

VIEWPOINTS

It appears school funding will always be taxing issue

You may remember that in the course of about the last 12 months, Gov. Dennis Daugaard has been the bearer of what seemed to be good news.

He first heightened optimism among South Dakotans in a press release issued way back in July 2013, in which he informed the state's citizens that we, at that time, were in better financial shape than expected.

The state general fund budget for fiscal year 2013 ended with higher revenues and lower expenditures than budgeted.

Revenue growth for the completed 2013 fiscal year exceeded estimates adopted by the legislature last March by \$13.6 million. In addition, state agencies also demonstrated fiscal restraint, spending \$10.6 million less than appropriated.

In total, the state's financial picture improved by \$24.2 million from the March fiscal year 2013 estimates.

The \$24.2 million surplus was transferred to the budget reserve account as required by state law.

Fast forward to the end of 2013. Things can change rapidly in South Dakota, and as the governor prepared to give his annual budget address to the Legislature on Dec. 3, there were no great expectations.

Daugaard had warned earlier that lackluster tax receipts would hold education-funding increases to around 1.6 percent, the minimum bump for inflation that state law requires for school aid. But he told state lawmakers on Dec. 3, 2013 that an unexpected \$70 million in unclaimed property receipts would allow 3 percent increases in school aid, payments to health care providers in the Medicaid

BETWEEN THE LINES



DAVID LIAS
david.lias@plaintalk.net

program and other key programs.

The Republican governor also proposed a 3 percent raise for state employees and a 3 percent hike in spending on South Dakota's four

technical institutes. So, how did that 3 percent bump in school aid affect the Vermillion School District as it prepared its 2014-15 budget?

Let's just say the budgeting process didn't get any easier for members of the Vermillion School Board and administrators. It's never easy to try to accomplish as much or more than the year before when you have significantly less money.

And for this latest budget, thanks, in part, to the state's rather complicated school funding formula, and thanks, in part, to simple demographics, the Vermillion School District had less cash for its 2014-15 budget than the previous year. Even with the 3 percent bump in state aid from the South Dakota Legislature. The South Dakota Legislature set the funding per student, or per student allocation (PSA) of state aid to local school districts in 2014 at \$4,625.65 per student. The PSA increase, however, was blunted locally by declining enrollment numbers in the Vermillion School District.

The district's total student count has dropped by over 40 in the past year.

That means about \$185,000 fewer dollars sent in the form of state aid to education from Pierre to Vermillion.

Our Republican Legislature stubbornly clings to state dollars, directing them, at times, to projects that are somewhat questionable while forcing school districts to scrape and slash while trying their best to keep everyone happy.

In July 2013, the state's two rainy-day accounts reached a combined record high of \$158,952,076.

That total of nearly \$159 million is equal to 12.3 percent of state government's general-fund spending from the 2013 budget.

All of that revenue didn't just suddenly appear out of thin air. There are a host of things at work here, including a high reliance by the state on a strongly regressive tax.

Another factor is the ease with which the state Legislature has, for three years in a row now, not only balanced its budget but also had plenty of money left over in its general fund and in reserve funds.

One reason the state's ledger ends up in the black is the state legislature's willingness to shift many financial burdens onto citizens' shoulders in a variety of ways.

An example: For years, now, the Legislature hasn't adequately funded public education in South Dakota. It has ignored South Dakota law that calls for state aid to education to increase annually by 3 percent or the rate of inflation, which ever is less.

Gov. Mike Rounds, in his last year in office, called for a freeze

in state aid, and the Legislature agreed. During Daugaard's first year as governor, it looked like schools would be hit with a 10 percent cut in funding. One-time monies were found to make that cut approximately 8.6 percent.

School districts have yet to recover from the double-whammy caused by the recession and state budget cuts.

Remember that current per student allocation amount of \$4,625 – the one that came after the 3 percent increase approved by the Legislature and governor thanks to that infusion of one-time money?

Compare it to the per student allocation school districts received in 2010 prior to the cuts made by the governor shortly after he took office – approximately \$4,805 per student.

The Vermillion School District – had state aid to education merely remained frozen at 2010 levels – would have received an estimated \$5.8 million in state aid to general education monies, based on an estimated enrollment of 1,209 students.

In reality, thanks to the long-lingering effects of that big cut years ago, the district will receive somewhere in the neighborhood of \$5.6 million in state aid.

Provided that student numbers stay constant.

We understand the desire to have a "cushion" in our state budget. It's natural to be happy about having a positive balance in our bank accounts, and a wallet that has a bit of heft to it. Yes, we're glad that South Dakota has had surpluses rather than deficits in its state budget for three consecutive years now.

Reserve funds, however, have a disappointing quality. They just sit there. There potential to further improve our state, to make needed investments in the public good, go wasted.

So, the money has always had to come from somewhere else.

Patrons of a growing number of public school districts across the state, frustrated with the state's unwillingness to fund public schools adequately, have had to raise needed revenue themselves by opting out of the state property tax freeze.

Of South Dakota's 151 public school districts, 66 have opted out, raising additional revenue to pay for salaries and other ongoing general fund costs. The Vermillion School District is getting close to the end of its second five-year opt-out that provides \$800,000 annually.

We hope state lawmakers will take that all into account months from now, as a new session of the state Legislature convenes in January 2015.

The state general fund budget on June 30 had \$2.6 million more revenue than legislators predicted in March, and spending was \$7.2 million less than expected. The net result was almost \$10 million put into the state's reserves.

South Dakotans' hard work, sacrifice, their doing without, their paying more than should be required in local, highly regressive property and sales taxes and fees and tuition have helped our state to end each fiscal year, for three years in a row now, with a surplus.

It's time to wisely spend some of those surplus funds to restore school funding back to where it was four years ago.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Poor pool plan

To the editor:

OMG.

If you haven't been following what our city is planning for Prentis Park, here is a review.

The City Council passed a plan for spending about 5.3 million plus some city labor and materials not documented. This plan has the only parking lot off of Prentis Street, in the 25-103 address area. Most traffic going to the park uses Main and Plum. This would require motor vehicles to travel an extra three blocks on narrow streets to get to the parking lot. So when there is a game at the baseball park and heavy usage of the pool, there will be traffic problems. The main parking lot should be off of Plum. A strip lot, in the park, mirroring the one on Clark St. would help alleviate the parking situation that the city has allowed to occur over many years. Also, a parking lot for the baseball park is needed.

The plan calls for \$4 million-plus for a new pool and lazy river that would be open three months of a year. How can you justify that cost? Also, the free wading pool would be eliminated. This shallow pool is where parents take infants to get them accustomed to water. If a child urinates in the wading pool, the water is

circulated and disinfected quickly. Not so in big pool.

An Olympic size pool (100 meters) should have been included in the USD Wellness Center. For year-around swim training, lap swimmers, competitive swimming, etc. that should be the place. The city pool should be designed for family recreation.

The plan has perimeter sidewalk for about one-half of the street frontage. Other developers are required to have sidewalk all along the street.

So, to fund this poorly thought out plan, the city would borrow about \$3.2 million to be paid back over 20 plus years from revenue from a 5 percent wholesale beer tax. That's right. The city is thinking of having beer purchasers pay for over half of the cost of the park expenses. For discussion, if half of the beer purchased in Vermillion is by college students, guests and travelers that will not use the park/pool, this is an outright camouflaged rip-off of college students and guests to Vermillion.

So, consider the interest on the borrowed money, operating and maintenance costs of a lazy river and discuss if this is for Vermillion.

Paul M. Hasse
Vermillion

LETTER TO THE EDITOR
POLICY

The Plain Talk encourages its readers to write letters to the editor, and it asks that a few simple guidelines be followed.

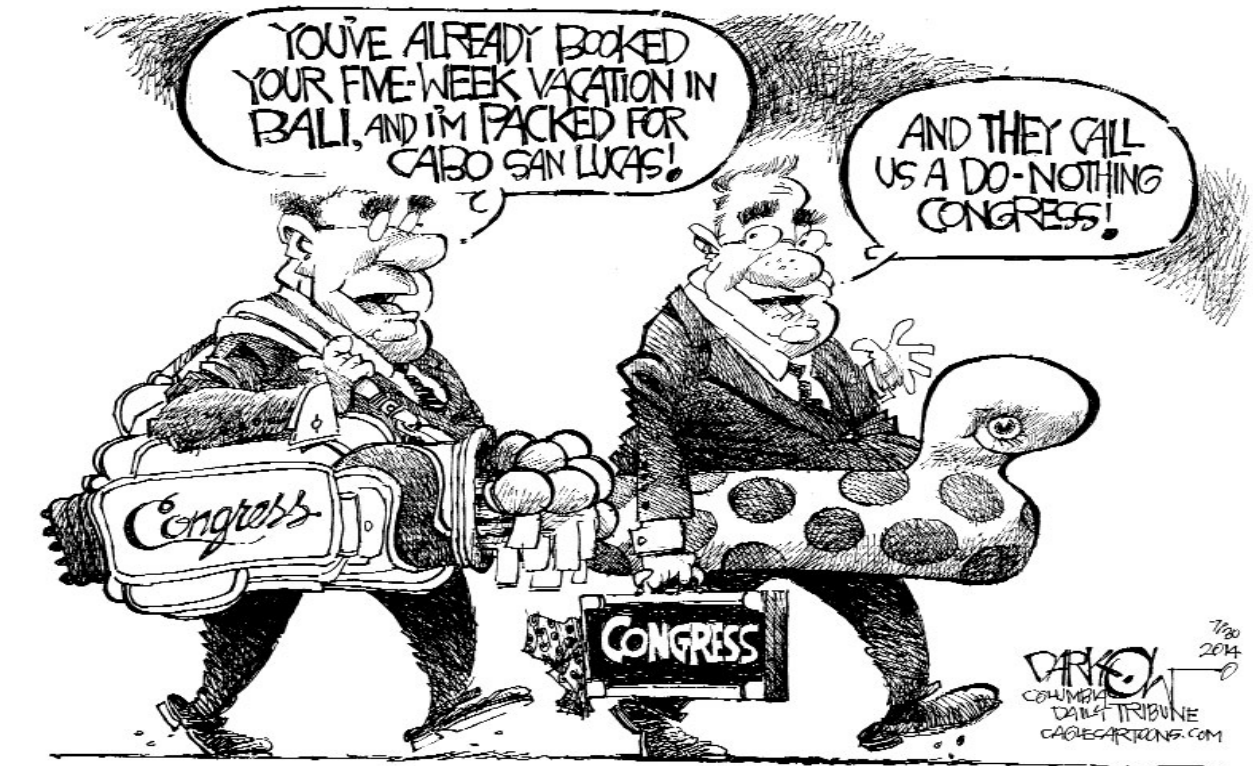
Please limit letters to 300 words or less. Letters should deal with a single subject, be of general interest and state a specific point of view. Letters are edited with brevity, clarity and newspaper style in mind.

In the sense of fairness and professionalism, the Plain Talk will accept no letters attacking private

individuals or businesses.

Specific individuals or entities addressed in letters may be given the opportunity to read the letter prior to publication and be allowed to answer the letter in the same issue.

Only signed letters with writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification will be accepted. Please mail to: Letters to the Editor, 201 W. Cherry St., Vermillion, SD 57069, drop off at 201 W. Cherry in Vermillion, fax to 624-4696 or e-mail to david.lias@plaintalk.net.



These cousins can take a hike

"Just write about what bites you and damn the rest!" – Jonathon Carroll, American author

Although I am a nature lover, there is absolutely nothing I love about chiggers. Not one iota. Zippo. Nada. Period.

In fact, I can't find one good thing to say about these nasty, tiny little varmintes who just happen to relish getting under my skin and chowing down for an endless feast. This, of course, leaves me itching like crazy, scratching until I bleed and all speckled with bite marks to no end.

Honestly, for years I've tried not attracting them, going without perfumes and products with fragrances. They still seem love me. I just don't get it. My husband passes through the same terrain as I do – grassy lawns, flower gardens, woods and all, but he doesn't have a single chigger bite – not one. Not that I would wish chigger bites on anybody, but tell me, how fair is that?

Believe me, if you have never been bitten by a chigger; consider yourself lucky – very lucky.

These bugs are bad – very, very bad. What are chiggers, you may be asking? Well, that tells me you aren't from around here. So, here's a little primer on chiggers.

Chiggers are mites in the larvae stage of the Trombiculidae family, cousins to arachnids, like spiders and ticks.

Chiggers are found all over the world but are most common in forests, grassy fields, gardens, parks and in moist areas

MY STORY YOUR STORY



PAULA DAMON
paula.damon@iw.net

around lakes or rivers. In other words, they're everywhere you are, unless you live in a concrete jungle.

By the size of their bite you'd never know those little red buggers are barely visible to the naked eye at less than 1/150th of an inch. The babies get along with six legs, but

adult chiggers have eight. Now here's the worst part. Chiggers attach themselves to human hosts for up to six hours before biting us. Most chigger bites occur in thin-skinned areas of the body, like the ankles, waist, groin, armpits and backs of knees. My husband says I must be thin skinned all over because they have not ruled out any part of me.

Rumor has it that chiggers remain dug in under our skin forever nesting on an endless supply of flesh. But come to find out that's just an old wives' tale. The truth is while chiggers do burrow beneath the skin; they don't really stay there all that long and are easily dislodged.

As I stated earlier, I've tried everything to prevent chigger bites. I've doused myself with vanilla flavoring, bug spray and Avon Skin

So Soft oil. No such luck.

Treating them has not panned out for me either. I've applied clear nail polish on the bites, believing I was suffocating them, but, darn it all, that was just a myth, too. Neither Listerine, household ammonia nor Vick's Vapor Rub sprinkled with table salt has worked.

Some people use Absorbine Jr.® or a mixture of Gold Bond Medicated Powder® along with Bactine® spray. Others try prescription Cortizone, Benadryl®, ammonia and peroxide to relieve itching.

I read that a concoction of tea tree oil, baking soda, Cortizone-10 and alcohol works, too, but I'm so busy itching to try it.

One simple preventative I read about is to apply rubbing alcohol wipes when you feel chigger bites coming on, then scrub a dub, dub in a hot shower or bath with baking soda.

After bathing, you're supposed to wipe chigger bites again with rubbing alcohol, apply baking soda paste and take an antihistamine.

For goodness sakes, I'm exhausted just thinking about doing all of this stuff.

Ah, the heck with it. Do you want to know what? I think when chiggers land on me, they put out an all-points bulletin, notifying every chigger in a 20-mile radius to come on over, cause Paula's hosting and there's not a thing I can do about that.

That's what I think.

Vermillion

PLAIN
TALK

Since 1884 • Official County, City and School District Newspaper

201 W. Cherry, Vermillion, SD 57069 • Publication No. USPS 657-720

Publisher: Gary Wood • General Manager/Managing Editor: Alan Dale

Published weekly by YANKTON MEDIA, Inc. • Periodicals postage paid at Vermillion, SD 57069.

Subscription rates for the Plain Talk by mail are \$27.56 a year in the city of Vermillion.

Subscriptions in Clay, Turner, Union and Yankton counties are \$41.34 per year.

Elsewhere in South Dakota, subscriptions are \$44.52, and out-of-state subscriptions are \$42.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Plain Talk, 201 West Cherry Street, Vermillion, SD 57069.

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