

Forces beyond local control

We're all familiar with humorous saying, and I'm paraphrasing here, "No person's life, liberty and property is safe as long as the legislature is in session."

The Vermillion School Board discovered at its Jan. 28 meeting that there could be a bit of truth to that axiom. And it's not really a laughing matter.

While discussing various bits of education-related legislation that's seeing action in Pierre during this legislative session, Superintendent Mark Froke brought up Senate Bill 15.

The bill, introduced at the request of the state Department of Education, is described, in its official title, as "An act to revise certain provisions regarding state aid to special education."

So far, so good. "This changes up the amount per thousand (valuation of real property) that can be taxed for special education. Currently, we have a minimum and a maximum, and the minimum is \$1.20 per thousand, and the maximum is \$1.40 per thousand," Froke told the school board. "The state is proposing moving that to \$1.33 minimum, and \$1.55 maximum."

"Just off the cuff, I thought, 'good, that will provide some additional support for special education.' We're always struggling with that," he said.

Business Manager Sheila Beermann "ran the numbers," so to speak, to see what kind of financial impact – hopefully a positive one – this legislation may have on our school district's special education programs.

Turns out it's not exactly a winning formula.

"When I did the worksheet for our special education, if the school would remain at \$1.40 (the current maximum) all it would do is reduce the dollars coming into the district," Beermann said. "We'd have to move our levy to \$1.53 (per thousand) in order to maintain the same income into the district, but it still would be shuffled from the state to the taxpayer – that extra 13 cents per thousand."

"So it does shift the burden," she said. "It also makes us increase our levy just to maintain our dollars."

"The governor is very interested in seeing this passed, and no one could figure out why," Froke told the school board. Beermann's calculations show that if this bill is approved in its present form, and the Vermillion district makes no changes to the present levy – keeping it at \$1.40 – there will be a noticeable impact.

"We take a \$70,000 hit," Froke said, "and taking it to a \$1.53 per thousand – we break even. What's happening is the burden is being shifted from the state to the local taxpayer."

It's easy to vent, to have steam coming from your ears, when you get the card from the county each year that breaks down just how much property tax you pay. There is no doubt some people who conclude that local governing entities, such as our school board, need to work harder at pinching

pennies. It is, after all, "our" money.

School boards, from Vermillion to Lemmon and all points in-between in South Dakota, face huge challenges year after year when it comes to budgeting. At the last meeting of the Vermillion board, members dealt with the fact that they will soon have to approve the spending of a significant amount of capital outlay funds on needed maintenance/replacement of a portion of the high school's roof.

Board members and school administrators knew this day was coming, however. They planned ahead, and made sure the district's capital outlay fund was adequately stocked with revenue to meet such needs.

BETWEEN THE LINES



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Senate Bill 15, however, is something that's as out of the school board's control as our district's student enrollment. The enrollment, by the way, is down from last year, meaning significantly less revenue will be available when it comes time to plan for next year's budget.

SB15 was introduced Jan. 9, and referred to the Senate Education Committee. On Jan. 24, it was bumped to the Senate Appropriations Committee. That committee is scheduled to take action on it today. One can imagine that it may be approved by that committee and move on to the state Senate. It may be altered in some way during this process; perhaps some wording will be stricken or an amendment may be added.

It's hard to say exactly what will happen. It may sail right to the governor's desk without fanfare. He will sign it, and it will become law. Without the Jane and Joe Does of our state – the South Dakota's taxpayers – knowing that it may bump up their property taxes a bit.

We realize it is difficult to describe 13 cents per \$1,000 as a burdensome increase. We are a state, however, whose voters strongly turned away a initiated measure last November that would have increased sales taxes to, in part, provide some extra revenue for education.

One can't help but wonder if that tax failed to gain public support because too many citizens were wary of how the Legislature would react if it passed. I heard more than one concerned observer note that they believed state lawmakers would simply pull back state revenues normally earmarked for education so that, while paying higher taxes, we wouldn't really gain what was intended.

Yes, there are forces at work beyond the control of our local school district. We have good reason to be wary of the state Legislature.

Legislative report:

State tourism tax increased 1.5 percent

By Sen. Tom Jones

District 17

Last Thursday, Gov. Dennis Daugaard signed the bill which increases the tourism tax permanently to 1.5 per cent. This tax affects all entities that are involved with tourism during the months of June, July, August and September.

A bill that is getting a great deal of attention is HB 1087. This bill authorizes school boards to establish school sentinel programs. This bill passed in committee 8-7. It then passed the entire House 42-27. It now will go to committee on the Senate side. If it passed committee, it will go to the Senate floor.

Personally, if each class room door were to automatically lock so the doors could only be opened from inside the class room, I think would be better than more arms in schools. This is a huge emotional issue. Clear minds need

to prevail.

On a very positive note, the Senate Appropriations Committee voted 8-0 to approve the construction of a sports complex on the University of South Dakota's campus. Almost all of the funding for this project is from private funds; a small percentage will be from state funds. We also passed SB 9, with an 8-0 vote, which allows the transfer of 14 acres from the University of South Dakota's Foundation to the University for an outdoor track and two soccer fields.

Next week, Joint Appropriations Committee will hear requests from Labor and the Unemployment Trust Fund, the Secretary of State, the Department of Social Services, the Bureau of Finance and Management, our South Dakota Retirement System, and our Investment Council. On Thursday, the two Appropriations Committees will meet separately to listen to bill hearings.



HOW'S THAT HOPE-CHANGES THING WORKING OUT FOR YA?

Bowling bag produces miracle

It has been said that there is light beyond the darkest hour. During our courtship and throughout our 40-year marriage, I aspired to be a light for my husband. Not by anything I could say or do, but because he had been saddled with more than his share of adversity.

The death of his mother in 1970, two years before we were married; the loss of his father in 1972, five short weeks before our wedding and the passing of his paternal grandparents all within those two fateful years.

Added to that was making a new life together in the Upper Midwest, where we raised our children at great distances from surviving relatives. Consequently, we celebrated holidays and birthdays without gatherings of extended family.

We were in our fifth year of marriage, when Brian turned 26 on Feb. 11, 1977. As always, I wanted to stand in the gap left by the absence of his parents.

So, I hired a babysitter, took Brian out to dinner and then we went bowling. While dating in high school, we went on several bowling dates. And during his freshmen year in college, Brian was on a bowling team. Even though our bowling days were long gone, Brian hung onto his bowling ball and bag for practical and sentimental reasons.

That night, as we pulled into the bowling alley parking lot, I curiously asked him, "If you had one wish on your birthday, what would it be?"

Deeply gazing into the frigid night, he thought awhile and said with a sigh, "I guess it would be to know what my parents would

MY STORY YOUR STORY



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think of me now. That would be nice."

Appearing mesmerized by the notion, he slowly began to list milestones they missed. While I admired his wish, I was at a loss over not being able to make it happen.

We bowled three games that night. Before retiring his bowling ball to its rightful place in the bowling bag of his youth, Brian sorted through the ancient burial ground of

score cards, cleaning rags, gum wrappers, scraps of homework and the like. Clear at the bottom, he excavated a dog-eared note carefully folded into fourths.

"Wonder what this is?" he said, examining the exterior with penciled tallies, tired smudges and a worn black ring imprinted from the ball resting on it.

"Probably just an old piece of scratch paper," I said dismissively, turning away to slip out of my bowling shoes and into my snow boots.

Proceeding to unfold the note, expecting to find more game scores, he quickly could see it was a letter...

Dear Brian, As I write this to you, my feelings are mixed. I'm proud, also happy and a little bit sad. It seems like one part of your life will be

over tomorrow. It also seems like yesterday you stepped on that school bus for the first day of kindergarten.

I just want you to know how proud Dad and I are of you. We haven't always seen eye-to-eye on a lot of things and we probably never will. But we have tried to bring you up in the way we thought best. And it has paid off in many ways.

We haven't always been able to give you as much as we liked. But we have tried to do things with you and for you, which we feel were important.

Although we may be a little short of money right now, we will never be short of love for you. I hope you realize that and will always remember it. I know you will remember me for my corny notes. It is sometimes easier to write these things down than to stand and tell you this.

We wish you all kinds of luck and happiness in the future, Brian. We will always be behind you,

All our love, Mom and Dad Time stopped momentarily. Past and present co-mingled. Brian didn't recall ever reading the letter, which we guessed his mother typed the day before his high school graduation in 1969, one year prior to her passing.

Transcending the years, that not-so-corny note was a garland granting a birthday wish – a miracle light on a dark cold February night.

Greetings from Pierre:

Week 4 more than 'housekeeping'

By Ray Ring
District 17

As expected, week four of the legislative session dealt with much more than the usual "housekeeping bills."

On Tuesday the House considered House Bill 1070, which would allow local school boards, with local law enforcement approval, to authorize teachers, other employees, or volunteers to have guns on school premises.

I spoke against the bill on the House floor, using the same arguments I outlined in last week's column.

After vigorous debate, the bill passed 42-27. It now goes to the Senate.

On Thursday, the House considered Senate Bill 70, the criminal justice reform bill. This bill passed easily, 63-7. I voted with the majority. Gov. Daugaard

is expected to sign the bill. I believe this bill will greatly improve our criminal justice system.

Expanding Medicaid eligibility is receiving increasing attention. Currently, Medicaid covers low-income children and nursing home residents.

Some parents of Medicaid-eligible children can also qualify, but only if their incomes are very low. Parents' eligibility requirements are much more stringent than are children's requirements. Childless adults do not qualify for Medicaid.

Under the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare"), South Dakota could raise income limits for parents and also expand eligibility to low-income people without children.

The federal government would cover 100 percent of Medicaid costs of newly-eligible adults for the first three years

(2014-2016).

The state's only expense would be a little over a million dollars a year for administration. The state's share would gradually rise until it reached 10 percent of total costs in 2020.

According to South Dakota Department of Social Services estimates, state residents would receive about \$2 trillion in medical care benefits between 2014 and 2020, at a cost to the state of about \$100 million.

In addition to direct benefits to people who are currently uninsured, state and local governments would save substantially since they now incur costs for medical care provided when uninsured persons are sick or injured.

Hospitals and other health care providers would also avoid uncompensated costs they are required to provide when uninsured persons come to for

them for treatments such as emergency room care.

Other payers, including persons with insurance, indirectly now bear many of these costs in the form of higher prices and insurance premiums.

So far, Gov. Daugaard has not recommended expanding the program. Legislative leaders from both parties have invited an expert from the Council of State Governments to a special briefing next week.

It remains to be seen how this important issue will play out during the rest of the legislative session.

Please come to one of the upcoming cracker barrels in Irene Community Center, Feb. 9, 10 a.m.; Marion School Gym, Feb. 9, 1 p.m.; or Vermillion City Hall, March 2, 10 a.m. You can contact me directly at Rep.Ring@state.sd.us or (605) 675-9379.

Daugaard: Remember sacrifices of military families

By Gov. Dennis Daugaard

Last year, I had the opportunity to join a Department of Defense trip to Kuwait and Afghanistan to visit South Dakota troops who were serving in those countries. Seeing the bleak landscape of Afghanistan and the extreme desert conditions made me appreciate even more the sacrifice that every member of our military makes for our nation.

It is not just these brave men and women who make sacrifices –

their families sacrifice as well. Just as we have military men and women overseas, there are other servicemen and women serving much closer to home here in South Dakota. Many of them are stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base. I have made a proposal to the legislature for the benefit of those families.

Thirty-five percent of military spouses in the workforce are in professions that require professional licensure or certification. When a military family is transferred to our state,

that family should not lose earning power for an extended period while a spouse seeks licensure in South Dakota.

That is why I proposed a professional licensure portability bill for military spouses. It has been introduced to the Legislature as Senate Bill 117. The bill will streamline the process so that a military spouse with a license or certificate in another state can easily transfer into South Dakota.

Nearly half of our sister states have approved similar legislation, and I hope that the Legislature

approves the measure, allowing South Dakota to join those states.

Our military men and women are devoted to our country. They endure greatly for us. They risk their lives and sacrifice much. One sacrifice our military families should not have to make is waiting for government to approve their ability to make a living after moving to South Dakota.

SB117 will let military families know that South Dakota welcomes them and values their great contribution to our nation.

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