Editor’s Note:

I am filling in for regular policy analyst Paul Johnson, as the extreme weather the first half of the week with its power, internet, and heat challenges for us as individuals, reduced our abilities this week. This issue will provide shorter explanations of legislation underway and rely on a number of links to relevant articles. Paul will return next week with more analysis and deeper dives into the issues.

Mary Fund

Mother Nature Tests Energy Planning

The news of the week is largely the extreme weather that gripped Kansas (and the swath of states in the middle of the country and beyond). Five degrees has never felt quite so balmy as it did the past couple mornings! Temperatures plummeting to double digit below zero lows across the state and rolling power blackouts early in the week for some challenged the heartiest of Kansans. Some power outages were not the result of the announced rolling blackouts, but the kind of routine breakdowns you might expect during extreme weather. Mechanical things simply don’t do well in a widespread Arctic blast lasting days. Ask any farmer or rancher. Trying to feed and water livestock this past week.

The frigid temperatures combined with moisture hampered wind turbine production to some extent, but the extreme weather also seriously affected natural gas and coal plant production, freezing gas wellheads and pipelines and coal stocks—not just in Kansas but across the Southwest Power Pool. Many (including a legislator or two) immediately jumped to the conclusion that renewable wind or solar are not reliable. But utility officials were quick to point out that no power source was safe or reliable during this kind of Arctic blast.


The Climate and Energy Project (CEP), one of Policy Watch’s co-sponsors, was quick to offer an explanation of what was happening and will offer more details over the next couple of weeks so Kansans can better understand what went wrong and how we can better protect ourselves in the future. (See article http://www.climateandenergy.org/blog.1050516.power-outages-45-what-39-s-happening?act=view)

Basically, the Southwest Power Pool (SPP) that Kansas is part of and that oversees the bulk electric grid and wholesale power market on behalf of a group of its members (utilities like Evergy) experienced a shortfall of electricity due to the extreme weather impacting coal, gas and wind production, just as demand for home heating etc. was increasing. Rolling blackouts had to be implemented in order to keep the grid functional. Kansas was lucky. Weaknesses or vulnerabilities in our energy system and grid were exposed, and can now be addressed.

Adding salt to the wound, sky high natural gas bills are expected in the next few weeks around the state as the cost of this weather event works its way through the economy. We can expect investigations into those increases and hopefully some relief for those most unable to pay for it. See Topeka Capital Journal article:

https://www.cjonline.com/story/news/2021/02/17/kansans-may-see-big-hike-heating-bills-coming-weeks-heres-
Meanwhile, the House Committee on Energy, Utilities and Telecommunications has introduced HB 2381 which would establish a state energy task force, and require development of a comprehensive state energy plan.

http://kslegislature.org/li/b2021_22/measures/documents/hb2381_00_0000.pdf

Development of a state energy plan was a key recommendation of the electric rate study commissioned by the Legislature last year, as a means of establishing long-term State energy reliability, affordability and price stability. Perhaps the recent vulnerability will increase the State Legislature's willingness to act on this much needed State planning effort.

The House Energy, Utilities, & Telecommunications Committee will hold a hearing on HB 2181 on February 23 at 9 a.m.

State Water Plan Budget
Texas is learning the hard way how energy and water issues are connected. But the Kansas State Water Plan Fund still appears to be far from receiving its'/due funding. (See SWP Funding doc HERE). Once more the promised allocation to the State Water Plan Fund of $8 million annually from the State General Fund and EDIF funds is shorted with only about half the $8 million promised. The total SWP Fund proposed budget for 2021 is $16 million, which is a bit higher than for 2020. But is nowhere near the annual $50 million amount recognized in the State Water Vision Plan’s annual projected need to start addressing current and future water quantity and quality needs.

The proposed State Water Plan Fund budget can perhaps be best looked at in terms of what will not be covered or will continue to be under funded? Will it take a hard drought and crisis to elevate State water needs to their rightful place in the State budget?

Tax Cut Threats
But how can we fund the State’s water needs when we once more are playing with massive tax cuts that will endanger education, social services, public health funding and more? (See Policy Watch #6.) Former state Senator Steve Morris, who was Senate president when former Gov. Brownback conducted his tax experiment on Kansas, was recently interviewed on the proposed tax cuts as a return to the dangerous past by the Kansas Reflector.

“It’s not exactly the same bill, but it’s the same concept as what Gov. Brownback did in 2012,” Morris said of last week’s Senate tax bill. “And with a $600 million fiscal note, that’s liable to be very damaging to the state’s economy if it actually gets passed by both houses.” Read more at: https://kansasreflector.com/2021/02/15/a-veteran-of-kansas-disastrous-tax-cutting-era-says-republicans-have-taken-several-steps-backwards/

School Tax Credit Bills Threaten Public Education
The three school tax credit bills introduced and now being considered will only add to the budget woes by reducing funding for public education by implementing complicated and expensive to administer plans to move state funds to private schools.

SB 61 (and its companion HB 2068) will amend the law relating to tax credits for the low-income student scholarship program, by specifically amending student and school eligibility requirements so as to expand the number of students eligible. Currently students must be eligible for free meals and must be attending one of the 100 public elementary schools with the lowest scores on state assessments. The bill would change this to allow both free AND reduce-price-meal eligible students to participate and would allow students attending ANY public school to participate.

These scholarships can only be used at private schools that are either accredited by the State Board of Education or a national or regional accrediting body approved by the State Board of Education for teacher licensure. The program is capped at $10 million/year.

HB 2119 offers a different approach to private school aid via an education savings account. It would allow families of eligible children to have “funding equal to the base state aid per pupil for the prior year depositedito an account to pay for tuition at a private school of the child’s choice.” Read more at: https://kansasreflector.com/2021/01/15/house-passes-private-school-savings-account-bill-to-help-low-income-students/

These scholarships are funded by a portion of sales coming through the Kansas Lottery and by the State's corporate income taxes. HB 2119 would allocate 25% of the Lottery proceeds and 100% of corporate tax proceeds to the program.

Read more at: https://kansasreflector.com/2021/01/15/house-passes-private-school-savings-account-bill-to-help-low-income-students/

The three school tax credit bills introduced and now being considered will only add to the budget woes by reducing funding for public education by implementing complicated and expensive to administer plans to move state funds to private schools.
private school tuition and other expenses or attend public school part-time and have a proportional amount of base aid transferred.” The bill would be open to any students who are enrolled in public schools and qualify for free or reduced-price bills, or are designated by a local school district to receive at-risk services, or who has been required to attend a minimum amount of time in a hybrid or remote learning environment.

While all of these bills (tuition tax credits, education savings accounts, or vouchers) are promoted as giving students and their families more choices, and would appear on the surface to do so, they are thinly veiled attempts to undermine the institution of public education while having taxpayers fund private schools. While purporting to help at-risk students, there are no requirements that the students be suffering academically. Also, private schools do not have to accept just any student. They can select those most likely to succeed, and leave struggling students in public schools while at the same time reducing those public schools ability (funds) to correct problems.

Supporters of the bills include several religious organizations who would benefit, and Americans for Prosperity and the Kansas Policy Institute, both conservative advocates of anti-public education and “small government”. Opponents include the Kansas State Association of School Boards, Parent-Teacher Association, and Kansas Board of Education.

In a Feb. 12 legislative report, the KASB wrote that “expanding the programs is a step towards a two-tiered system, with publicly aided private schools able to serve students most likely to succeed and public schools serving all those not chosen. Because school funding is based on enrollment, if students move to private schools, public districts receive less funding. That is particularly a problem if public schools continue to be responsible for the highest cost students.” See full article at https://www.kasb.org/45132?articleID=71018

State Treasurer Lynn Rogers also expressed concerns in a recent op ed about the fiscal costs of HB 2119, the education savings account program that would be implemented and administered by the State Treasurer’s office. Approximately $12 million would be needed annually for software management of the individual accounts without including the staffing and other administrative needs of the State Treasurer’s office. For the op ed, see https://www.kasb.org/45132?articleID=70890
See Fiscal Note filed with HB 2119 Here

The above three bills could be debated in the House at any time.

FIELD NOTES

Future of Rural Kansas presentation

On Feb. 3, a representative of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation gave a presentation on the Future of Rural Kansas to the House Financial Institutions and Rural Development Committee. Chris Harris, the senior program officer in entrepreneurship at Kauffman, reviewed national survey data showing people’s significant interest in moving to rural communities or remaining in rural communities, and also what people everywhere want from the places they choose to live: good place to raise their children, good health care, access to outdoor or recreational activity, and access to arts and culture and a sense of community.

A Pew Research Center survey in 2018 (pre-Pandemic) found that more urban residents (30%) and suburban residents (35%) are interested in moving to a rural community than rural residents are interested in moving to the city. Also, a Gallup 2020 poll showed 48% of respondents wanted to stay in their rural communities while only 47% of urban residents wished to stay in the city. The report recommendations offered support for continuation of programs and policies such as the Rural Opportunity Zones, and for new rural entrepreneurship grants or loan programs. Another interesting recommendation is to leverage the power of "intergenerational transfer of wealth and experience", citing the number of retiring business owners and the need to pass on the wealth of knowledge and experience as well as the physical businesses to a new generation.
You can view a copy of his 12-page presentation HERE

KC Star story on youth exodus from the state

Another worthwhile read, which holds some wisdom for pushing a less conservative culture in Ks., focuses on why so many Kansas youth are leaving the state and do not plan to return. Check out this Kansas City Star article. “Young Generations are Not Staying in Kansas. Here is Why.”
HOW TO ACCESS STATE COMMITTEE HEARINGS, SCHEDULES, BILLS

To access House and Senate Calendars:
Published daily; and on Thursdays, calendars are published for the next week. They provide Committee Schedules, list bills or informational hearings to be heard, and possible votes.
Go to http://kslegislature.org/li

To access copies of bills introduced:
Go to the Kansas Legislature’s homepage at http://kslegislature.org/li/ and on the right side of the page click on the House and Senate pre-filed bills.

To view and listen to a committee hearing:
Go to the very top of the Legislature’s homepage http://kslegislature.org/li/ and click on the Audio-Visual tab and scroll down to ‘Statehouse Live & Archive’. There will be a listing of the committees for that day and the start time. In order to testify on a bill before a given committee, you will need to contact the ‘committee assistant’ (listed in the Calendar) a day or so before the hearing to be able to testify in person or virtually.

To view Senate & House Chambers in session:
Go to http://kslegislature.org/li/ Audio/Video Broadcast and click on House or Senate.

The Legislative Policy Watch Update is a project of the Kansas Rural Center. KRC promotes the health of the land and its people through research, education and advocacy that advance an ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially just agriculture.
If you have any questions about Policy Watch, contact Mary Fund, Editor at mfund@kansasruralcenter.org, or contact Paul Johnson, Policy Analyst, at pdjohnson@centurylink.net.
If you are on KRC’s list and wish to opt out of receiving the Updates, contact Joanna Will at jwill@kansasruralcenter.org

2021 Co-Sponsors

www.kansasfarmersunion.com

www.kansannaturalresourcecouncil.com

www.leagueofwomensvoters.org
Contributors to KRC are automatically on the Policy Watch e-list, if they provide an e-mail address. KRC provides Updates to the sponsoring organizations including League of Women Voters of Kansas, Kansas Natural Resource Council, Kansas Farmers Union, Climate and Energy Project, and Audubon of Kansas, who make the Updates available to their memberships.

If you are receiving KRC Policy Watch through one of these organizations and have questions, contact the organization directly.