than \$400 million.

His opposition to taxes melted away as the session motored into the 113th day — far beyond the typical 90-day session. He voted for both pieces of legislation raising taxes, and explained himself to House peers.

"Colleagues," he said, "we've had a long session, but our diligence has paid off and we're making an additional \$50 million in cuts to the budget. Our goal is to enact a long-term stable and predictable revenue source to provide necessary services while protecting taxpayers' pocketbooks. This bill accomplishes that."

Rep. John Rubin, R-Shawnee, assured Americans for Prosperity he would vote to elevate state taxes only in an emergency. The deficit ought to be handled through spending reductions, he said.

The tax agreement submitted to Brownback would alter state law designed to gradually shrink the state income tax to zero. The legislation freezes current rates for two years, drops the rate a bit in 2018 and makes future adjustments contingent on ballooning state tax revenues.

"By far, the most hated tax — the most detested, the most resented of all the types of tax we impose on the state of Kansas — is the income tax," Rubin said. "It is used for social engineering. It has been used as a method for government to pick winners and losers among businesses and others. It invites fraud and favoritism. This bill effectively ends the march to zero."

When the final roll-call votes were cast, nevertheless, Rubin voted for both bills.

'Harmful bill'

Larry Meeker, chairman of the Kansas Democratic Party, said passage of GOP-inspired legislation raising taxes shouldn't come as a surprise.

"The Republican Party's irresponsible policymaking is now common practice," he said. "Republican legislators know that the only honest way to fix the state budget crisis is to reverse Governor Brownback's failed experiment."

By that, he meant overhauling the state income tax exemption granted limited liability companies and other businesses in 2012. That bill was accompanied by reductions in individual income tax rates.

“Instead,” Meeker said, “leaders within the Republican Party used political arm twisting and blackmail to force the majority vote on this harmful bill.”

Annie McKay, who serves as executive director of the moderate-leaning Kansas Center for Economic Growth, said action by the 2015 Legislature deepened inequity folded into the tax code in the past three years.

More than 330,000 Kansas businesses will continue to pay no state income tax, while Kansas families absorb the fourth tax increase in six years, she said.

“Lawmakers promised Kansans ‘pro-growth’ tax policy, but all this legislation will grow is the number of families struggling to make ends meet,” McKay said.

Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, a Topeka Democrat who voted against the tax bills, said the governor faltered by refusing to reconsider state income tax cuts, insisting on raiding the state highway fund and pressing forward with a goal of shifting to the sales tax to fund Kansas government.

“The Republican legislators who support this bill are foisting on the people of Kansas the highest, most regressive sales tax on food in the nation,” Hensley said.

<http://cjonline.com/news/state/2015-06-14/dozens-kansas-legislators-violate-no-tax-pledges>

Lawmakers craft bill to expand Gov. Sam Brownback's budget cutting authority

Brownback would have power to make targeted cuts if end balance under \$100 million

Posted: **June 12, 2015 - 3:37pm**

By **Jonathan Shorman**

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Lawmakers approved a measure Friday temporarily expanding Gov. Sam Brownback's authority to make targeted cuts of state agency budgets, a change described as a way to protect education funding.

A tax proposal that will go to Brownback's desk calls on the governor to make \$50 million in cuts. The cuts, along with tax increases and other measures, are designed to fill the state's \$400 million budget hole and provide the state with a positive ending balance.

The tax plan that passed the Legislature, Senate Bill 270, anticipates an approximately \$80 million end balance. Currently, the governor can make across-the-board cuts if the ending balance is anticipated to be between zero and \$100 million.

House Bill 2135 gives the governor the authority to make targeted cuts, known as allotments, if the end balance is between zero and \$100 million. The power would only last for one fiscal year before expiring.

The bill was approved nearly unanimously by the House and Senate — the last bill approved before the Legislature adjourned.

The bill is designed to help shield K-12 spending, state budget director Shawn Sullivan said. Education spending isn't spared under across-the-board cuts.

“This will allow (Sullivan) to be a little bit more strategic. If we drop below \$100 million ending balance, he would have the ability to cut with more strategy (sic) instead of across the board,” said Rep. Ron Ryckman Jr., the House Appropriations chairman.

The bill garnered bipartisan support. Sen. Laura Kelly, D-Topeka, said the measure will give Brownback a scalpel as he makes cuts.

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-12/lawmakers-craft-bill-expand-gov-sam-brownbacks-budget-cutting-authority>

Gov. Sam Brownback: Tax package not a tax increase

Governor argues overall tax burden still lower when 2012 cuts taken into account

Posted: **June 16, 2015 - 12:42pm**

By **Jonathan Shorman**

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Gov. Sam Brownback wants Kansans to know that whatever the revenue deal passed by lawmakers last week was, it was definitely not a tax increase.

“Some would have you believe this bill represents a tax increase, and that is not accurate,” Brownback said.

“When looked at in totality, from 2012 to 2015, as I said at the outset, Kansans are paying less in taxes and continuing to move off income taxes to consumption-based taxes.”

Legislators increased the sales tax, boosted taxes on cigarettes, taxed so-called guaranteed payments to business partners and added new fees onto managed care organizations. They also reduced itemized tax deductions.

Lawmakers struggled for weeks to pass a deal, and some Republicans cried when they ultimately voted yes.

[Related: Here is Brownback's speech in video from the news conference.](#)

[Related: Here is the video of the entire Q&A with Brownback from the news conference.](#)

But despite the governor's statement that, in context, the tax package doesn't represent an increase, many Kansans will pay more in taxes beginning July 1 than they do today.

Brownback himself said a household with an income of about \$36,000 will pay an average of about \$50 more a year in sales taxes, under the new state sales tax rate of 6.5 percent, up from 6.15 percent. A smoker who buys five packs of cigarettes a week will pay an average of \$130 more each year.

Brownback's argument, laid out in a Tuesday news conference, is that the state will still take in less in tax revenue than it would have without the 2012 tax cuts. Aides circulated a chart showing that without the just-passed tax plan, the state would forfeit about \$1 billion in revenue during the next fiscal year.

Now, the state will forfeit only about \$729 million, according to the chart. Kansans are still paying less in taxes than they were before 2012, Brownback said.

The tax package passed Friday and signed into law by the governor will remove income taxes for some of the poorest Kansans. Brownback said about 388,000 people will no longer pay income taxes, though some counted in that number already receive tax credits.

Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka, said in a statement Brownback is “incapable of telling the truth.” Rep. John Carmichael, D-Wichita, said he was surprised that Brownback doesn’t think the package represents the largest tax increase in state history.

“If the governor believes increasing taxes on the working Kansans to the tune of \$300 million is not a tax increase, he is living in a fantasy world,” Carmichael said.

Not all Republicans who voted in favor of the package agree with Brownback’s claim that the legislation doesn’t amount to a tax increase. Rep. Kristey Williams, R-Augusta, and Rep. Steven Anthimides, R-Wichita, voted yes but issued a joint explanation of their vote saying raising taxes was the last line of defense.

Sen. Jeff Longbine, R-Emporia, voted in favor of the package but referred to “political blackmail” from both lawmakers and the administration to get legislators to support the deal. The Brownback administration had issued a veto threat, saying the governor would veto any increases to business taxes. And in the end, income tax exemptions for business owners were left largely in place.

The Washington-based Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, which is critical of the policy, said according to its analysis the poorest 20 percent of Kansans will pay about \$197 more in taxes in 2015 than they would have without both the 2012 tax cuts and 2015 tax hike.

In addition, the analysis found that the top 1 percent of Kansans are paying, on average, \$24,632 less in taxes.

“Let’s be clear about the big picture,” Kelly Davis, ITEP Midwest regional director of state policy, said in a statement.

“This tax package that just passed does nothing to reverse the fact that Kansas is paying for tax cuts for the rich by taxing the poor more. Even with these tax changes, low-income people are paying more in taxes now than they did before the governor’s supply-side experiment, and the wealthiest Kansans still are paying far less.”

The revenue deal passed last week will generate a little more than \$400 million next year to balance the budget. Lawmakers in the plan assume Brownback will make about \$50 million cuts to boost the ending balance to about \$80 million.

Lawmakers also gave the governor authority to make allotment cuts to achieve the desired end balance, rather than across-the-board cuts. Under current law, the governor can only make across-the-board cuts when the end balance is between zero and \$100 million. The legislation will change that to allow allotments in that range as well.

Lawmakers cited a desire to avoid cuts to education, which aren’t spared in across-the-board cuts. As for what will be cut, Brownback divulged few details.

“We’ll look at everything we can on efficiencies, on privatization, on a series of areas — we haven’t started much of a serious focus,” Brownback said. “This is a long legislative session for people to get through and I wanted people to get rested up before we take on that next set of issues.”

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-16/gov-sam-brownback-tax-package-not-tax-increase>

Gov. Sam Brownback rips Democrats for lack of support on tax solution

Governor praises GOP lawmakers with 'courage' to solve deficit

Posted: June 16, 2015 - 4:59pm

By [Tim Carpenter](#)

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Gov. Sam Brownback wagged a finger at Democrats on Tuesday but declined to condemn fellow Republicans who chose not to support legislation raising state taxes and putting in place a strategy for closing the government's budget deficit.

Brownback, standing alone at a news conference at the Capitol, praised GOP leaders in the House and Senate for helping push through a package of bills projected to generate more than \$400 million in new revenue for the treasury. Additional cash is needed, absent wide budget cuts, to erase an anticipated shortfall in the fiscal year starting July 1.

The second-term governor decried lack of assistance from Democrats in shaping the controversial legislation. In the end, no Democrat voted for measures boosting the statewide sales tax to 6.5 percent, raising the cigarette tax by 50 cents a pack, shrinking the value of itemized deductions and limiting the ability of cities and counties to raise property taxes.

"There were a number of people that didn't help much with the process and just wanted to see it fail," Brownback said. "The minority party put forward no proposals. None."

House Minority Leader Tom Burroughs, D-Kansas City, and Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka, said they consistently advocated for a solution anchored by overhaul of the 2012 tax law signed by Brownback exempting 330,000 businesses from state income tax and lowering individual state income tax rates.

"The governor continues to misdirect blame for his failed economic experiment," Burroughs said. "From Day One of the legislative session, Democrats clearly stated we would consider any proposal that was responsible, equitable and sustainable."

Before the annual session drew to a close Friday on the record 113th day, the Brownback administration issued a veto threat to legislators who were drafting plans to modify the tax exemption given limited liability companies, sole proprietorships and subchapter S corporations. That roster of benefactors includes lawyers, doctors, accountants, farmers and other businesses large and small.

Rep. Mark Hutton, a Wichita Republican, led a group of dissident Republicans who wanted to reform the business tax policy because it hadn't been shown to create a meaningful number of jobs.

"The benefit of this policy is insignificant in inducing businesses to come to this state to hire employees," Hutton said.

He disclosed a report prepared by the Kansas Department of Revenue that showed 5.3 percent of businesses eligible for the income tax exemption took in \$171 million of the total \$205 million surrendered by the state. In other words, 94.7 percent were able to bank \$33 million in tax benefits.

Hensley and Burroughs said Republicans in the Statehouse never invited them to be part of conversations about a bipartisan solution on tax policies capable of filling the hole in the state budget.

A bipartisan contingent, including three dozen Republicans in the House and nearly a dozen Republicans in the Senate, avoided voting during the 2015 session in support of bills addressing the deficit by raising new tax revenue.

Lawmakers did so because they weren't convinced tax hikes embraced by the governor were the proper remedy to the revenue problem, Hensley said.

"Until the governor understands that," Hensley said, "he will have the Republican majority doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result."

Brownback said the state's residents should laud Republicans who showed they had the guts to make difficult votes necessary to keep Kansas government moving forward. There are 98 Republicans in the House and 32 GOP members in the Senate. The legislation survived the gantlet with the minimum number of affirmative votes possible: 63 in the House and 21 in the Senate.

"A number of people, a majority, came together in the House and Senate to pass a budget and a tax bill to fund the government. I applaud their work and courage," Brownback said.

Twenty-nine members of the House and 10 members of the Senate voted for what amounts to the largest tax increase in state history despite signing anti-tax pledges with Americans for Prosperity and Americans for Tax Reform.

In 2013, Brownback and the GOP-led Legislature reset the state sales tax at 6.15 rather than allowing it to drop to 5.7 percent in accordance with a 2010 law. Democrats and moderate Republicans who had voted five years ago for the three-year, 1-cent raise in the sales tax were punished at the ballot box by GOP conservatives in the 2012 elections.

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-16/gov-sam-brownback-rips-democrats-lack-support-tax-solution>

USD 437 Auburn-Washburn board hears update on Tuesday's mail-in ballot election

Voters have been asked to authorize increase in district's LOB

Posted: **June 15, 2015 - 9:15pm**

By **Angela Deines**

Special to The Capital-Journal

Members of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District 437 board of education were updated Monday on the upcoming mail-in ballot election.

Voters will decide Tuesday whether to authorize a 3-percent increase in the district's local option budget, or LOB, authority.

Martin Weishaar, USD 437 communications director, told board members he and other district staff on Thursday made between 250 and 500 calls to district patrons who hadn't yet mailed in their ballot.

"We talked to people who said it (the ballot) was still sitting on their kitchen counter and that they appreciated the reminder," he said.

Weishaar said 21,404 ballots were mailed out on May 27 and 8,319 had been returned as of June 12. He said there was a 50-percent turnout in the 2007 bond election, and expects about the same percentage to have mailed in ballots by noon Tuesday.

Weishaar told board members preliminary results were expected to be in by 6 p.m. Tuesday.

This year's mail-in ballot asked patrons whether they would authorize an increase in the district's local option budget from 30 percent to 33 percent of USD 437's general state aid.

Superintendent Brenda Dietrich told board members in April the district would probably only need to access about 1 percent of an LOB increase, which would generate about \$386,000. She said the full 3-percent increase would give USD 437 some flexibility, if needed.

District officials have said the additional LOB authority, contingency funds, potential fee increases and targeted funding cuts will be necessary to get USD 437 through the next two years of block grants approved by the Kansas Legislature this past spring.

After the conclusion of Monday's business meeting, board members interviewed Amanda Kiefer to fill the vacancy on the board left by Harold Houck, a lawyer, who resigned in May to take a job in Savannah, Ga.

Kiefer, the only applicant for the vacant 6C position, is the assistant general counsel for the Federal Home Loan Bank and has three children attending Farley Elementary. Each board member asked Kiefer a different question, which ranged from why she wanted to serve on the board to strengths and weaknesses she sees in the district.

Board president Terry Carney asked Kiefer if she plans to run for re-election and she said she would run for another term. He also asked Kiefer what she believes the board's role is in directing the district.

"The board has a huge part in advocacy to shine a light on the importance of education and what is being accomplished here," Kiefer replied.

Board member Jim Gartner asked her how she saw the district in five years. In addition to having parents more informed of their children's curriculum, she said she would like USD 437 to have a "broader capacity for languages" at a younger age.

"I think that is something that should be on the radar," she said.

Carney said board members will vote during the board's end-of-fiscal-year meeting on June 29. If appointed, Kiefer would begin serving on the board July 13, the first meeting of the new fiscal year.

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-15/usd-437-auburn-washburn-board-hears-update-tuesdays-mail-ballot-election>

USD 437 patrons vote against ballot question giving increased budget authority; USD 501 patrons pass it

501 measure passes by 106 votes

Posted: **June 16, 2015 - 4:11pm**

By **Angela Deines**

Special to the Capital-Journal

Patrons in the Topeka Unified School District 501 voted to increase in their district's local option budget by just more than 100 votes while Auburn-Washburn USD 437 voters soundly defeated their mail-in ballot by more than a 10 percent margin on Tuesday.

Both districts had asked voters for a three-percent increase in budget authority in help soften the impact of significant budget cuts that are expected as part of the two-year block grant funding approved by Kansas lawmakers earlier this spring.

By a 4,148 to 5,250 vote tally with 43.9 percent of eligible voters casting ballots, USD 437 patrons voted against increasing the district's LOB by three-percent from 30-percent to 33-percent of the district's general state aid.

By just 106 votes, USD 501 patrons approved increasing the LOB by three percent to 33-percent. The final unofficial count was 7,191 "yes" votes and 7,085 "no" votes with 31.2 percent of eligible voters casting ballots.

Retiring USD 437 superintendent Brenda Dietrich said she was disappointed but not too surprised the ballot question was voted down in her district. She said several patrons told her that they didn't want to give state lawmakers a "free pass" for not holding up their end of school funding responsibilities.

"I think they're angry," Dietrich said of the district's voters. "It's extremely disappointing because we have a great district and parents who are extremely supportive. We'll try to make sure the district is on solid footing going forward."

Dietrich said raising fees and digging deeper into contingency reserve funds will likely have to happen to make up for the funds that won't be coming from the LOB.

"We've already made some reductions for next year," she said. "The board is going to have to make some hard decisions."

A one-percent increase in USD 437's budget would have generated about \$386,000 while the same increase in USD 501's LOB authority generates about \$1 million.

While happy the mail-in ballot passed in Topeka USD 501, superintendent Julie Ford said she and the board knew voting for the increase wasn't easy.

"We know it was a difficult vote and a difficult decision," Ford said. "It speaks highly of our city and our citizens. We appreciate the voters looking ahead."

Ford said it's unlikely that the district would need to use the full three-percent increase in budget authority but it gives the board some flexibility in the next couple of years of block grant funding.

"We'd use it only as a last resort option for needing revenue," she said.

Shawnee County Elections Commissioner Andrew Howell said the vote canvass will be conducted June 22 when the totals will become official.

Howell said he expects to bill each district to cover the cost of their respective mail-in elections within the next couple of months. His office had given USD 501 an estimate of about \$212,000 and USD 437 an estimate of \$104,000. He said he's hoping those estimates will be less once the final costs are determined.

"We're trying to be as efficient as we can," Howell said. "I think we're getting better at it (processing ballots)."

Howell said the vote canvass will take place on Monday and the deadline a recount deadline would June 23.

"You can't start billing until you know where all the dominos will fall," he said.

Dietrich said her district would have to pay their election costs out of contingency reserves. Larry Robbins, USD 501's deputy superintendent, said USD 501's election would be paid for out of a combination of reserves and an election line item in the district's budget.

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-16/usd-437-patrons-vote-against-ballot-question-giving-increased-budget-authority-usd>

Voters approve bond for new elementary school in Hoisington

New school will replace a school built around 1926

Posted: June 17, 2015 - 8:31am

By **The Associated Press**

HOISINGTON — Patrons of Hoisington school district have approved an \$11.5 million bond issue to build a new elementary school and fund other improvements.

Unofficial returns from Tuesday's vote show the issue passed by a vote of 874-278.

The new elementary school will replace a school built around 1926. The new school is scheduled to open in August 2017.

The Hutchinson News reports Hoisington's school population has grown 20 percent in eight years, after the city lost population when a tornado struck the city in 2001 and a railroad center moved.

The bond issue will also finance safety and security upgrades, including asbestos abatement.

The issue doesn't require an increased mill levy, with state aid covering 25 percent.

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-17/voters-approve-bond-new-elementary-school-hoisington>

USD 450 Shawnee Heights board approves more than \$240K in budget cuts for upcoming year

Shawnee Heights board members Hecker, Burton attend last meeting

Posted: June 15, 2015 - 9:39pm

By **Phil Wilke**

Special to The Capital-Journal

TECUMSEH — Shawnee Heights Unified School District 450 board members Mark Hecker and Trey Burton have a long list of accomplishments.

They were involved in two elementary school boundary redistrictings, implementing huge changes in educational technology, successful bond elections, overseeing budget cuts and enacting the controversial No Child Left Behind law.

That list ended Monday night when both attended their final meeting of the Shawnee Heights school board. Hecker had served 12 years on the board, while Burton served for eight.

“I’m proud of the accomplishments on that list, but more proud to be associated with the professionals in the district,” Burton said. “Over the years, we’ve come together with a common goal to serve the kids and teachers. I’ve received more than I’ve given over the years.”

Hecker said that, during his time on the board, he has grown to appreciate the hard work of bringing all students through the entire school system.

“It’s been an amazing process to watch them bring kids from kindergarten to high school,” he said, noting a personal example. When he started on the board his daughter was in second grade. She now is a sophomore at Kansas State.

“It’s a bittersweet evening,” Hecker said. “I’ve enjoyed every year.”

Board president Eric Deitcher thanked Burton and Hecker for “their dedication and all you’ve done for the district.”

The board also approved more than \$240,000 in budget cuts for the upcoming year. The board previously discussed these cuts, and they were part of the negotiated agreement with teachers.

The cuts include three teaching positions that are currently empty and won’t be filled, cutting a high school secretary position, reducing the number of seats purchased at the alternative high school and shortening building secretary and instructional coach contracts.

In other business, the board:

- Recognized athletes in boys baseball, girls softball, boys tennis, boys golf, girls swimming and boys and girls track.
- Kept textbook rental fees steady for the upcoming year.
- Recognized high school principal Alan Beam for his service. He is leaving administration to return to the classroom.

The board will meet 7 a.m. June 29 to approve end-of-the-year bills. The next regular meeting of the board is July 6 at the Shawnee Heights High School library.

Read more: <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-06-15/usd-450-shawnee-heights-board-approves-more-240k-budget-cuts-upcoming-year>

The Wichita Eagle

JUNE 15, 2015

Brownback signs bill empowering DCF chief to determine ATM limit for welfare recipients

BY BRYAN LOWRY

Eagle Topeka bureau

TOPEKA — A bill intended to ensure the state doesn't lose \$100 million in federal aid as it sets new restrictions for welfare recipients has been signed by Gov. Sam Brownback.

The bill also increases a tax on health maintenance organizations in an effort to generate nearly \$50 million more for state coffers.

The Legislature – with strong backing from Brownback – passed welfare reforms in April, including a provision that would limit to \$25 a day the amount welfare beneficiaries could withdraw from an ATM using their electronic benefits transfer cards.

Supporters say the restriction – the first of its kind – will ensure that benefits money isn't squandered. They said beneficiaries can still use their cards as debit cards at the grocery store without a \$25 restriction. Opponents called the restriction mean-spirited and said beneficiaries would be gouged by ATM fees since they'd be limited to withdrawing \$25 at a time.

State officials later became aware the restriction could violate provisions in the Social Security Act requiring that welfare beneficiaries "have adequate access to their cash assistance" and be able to withdraw money "with minimal fees or charges."

The Brownback administration began seeking a fix to ensure the state would not lose \$102 million in federal aid it receives for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. That possibility was first reported by The Eagle and McClatchy's Washington bureau.

HB 2281, which the governor signed Friday, doesn't eliminate the restriction, which is set to take effect in July. Instead, it empowers the secretary of the Kansas Department for Children and Families to unilaterally raise or rescind an ATM withdrawal limit.

Sen. Michael O'Donnell, R-Wichita, who carried the original welfare reform bill and worked with the governor's office on the fix, said the legislation will allow DCF Secretary Phyllis Gilmore to work with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "to find a reasonable amount of cash for TANF recipients to receive from ATM withdrawals."

Theresa Freed, spokeswoman for DCF, said federal officials were evaluating the state's policy changes and would be consulted on what an appropriate restriction would be, if any.

"We are working closely with our federal partners on this issue," Freed said.

Gilmore could strike down the limit if needed, O'Donnell said.

The TANF change was paired with legislation that will increase a tax on health maintenance organizations, or HMOs, from 1 percent to 3.31 percent on total premiums and subscription charges.

That legislation is part of the state's solution for a \$400 million budget hole and is estimated to bring in about \$48 million in 2016.

The Legislature passed a tax increase package Friday that is projected to bring in another \$384 million. Brownback is expected to sign it soon.

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article24469915.html#storylink=cpy>

JUNE 15, 2015

Governor signs law to establish state database of scrap metal sales

BY BRYAN LOWRY

Eagle Topeka bureau

TOPEKA — A bill that would establish a statewide database of scrap metal sales in an attempt to curb thefts has been signed into law by the governor.

HB 2048, which Gov. Sam Brownback signed Friday, requires the attorney general's office to set up and maintain the database.

The bill was pushed by Sedgwick County DA Marc Bennett, who said the database will offer law enforcement an effective tool to analyze trends and catch thieves.

For example, he said, last year thieves stole about \$100,000 in scrap metal in Wichita on two separate occasions. The database would enable law enforcement officers to identify whether the same person sold metal at multiple scrap yards in multiple counties and pursue that as a lead after a robbery, he said.

"Who are the big buyers? Who are the big sellers? Is this legitimate what's going on?" Bennett said. "Or can we track some of these people who are habitually selling scrap metal across different yards around one jurisdiction to the next. Because it's very hard to just go into a yard and find one length of scrap metal and say, aha, here's the piece of copper that was stolen."

The database will be paid for through penalties for theft and registration fees for scrap metal dealers.

The legislation will also bring uniformity to restrictions on the selling of scrap metal across the state. Bennett said ordinances differed in Wichita from the rest of Sedgwick County and the rest of the state, making it difficult to enforce the law.

The legislation makes scrap metal theft a Level 6 nonperson felony if the damage exceeds \$5,000; that carries presumptive probation, Bennett said. A second offense would mean presumptive imprisonment.

"We're not expecting people suddenly lining up filling the prisons. The goal here is to try to identify people doing this, shut them down and put a stop to this crime," he said.

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article24501499.html#storylink=cpy>

JUNE 13, 2015

Major steps lawmakers did – and didn't – take during the session

BY DION LEFLER AND BRYAN LOWRY

Eagle Topeka Bureau

The Legislature began its wrap-up session the final week of April but did not finish until the second week of June. Lawmakers spent the bulk of that time battling over how to cover the state's \$400 million budget shortfall. But they also passed other significant measures. Here's a quick look at some of the major steps the Legislature took during the 113-day session – and a few it didn't.

What the Legislature did

Abortion

Made Kansas the first state to restrict an abortion procedure – common in the second trimester – known as dilation and extraction. A legal challenge was filed in Shawnee County this month.

Budget

Passed with almost no debate a plan for \$6.37 billion in spending in state general funds and \$15.4 billion when all funds, including designated fees and federal grants, are taken into account.

BYOB

Passed a bill allowing businesses to let patrons bring their own alcoholic beverages. Banned BYOB hours from midnight to 9 a.m. after Wichita complained the original plan would facilitate “after hours” club drinking.

Courts

Passed a bill funding courts but de-funding them if they strike down a law that strips the Supreme Court of authority to choose local district presiding judges.

Guns

Stripped cities and counties of the authority to regulate gun sales in residential areas; earlier, allowed anyone who is legally qualified to own a gun to carry it concealed in public without a license or training.

Elections

Moved city and school board elections from spring of odd-numbered years to fall of odd-numbered years; granted Secretary of State Kris Kobach and his successors authority to prosecute alleged election crimes.

Fantasy sports

Legalized “real money” daily fantasy league sports betting.

Local property taxes

Restricted county and city governments’ ability to increase property taxes beyond the inflation rate without a public vote, with exceptions for infrastructure needs and to meet state and federal mandates. The Kansas Association of Counties warns this will hamstring local governments and potentially force budget cuts.

Private school scholarships

Expanded eligibility for a \$10 million private school scholarship fund established last year to allow use by parents who pay tuition through tithing to a church. The provision will likely be a boon to Catholic schools in Wichita, but some education advocates have raised concerns that the program lacks accountability and could steer public dollars toward unaccredited schools.

School finance

Replaced school funding based on weighted attendance with block grants based on 2014 spending. School districts have sued to overturn, arguing it fails the constitutional mandate of equitable funding for rich and poor schools.

Taxes

Passed a tax package – spread over three bills – that raises more than \$400 million in revenue. The sales tax will increase from 6.15 percent to 6.5 percent in

July – including on food purchases, which some critics say will disproportionately affect poor and working-class Kansans. The Legislature did include a tax break for low-income workers, first floated by Gov. Sam Brownback, but that won't go into effect until 2016.

Uber

Passed an insurance and background-check bill for ride-sharing services that caused Uber to shut down in Kansas; Uber resumed service after a second bill softened the regulations.

Welfare

Cut welfare eligibility from four years to three; banned use of welfare funds for a long list of recreational and social activities; set \$25 limit on ATM withdrawals of welfare funds; passed trailer bill to allow administration to raise or eliminate the ATM limit if necessary to comply with federal law.

Wind

Repealed state standards requiring utilities to provide renewable energy, agreed not to levy excise tax on wind power.

What the Legislature didn't do

Antlers

The Senate rejected a bill to require wildlife agents to give valuable antlers from illegally poached deer to the property owner or tenant where the deer's carcass is found.

Campus religion

The Senate passed a bill to exempt campus religious groups from university anti-discrimination rules, but it stalled in the House.

Grocery alcohol

Lawmakers did not pass a proposal backed by Dillons, Wal-Mart and others to allow grocery stores to sell full-strength beer, wine and liquor and convenience stores to sell stronger beer.

Medicaid expansion

The Legislature took no action to expand Medicaid to cover workers with too much income for Medicaid and too little income for subsidies under the Affordable Care Act.

Private e-mails for public business

Attorney General Derek Schmidt recommended the Legislature close a loophole that allows public officials to conduct official business through private e-mails, circumventing the state's open records law, after The Eagle reported the use of private e-mail by the Brownback administration. Legislation to close the loophole was introduced in both chambers but failed to gain traction. Senate Vice President Jeff King has asked that a special committee study the issue before the next session.

Teacher prosecution

A bill to allow criminal prosecution of teachers who display materials deemed harmful to minors passed the Senate but stalled in the House.

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article24047926.html#storylink=cpy>

JUNE 16, 2015

Brownback signs budget and tax bills, defends tax policies

BY BRYAN LOWRY

Eagle Topeka bureau

TOPEKA — Gov. Sam Brownback says a plan increasing sales and other taxes does not count as a tax increase because it comes on the heels of income tax cuts passed three years ago.

He signed the state's \$15 billion budget and two tax increase bills, HB 2109 and SB 270, needed to fund it Tuesday.

The governor championed massive tax cuts in 2012, which many economists have blamed for the state's budget problems this year. On its 113th day last week, the Legislature passed a plan to raise the sales tax from 6.15 percent to 6.5 percent starting in July.

National experts have panned the plan and say Kansas could face more budget problems in the future.

Democrats have called the \$384 million tax plan the largest tax increase in state history.

Brownback pushed back against that, saying it was not a tax increase because it comes after tax cuts.

"Look at the totality of the picture. When you look at that, it is a tax cut," he said.

Brownback noted that the final result is similar to his initial tax proposal in 2012.

His staff distributed data showing that the overall value of the taxes cut during his first term outweighs the overall increase this year. The data was not broken out by income group or individual person.

The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a liberal-leaning think tank that has criticized Brownback's policies, [released an analysis](#) hours later showing that the bottom 40 percent of Kansans will on average end up paying more in taxes.

People making less than \$23,000 a year will end up paying an average of \$197 more a year in overall taxes when this year's changes are weighed against the previous tax cuts, according to the institute's analysis. People making between \$23,000 and \$42,000 will see an average overall increase of \$66.

On the other end of the spectrum, people making more than \$493,000, who represent the top 1 percent of Kansans, will pay \$24,632 less in taxes even when this year's tax increase is included, according to the institute.

'They got it done'

Republicans struggled to reach consensus on tax policy this session and only found the bare minimum of votes needed to pass a bill Friday after the governor warned that massive budget cuts would take place this week if lawmakers did not act.

“They got their work done. The furloughs didn’t happen. They got it finished. I applaud that,” Brownback said. “They got it done. And I don’t know that anybody’s happy about it. But they got their work done and Kansans should applaud them. It took a long time. But they got it done.”

Brownback blamed dysfunction in Topeka in recent weeks on Democrats, who hold less than one-fourth of the seats in the Legislature.

“The minority party put forward no proposals to solve this issue. None. They just wanted to see it fail,” Brownback said.

Democrats fired back.

“Governor Brownback is incapable of telling the truth,” said Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka, in a news release. “Not only is this a tax increase, it is the largest tax increase in state history. His ‘glide path to zero’ is a complete failure and will further result in a self-inflicted budget crisis for years to come.”

More cuts coming

The tax plan fixes the shortfall in the state’s \$6.4 billion general fund budget but is projected to leave a razor-thin balance at the end of the 2016 fiscal year, which starts next month. Lawmakers are counting on the governor to make an additional \$50 million in cuts to help shore up the state’s cash reserves.

Brownback repeatedly touted K-12 education during the news conference, but would not definitively say that cuts to K-12 education would be off the table.

“I didn’t hear a specific answer,” said Scott Rothschild, spokesman for the Kansas Association of School Boards. “Our position is we need a sustainable, reliable source of tax revenue, and we’ll see if this does it or not.”

“Schools have been on high alert for years. There’s all this talk about was our funding increased or was it decreased. Schools are dealing with severe funding challenges,” Rothschild said. “Our funding is not keeping up with inflation.”

The governor said he had not decided what to cut, with one exception. When he signed the budget, he made a line-item veto based on a recommendation from the Kansas Board of Regents, cutting \$1.9 million both this coming year and the

next for a program that grants funds to post-secondary institutions that provide GED accelerators for students.

Budget director Shawn Sullivan said the Board of Regents indicated the program had sufficient funds to operate through 2018 without the additional money.

‘Perfect’ projections

With the cut, the state is projected to have an ending balance of less than \$40 million – without additional cuts from the governor — and only if everything goes exactly as planned, which is unlikely, said Joseph Henchman, a policy analyst with the conservative-leaning Tax Foundation in Washington, D.C.

“Everything’s got to work perfectly,” Henchman said, predicting that additional budget cuts or tax increases would be on the horizon. “Their projections have to be perfect for the next three years.”

Henchman said Kansas has become a cautionary tale for other states’ policymakers when they approach his organization for advice on tax policy.

“A lot of people are asking when they confront proposals, ‘Well, what does this compare to Kansas? Because we don’t want to be like Kansas,’” Henchman said. “What did Kansas do, so we know not to do that?”

Henchman said Kansas made two key mistakes when crafting its tax policies in 2012: It failed to reduce spending proportionally and it excluded limited liability companies from income tax.

This policy gave independent contractors incentive to make LLCs to avoid paying income tax, he said. “That’s creating, I think, a lot of the instability in the tax code. Because you don’t know how many people are going to take advantage of this each year – and that’s a big hole in the budget and a big hole in the projections,” he said.

The state had projected that about 191,000 business owners would use the business tax break. The Eagle reported in February that the number turned out to be more than 333,000.

Brownback had threatened to veto any tax plan that rolled back the business income exemption. Sen. Jeff Longbine, R-Emporia, accused Brownback of

perpetrating “political blackmail” by warning of massive budget cuts while refusing to budge on the business income issue.

Brownback acknowledged the veto threat, but contended that he had been open to hundreds of proposals from lawmakers and that time simply ran out. He also said time would serve as a healer for lawmakers who grew frustrated during the long session.

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article24640072.html#storylink=cpy>

JUNE 17, 2015

After tax increase vote, Michael O’Donnell may be vulnerable in 2016

BY BRYAN LOWRY

Eagle Topeka bureau

Sen. Michael O’Donnell has a target on his back in 2016, and he knows it.

O’Donnell, a Republican, represents a Senate district in west-central Wichita that overlaps with the districts of three Democratic state representatives and that went in favor of Democrat Paul Davis in the 2014 governor’s race by double digits.

He also voted last week in favor of HB 2109, which increases the state’s sales and cigarette taxes, among other things.

“I fully anticipate the Democrats trying to exploit any vote I take, yes or no,” O’Donnell said. “That’s just politics.”

He defends this vote because it was paired with a cut to the sales tax on food a year later.

“I did have reservations about it but because the sales tax (cut) for food was in there, I was able to support that bill....And then I heard from people in my district that were very unhappy with it,” he said. “So I regretted it and I told them if I have an opportunity again, I would vote against it.”

O'Donnell lobbied House members to vote against the bill, a move that rankled some of his Senate colleagues, including tax chairman Sen. Les Donovan, R-Wichita, who called O'Donnell's behavior inappropriate.

He voted against a subsequent tax bill, SB 270, that dropped the future cut to the sales tax on food. "I know that I disappointed members of the Republican Party, but I think I did the right thing for my district," O'Donnell said. "And I've received nothing but positive comments since that vote on Friday."

The two bills together form a tax package that Gov. Sam Brownback signed Tuesday.

Kansas Democrats say that frustration with the sales tax hike and with dysfunction in Topeka after a record 113-day session gives them an chance to pick up seats in the Legislature. They see O'Donnell's seat as particularly winnable in the next election if they can field the right candidate.

"They own this dysfunction...I think this gives us an opportunity to maybe make a few changes," said Tim Graham, a Democratic staffer.

Chapman Rackaway, a political scientist from Fort Hays State University, said O'Donnell "certainly stands out" as someone who will be vulnerable in 2016. "Anyone who is in a swingy district like that is certainly ripe for a challenge," he said.

"There's plenty of outrage over this session. And you have a set-up for opponents of these conservatives that is really, really perfect," Rackaway said. "You've got a perfect opportunity to say these folks called themselves conservatives and they raised your taxes. Don't mention sales. Just say they raised your taxes."

However, Rackaway said, Democrats need to find candidates early to build support behind.

Rep. John Carmichael, D-Wichita, confirmed that he has received phone calls asking him to challenge O'Donnell but said that he thinks it's too early to make a decision. Carmichael said he's even had some Republicans ask him to go after O'Donnell.

Speaking more generally, Carmichael said that Democrats, who hold less than one-fourth of the seats in Legislature, stand to gain in 2016.

“The Republican governor with supermajorities in both houses of the Legislature has been unable to govern the state and I think voters are well aware of that,” he said.

“It’s obvious that folks were engaged this year,” Carmichael said. “The level of email that I received from my constituents exploded exponentially as the session drew on.”

Another name being mentioned in Democratic circles as a possible opponent for O’Donnell is Chris Pumpelly, who served as Davis’ communications director during the 2014 campaign and is a Wichita native. Pumpelly would not comment for this article.

O’Donnell took his seat in 2012 – after serving on the Wichita City Council – by ousting longtime moderate Republican incumbent Sen. Jean Schodorf in the primary. Schodorf has since become a Democrat and now serves as the state party’s secretary.

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/prairie-politics/article24704011.html#storylink=cpy>

JUNE 17, 2015

Reopening Riddel boys ranch concerns Wichita school officials

BY SUZANNE PEREZ TOBIAS

The Wichita Eagle

Wichita school district leaders say they’re concerned about a move to reopen Judge Riddel Boys Ranch because it could require a “significant investment” in education programming without guaranteed state funding.

“That decision has an impact on our financial aspects and our budget,” Superintendent John Allison told board members last week.

“That’s a program where staff’s been reassigned, equipment has been used elsewhere in the district after it closed,” Allison said. “It would be an investment on our part to once again start that program.”

The ranch, a juvenile reform facility for boys in western Sedgwick County, closed last summer after county officials said they could no longer afford to subsidize it. Although the ranch is located near Lake Afton in the Goddard school district, state statute requires the Wichita district to provide educational programs there, including diploma and GED classes.

Last month, some Sedgwick County commissioners [instructed county staff members to include money](#) in their 2016 spending requests to revive the aging ranch or open a similar reform home.

According to school district officials, the Wichita district spent about \$700,000 a year to educate boys at the ranch. The district received double the state per-pupil aid for each student, “but it covered only about half the costs,” said district spokeswoman Susan Arensman.

In addition to teacher and administrative salaries, supplies, technology and other expenses, the district was required to pay mileage to teachers who traveled to the ranch each day.

School board member Lynn Rogers expressed concern that county officials had not approached the district about the possibility of reopening the ranch. At a recent meeting, he directed Allison to provide estimates for how much it would cost to re-establish school programs there.

“I’m more than willing to provide a partnership, but I would like to be a part of that partnership,” Rogers said.

“Many of those kids, if they were in our buildings, would get an education. We want that. But at the same point, it’s a different facility. It’s a long way away. ... You’re talking about a significant investment on our part.”

County Commission chairman Richard Ranzau said the county is “still in the planning and decision-making process,” so talks with the school district about reopening the ranch would be premature.

“I’m sure we’re all interested in doing the best things for the kids, and I’m sure we could work something out,” Ranzau said. “If we move forward, then of course staff would contact their staff and work something out.”

District leaders are especially wary about increased costs next year because block grant state funding is based on current enrollment figures. The district is projecting an increase of about 230 students but [no increase in per-pupil funding](#). What’s more, the number of poor, bilingual, special-needs and at-risk students is expected to increase at twice the pace of overall enrollment.

“It does not sound as though, with the condition of the ranch currently, that it would be something immediate,” Allison said. “But it is concerning when you hear those types of discussions, because it has an impact on us.”

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/news/local/education/article24704701.html#storylink=cpy>

The Kansas City Star