

Kansas legislators predict hot topics for the 2020 session

When four Kansas state legislators and a policy analyst converged in front of an overflowing public audience, predicting the ‘hot topics’ for the 2020 Kansas legislative session came as easily as a Kansas breeze. The event was the well-attended panel discussion during the Kansas Farmers Union state convention Wednesday, December 4th in Lawrence, Kan.

“Medicaid expansion is a key issue of the Governor’s – and something I think we need to get done this session,” began Kansas State Representative Eileen Horn, who serves the 10th District. “Then, other priorities are: lots of discussion on taxes – it’s an election year so legislators will be wanting to return some taxes to folks and that will be a hot topic. There will also be a lot of discussion on the constitutional amendment on abortion,” she added.

The next panelist was Kansas State Senator Marci Francisco, who represents the 2nd Senate District: “In the Senate, we’re going to talk about those same things. I also hope we have a proposal from the Broadband Task Force to talk about how to address broadband, particularly in rural areas that have less than desirable service. We’ll also continue the discussion about industrial hemp and we might expand that for medical marijuana, but we have some catching up to do,” said Francisco, adding, “And I agree – we’re going to have to address taxes; certainly sales tax on food. I also want to address property taxes.”

Restarting a debate about affordable housing in Kansas, was a priority of the next panelist; Paul Johnson, policy analyst consultant for the Kansas Rural Center working on environmental, local food and independent family farm issues.

“Hopefully the Governor will have a task force on affordable housing, and we’ll get into how its funded and how it expands across the state,” said Johnson.

A topic that continually emerged, not only in this 2020 Legislative Session panel discussion, but throughout many meaty sessions during the Kansas Farmers Union state convention week in Lawrence, was the dire need for medicaid expansion.

“I believe that Governor Kelly is 100 percent convinced that medicaid expansion will pass, this session,” relayed moderator Tim Carpenter. “She said she’s holding out for a simple bill and thinks that will happen at the end of the legislative session.”

Carpenter, Statehouse Bureau Chief and Special Projects Reporter at Topeka Capital-Journal, also queried the legislators about any hesitations regarding approving medicaid expansion in this next legislative session.

“There are things in there that will require federal approval, and will that cause delay...? I’m hoping we can hold the line, follow the advice, that we make it simple, and allow the legislature to, after its been enacted as per authority on further changes,” said Francisco.

“I do think we ought to pass an increase in tobacco taxes and use it as a basis for funding the expansion, at this point,” said Johnson.

There’s actually a benefit to being one of the last states to approve medicaid expansion, according to Horn.

“A key advantage, if you could put it that way - to being one of the last states to expand medicaid, is that we have a lot of good examples to learn from. The most successful for everyone is simple expansion. I’m concerned about anything that would make it harder for the federal government to approve a waiver for us to expand medicaid,” said Horn.

Helping people climb out of food insecurity – a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life – is another hot topic in need of solutions in Kansas.

“The good news now, is we have a governor and staffing who care about food insecurity. In 2015, we did about 360 million dollars in food stamps...and now we’re down to about 290 million. One in six households in Kansas can’t feed themselves. It’s unbelievable...” said Johnson. “We’re in the breadbasket of the world, supposedly at this point. Food stamps is 90 percent of the food aid in our state. You may think that Salvation Army, United Way, and churches are going to pick up the rest, but they aren’t. We need a dedicated effort. We don’t talk about food insecurity at our state capital, and we need to elevate that dialogue.”

Protecting farmers, is another key priority for some in the the legislature.

“We haven’t talked really about drift, and so when we talk about application of pesticides, we need to also include how to protect the organic farmers; people who are doing crops like cotton, and we need to be sure to handle both sides of the process,” said Francisco.

The big picture is that Kansas does very little to control the agricultural landscape and what really drives land use in Kansas is the federal farm bill.

“We got 1.2 billion dollars in federal farm aid last year in Kansas and 80 percent of that aid went to the top 20 percent of the recipients, and we wonder why our farms are getting larger, at this point,” said Johnson. “We need a dynamic discussion between our state and federal officials about how the farm bill inter-plays with the Kansas Department of Agriculture; especially the state water plan. Because federal conservation programs brought in 170 million dollars last year, and our state water plan is at 15 million at this point, and we need an inter-play of how we put federal and state policy together for ag improvements,” Johnson emphasized.

Another panelist, freshman Representative Rui Xu, who serves the 25th District in Johnson County, said, “What else I’d like to see this session is more about climate change. I’m part of a local group in Kansas City, ‘Climate Action Kansas City’ where we’ll roll out a state legislative platform soon.”

“The Governor has already said she’ll start a state energy plan. On that platform, I think a good ambitious goal is 100 percent renewable by year 2030,” said Xu. He also said the state could look into speeding up efforts for tax incentives to encourage farmers to put in carbon

sequestration policies, although some farmers are doing it, individually already.

Additional climate priorities included some suggestions from the legislators such as using solar panels on our small grocery stores and investing in wind.

Governor Kelly has asked her Commerce Secretary to develop a new statewide economic development plan. Also, Johnson mentioned a bill was passed to take an audit of their economic development programs in Kansas and how they affect rural areas.

It is however going to be an election year, which will be rather politicized so it may be tough to have anything with much substance accomplished this year, said another state legislator Representative Dennis ‘Boog’ Highberger, who serves the 46th District. “But, criminal justice reform! If we don’t make any changes in our laws, we’re due to have 1,000 more people in our prisons by end of 2019 and we’re already at capacity. They’re pushing to build a 200 million dollar prison and I don’t think anyone on either side of the aisle wants to do that.” Highberger also told the crowd, that more pay is needed for corrections officers and he wants to help stop recidivism.

Another expected topic in the legislative session...tax reform.

“The governor appointed a tax council that’s been meeting. They made some recommendations for the 2020 session, and they’ll continue meeting into next year. They’re interested in local property tax relief, and they’d like to add a couple of sales taxes, especially for out of state internet-based companies,” shared Carpenter.

“We had a very successful, informative convention,” said Lavern Potuzak; KFU member, “And it was good to see old farmers union family and also new people at the convention.”