

State News

Gov. Laura Kelly signs budget bill, issues dozens of line-item vetoes, asks Legislature to try again

Democrat praises investment in economy, water policy; blasts K-12 decisions

BY TIM CARPENTER
Kansas Reflector

Gov. Laura Kelly made an end-of-session plea to the Kansas Legislature after signing a massive state budget bill investing in economic development, water resources and disability services while triggering more than 35 vetoes of provisions labeled as unwarranted earmarks, power grabs or financial gaffes.

Kelly, who has leaned on her veto pen in disputes with House and Senate Republicans since taking office in 2019, said she was concerned the budget endangered the state's long-term fiscal health and could jeopardize funding for essential programs and services that mattered the most to Kansans. She said it was folly for GOP leadership in the Legislature to adjourn the annual session before release of updated revenue reports evaluating financial implications of the budget.

"This budget will put Kansas in the red by fiscal year 2028," Kelly said Wednesday in a message to the Legislature. "Given the ongoing economic uncertainty we are experiencing, I urge the Legislature to seriously consider revisiting this budget."

She said Kansas demonstrated financial resilience during the past seven years after enduring damaging tax and spending decisions under a previous governor. She repeated a warning to not ignore the history of careless decisions leading deep cuts, unnecessary debt and higher taxes.

"We risk losing all of that progress and returning to the dark days of four-day school weeks and crumbling roads and bridges if we don't correct the structural imbalance we are currently facing," the governor said.

GOOD NEWS ... RIGHT THING

Kelly said she was enthusiastic about portions of Senate Bill 125 that provided \$6 million to safeguard Kansas' water supply, a \$1.75 million increase in matching funds for local conservation districts and \$3 million for a pilot project to manage sedimentation in John Redmond Reservoir.

She thanked the Legislature for \$50 million invested in the state's aviation industry because those commitments would continue "the state's historic success" in economy development. She praised lawmakers for allocating \$1 million to create rural remote workspaces as well as investments to attract innovative businesses in cybersecurity and biotechnology.

The budget appropriately invested in early childhood education while adding \$10 million for special education programs in the state's K-12 public education system, Kelly said. There was \$1.25 million to expand rural child care, she said. The governor appreciated \$14 million to help 200 people with intellectual or developmental disabilities move off the state's waiting list for services.

However, the governor said it was troubling the Legislature didn't address rising health costs by expanding eligibility for Medicaid. Forty states and the District

of Columbia have opened that door to billions of dollars in federal funding aimed at lower-income residents without quality, affordable health care.

"Not only will expanding Medicaid make it easier and more affordable for Kansas families to access health care," she said, "it would also have substantial economic benefits for Kansans."

She line-item vetoed a provision requiring the state to unenroll and reenroll people in the Medicaid program at an annual cost of \$3.5 million to \$4.3 million. She said federal regulations forbid caregivers and parents from being denied Medicaid health care coverage without an individual review. In addition, the governor said, the concept was a "highly inefficient, administratively burdensome, costly process."

EDUCATION, 'FALLS SHORT'

Kelly, known as a public education advocate as governor and during her 14-year tour in the Kansas Senate, said she was disappointed with a collection of budget decisions regarding K-12 schools. She was critical of the elimination of funding for teacher professional development programs and literacy training for teachers.

She objected to the "extremely troubling" decision by the Legislature to finance grants for emergency medical equipment in private schools with money that should be applied to public schools. She suggested the maneuver raised questions about whether lawmakers were challenging Kansas Supreme Court rulings in the Gannon v. State school finance lawsuit that concluded the Legislature violated the Kansas Constitution by inadequately funding schools.

"While I have corrected this via a line-item veto, I remain extremely concerned about the future of education funding in Kansas," Kelly said. "The Legislature must stop playing games with school finance, especially when it underfunds our public schools and could land the state back in court, relitigating issues we've worked to solve in a bipartisan manner."

The governor also vetoed a budget item that directed school districts to adopt an online curriculum not vetted by the Kansas Board of Education. Constitutional authority for curriculum decisions rested with the elected 10-member state Board of Education, she said.

POWER GRABS

Kelly used a veto pen to dispatch the appropriation of \$3 million to the state treasurer, rather than to an executive branch agency, for operation of the "pregnancy compassion awareness" program. Her veto message recalled the August 2022 statewide vote that defeated a proposed amendment to the Constitution reversing a state Supreme Court decision that women had a basic constitutional right to terminate a pregnancy.

"I continue to believe that housing the pregnancy crisis center program in the office of the state treasurer is inappropriate and simply politically motivated," the governor said. "Kansas women facing unplanned pregnancies deserve meaningful support from medical professionals who can

provide evidence-based guidance, not from largely unregulated pregnancy resource centers."

In addition, Kelly vetoed creation of an "unvetted program with no guardrails" in the office of state treasurer that would help expand the state's workforce. She said it was inefficient for the Legislature to defund an existing workforce program, "Love, Kansas," in the Kansas Department of Commerce.

Kelly vetoed a provision in the budget that would have increased the cost of office space for journalists in the Capitol.

"This item appears to be targeted at the Kansas Capitol press corps to stymie their ability to effectively report on the actions occurring in the people's house," the governor said. "Provisions like this set a dangerous precedent and undermine one of the core principles enshrined in the U.S. Constitution."

SPECIAL-INTEREST EARMARKS

Kelly said she couldn't allow the Legislature to approve a no-bid \$1 million earmark for the O'Connell Children's Shelter in Lawrence. She said the expenditure circumvented established methods of awarding grants that would include rigorous review of qualified applicants.

"We have made great progress towards eliminating no-bid contracts recently," Kelly said. "We should not take an unnecessary step backwards."

Kelly vetoed a directive that the state Department of Commerce devote \$500,000 to Wichita State University's aviation research institute to work on unmanned aircraft systems and \$500,000 to the Salina campus of Kansas State University for development of a commercial credentialing process for drones.

"The Department of Commerce did not request this item and it did not go through the agency vetting process," she said. "I cannot ignore the deficiencies in the process that led to this being included in the budget."

The governor vetoed a \$750,000 earmark for a feasibility study on launching a dental school at Wichita State. She urged higher education and dentistry professionals to collaborate on a strategy for starting the school and present it to the 2026 Legislature.

Meanwhile, Kelly vetoed \$500,000 to the Kansas Bureau of Investigation for a forensic genetic genealogy DNA analysis system to identify human remains. The KBI didn't request the funding through the normal appropriations process, the governor said.

Kelly deleted a plan calling on the Kansas Highway Patrol to collaborate with a third-party entity to build an aviation hangar in Wichita that would be leased by the state.

She also vetoed "poorly written" provisos directing the state Department of Health and Environment to spend not less than \$250,000 on preventing transmission of tuberculosis and a separate requirement that KDHE spend up to \$96,000 to control tuberculosis. A \$263,000 earmark for cerebral palsy research, not requested by KDHE, was vetoed because "intent behind this budget proviso is unclear," the governor said.

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Helpful Tips

Campsite safety tips

The appeal of camping is undeniable. According to The Business Research Company, a market research and intelligence company, the global camping and caravanning market is expected to grow from just under \$40 billion in 2020 to more than \$45 billion in 2021. Estimates suggest the market will grow even more in the coming years, reaching \$56.6 billion by 2025.

Camping has long been a popular pastime for outdoor enthusiasts, but it may have developed an entirely new group of devotees in 2020. Traditional vacations may not have been possible in 2020, when governments across the globe urged citizens to avoid conventional travel as the world found itself in the throes of a global pandemic. In an effort to overcome cabin fever, many people viewed camping as a safe way to get out of the house while still limiting

Helpful Tips

contact with people from other households. That no doubt inspired new generations of camping fans, many of whom will continue to pitch their tents and sit around campfires long after the pandemic has ended.

The National Park Service recognizes the popularity of camping and urges people to stay safe. Veteran campers and novices alike can benefit from reviewing these safety tips, courtesy of the NPS.

- Plan ahead. Camping trips may not require hours of scouring travel websites in an effort to find the best deals on flights and hotels. But camping trips still require ample planning. When planning a trip, take into account who's coming along. Assess their camping skills and physical fitness to determine the most appropriate place to camp. Campers with limited mobility may be best suited for accessible campsites. The NPS urges campers to consider if everyone in the group will be able to make a long hike from the parking lot to the campsite. If not, choose a site that you can pull right up to or is just a short, easy walk from the parking lot.

- Research the campsite and surrounding area. Know as much as possible about the campsite prior to embarking on your trip. Learn about everything from the local wildlife you may encounter while camping to the condition of surrounding areas, including the altitude, the difficulty of nearby hiking trails and where to go in case of emergency.

- Develop an emergency plan. The NPS urges campers to develop an emergency plan, noting that it's always wise to expect the unexpected when camping. Bring a first aid kit along when leaving the campsite to engage in activities like hiking or fishing. Go over safety protocols before going on a hike, including the need to stay together and remain on the trail at all times. More information about what to do should anyone be injured during your trip is available at www.nps.gov.

- Bring the right gear. The NPS notes that each camping trip will have its own equipment needs, which will be dictated by the setting, the time of year of the trip, the difficulty of the terrain, and the duration of the trip. Navigational supplies, sun and insect protection, insulation (i.e., extra clothing and blankets), shelter, flashlights and headlamps, first aid kits, extra food and water, firestarters, repair kits and tools, and a communication device like a smartphone or satellite phone are the essential necessities that should be brought along on all camping trips. Camping is a great way to get away. Campers of all skill and experience levels can make the most of their trips by emphasizing safety at all times.

. Commission

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sharing that the property in question is at the top of Big Hill, just west of the water treatment plant. He explained that the water department has issues with leaks in the main lines running up from the water treatment plant to the reservoir. For a number of years there have been extensive leaks. There are currently five lines running up to the hill and plans are to replace those lines by two 24" mains to provide the needed separation for construction. The real estate in question would provide an easement or a right-of-way, but the property owner would rather have the City purchase the property than get an easement. Partial funding for the project will come from CVR, with the remaining \$7,000 coming from the City.

- The approval of a construction contract with Ersham Construction for the relocation of a sanitary sewer main. This relocation is due to the future construction of an Evergy substation north of Wilcox Street. Ersham was the lowest of four bids that came in, at \$170,229. Evergy would be paying for the project in

full.

- The approval of a design contract with BG Consultants for the 2026 KDOT Cost Share project for the mill and overlay of 8th Street. The City was awarded a 2026 Cost Share grant to mill and overlay 8th Street from Highway 166 east to Elm Street. The City received two bids, with BG coming in the lowest.

- The purchase of two mini excavators and accessories for the Public Works Department. In January, the Commissioners approved a not to exceed price of \$330,000 for two new mini excavators for Public Works. The City received ten bids, Wright disclosed, but none of them fit all of the requirements that the City was asking for. The winning bid was from Murphy Tractor and Equipment Company for two 2024 John Deere compact excavators and accessories in the amount of \$220,420, with a five-year warranty for \$995 per machine.

- The purchase of a compact track loader and attachments for the Public Works Department. Again, in January, the Commission approved

a not to exceed price of \$115,000 for the purchase of a track loader with attachments to replace the City's aging machinery. The City received eight bids and the lowest was again, from Murphy Tractor and Equipment Company for a John Deere compact track loader in the amount of \$109,400 with a five-year warranty in the amount of \$3,860.

- The purchase of one 300 KVA and one 500 KVA transformer for the Electric Utility dept. City Manager Ben Brubaker commented on this purchase, explaining that the City likes to keep a back stock of large machinery like this just in case. "These two transformers, to give you an example... The 300 KVA transformer is equivalent to like Wendy's or Pete's... Our existing spare is going to be used by a new four-point crane facility. The 500 KVA transformer is something that'll be the size of our new hospital clinic coming into town... That gives you some comparisons as to what they're used for. That existing spare that we have will be going out to the hospital here."



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