**FOCUS ON FAIRNESS**

**with Representative Dave Baker, 68th District**

The “turnaround” is how we refer to the halfway point in the Legislative session when most Senate and House bills have passed out. Very few committees will meet this next week, and we begin debating bills on the floor. This will take a lot of time due to the debate process. The evening of Thursday, February 22 should be the conclusion of hearing bills, and we will resume work at the Capitol on Wednesday, February 28. I will be meeting with constituents at forums and with businesses during the time away from Topeka and looking forward to area events and news.

We received good news on the projections from the new tax bill passed by Congress this week, and the state may receive an increase in revenue of about $137 million for fiscal year 2019. The increase is from limiting charitable deductions, limiting deductions for state and local taxes, and limiting the deduction for qualified residence interest. Additional revenue comes from foreign-source portion of dividends received by domestic corporations, sales and transfers of foreign-owned corporations, and deferred foreign income treatment. Estimates for 2020 are $179 million and $187 million in 2021. We have heard this before, and there is usually a big snag when the money starts to come in. Several groups are already adjusting to the new law, and “required donations” are escalating. The need for tax dollars to operate the federal government will escalate, and revenues will not be sufficient to meet their obligations. The “Brownback Experiment” has moved to Washington. Predictions are for a two-year window before the wheels come off the bus. Greedy special interest leaders will blame Social Security and Medicare as unsustainable, which is correct because Congress has not made the necessary changes to guarantee these programs’ success. Social Security is an insurance policy, and Medicare is far more efficient than private insurance. Send a message to our Kansas representatives that intelligent changes need to be made to these programs. Giving away money feels good, but we have a huge deficit that just got bigger.

Medicaid expansion will be a topic again in the legislature, and I am hopeful that we can celebrate Governor Colyer signing the bill. Local providers have made it very clear that it is critical to survival of services, and politics should not enter the discussion. Incentives for economic development are going to become more transparent with a proposed committee being formed to keep an eye on them. Some of these incentives are STAR Bonds, income tax credits including ROZ (Rural Opportunity Zones), PEAK (Promoting Employment Across Kansas), HPIP (High Performance Incentive Program), property tax exemptions, and a host of others. I am learning about the possibilities for our district and will be sharing opportunities in the future. I’m encouraged that we are reviewing incentives and that costs are becoming transparent. Changes will be coming as some of these programs are not returning the promised results.

Dale Dennis reported that some school districts would use the approximate $200 million of new funds for each of the next three years for the following: increasing base aid by $285; increasing teachers’ salaries by about 3.85% each year; adding 150 psychologists, social workers, and counselors after we increased the number of these employees by 126 state-wide last year; closing the achievement gap; reducing class size in urban schools; and increasing pay for non-licensed employees to improve retention. The students of today learn differently than those of the past as technology enters our lives on every level, and we have to adjust. I have heard from schools in the district, and they echo many of the same points that Dale has highlighted. Great teachers in Kansas public schools have produced some of the brightest industry leaders, and we should strive to continue to be a model. The issue of school finance needs to be resolved this year so we can focus on other issues. It’s been a problem for almost 50 years, and that is 50 years too long!

We are starting to dig ourselves out of a six-year hole and are beginning to learn from the mistakes of past legislatures. In the coming weeks, we will get down to the final analysis of the proposed bills and how to fund government. Wage earners shouldn’t provide the bulk of funds while wealthy individuals and corporations steal our state. We will be watching for self-serving special interest groups trying to sneak by legislation that doesn’t benefit Kansans. Listen and read area news sources for accurate information, and contact elected officials with your suggestions. The decisions in the weeks ahead will determine the direction of how we prioritize and fund our obligations. As Will Rogers said, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.” Kansas is headed in the right direction, and we need to stay focused on fairness.

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