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KLPG Capitol Highlights

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2024 LEGISLATURE WEEK ONE

Kansas lawmakers returned to Topeka on January 8th to begin their 2024 legislative session, with the House and Senate gathering in their respective chambers at 2 pm for what was primarily a ceremonial first day.

Kansans rang in 2024 with fatter wallets and wider school choices. The state's grocery sales tax cut, from 4% to 2%, went into effect on January 1st and is expected to save residents over \$150 million in 2024. Then, on June 1st, parents will gain unprecedented freedom to register their children in any public school district they choose across the state. Districts may only deny enrollment(s) if they can show that doing so would cause a hardship on classroom capacity. Supporters of school choice say families need alternatives to failing public schools. In contrast, opponents say it will divert tax dollars away from the schools that need it most and hand them out without any mandated accountability.

Governor Kelly unveiled her 2024 budget focusing on tax cuts, Medicaid expansion, education, and infrastructure while aiming for a \$1.4 billion surplus by July 2025 with a \$1.7 billion rainy day fund. Medicaid expansion to cover 148,000 additional Kansans already has bipartisan support in the House but GOP resistance in the Senate. Infrastructure disbursements include \$35 million for the state water plan, \$5 million for Kansas State University's Water Resources Initiative, and \$1.3 billion in one-time expenses for pension debt, prison improvements, emergency housing, and World Cup operations. Additional proposed expenditures are a \$74.9 million annual increase in special education funding for five years, 5% pay raises for all full-time hourly state employees, 7.5% pay raises for all full-time salaried state employees, and a minimum wage increase to \$15 for part-time state employees. The governor's budget also includes a \$1 billion bipartisan tax cut package over three years that features:

- Property tax relief,
- Social Security income exemption,
- Sales tax elimination for diapers and feminine hygiene products,
- Back-to-school sales tax holiday, and
- Doubled child care tax credit.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that Kansas wastewater is showing extremely high COVID-19 levels, which indicates that the virus is spreading across the state again. However, there has not been a spike in hospital cases. Wastewater testing has been used as an early warning system to alert public health officials about possible outbreaks since 2020. The latest COVID variant is highly infectious but has fewer severe symptoms than the original strain. Nevertheless, the CDC once again urges Kansans to get tested if they think they may be infected and vaccinated if they still need to do so.

Governor Kelly announced a \$4.6 million federal grant to build six new electric vehicle direct-current fast-charging stations to fill gap areas not covered by the existing stations spread across the I-70 and I-135 corridors. The locations chosen for the new chargers are I-35 in Emporia, US-81 in Belleville, and US-400 in Cherokee, Fredonia, Pratt, and Garden City.

A proposed Kansas law aims to tighten ethics around public officials. The bill, proposed by Senator Tom Holland, would prevent current legislators from also holding executive branch jobs and bar executive branch members from doubling as cabinet secretaries. Holland specifically noted the concurrent roles of Lt. Governor David Toland as Commerce Secretary and Senator J.R. Claeyes' position as advisor to the Attorney General when citing his concerns of possible conflicts of interest and a public appearance of impropriety, even if none exists.

Kansas Revenue Secretary Mark Burghart reported the state took in 3.4% less tax money than expected in the last month of 2023. While the total taxes collected were nearly \$1 billion, that figure was \$37 million below the estimate, partly because corporate income tax receipts were significantly lower than anticipated.

The Kansas Council on Developmental Disabilities has reported that the state has a financial assistance waitlist of over 7,000 applicants requiring in-home medical care. A disability rights advocacy group estimates the state would need to increase funding by at least \$85 million to decrease the waitlist by a mere 20% this year, and they are urging lawmakers to make that happen.

Kansas farmers are urging Congress to pass a new farm bill before it expires in September, worried that the much-needed support will get lost in election-year politics. The bill provides financial safety nets like subsidies, insurance, and conservation programs, with most funding going toward food assistance.

Kansas Bureau of Investigation Director Tony Mattivi addressed the state Board of Education about a new, higher potency version of the synthetic opioid fentanyl being distributed in the state by Mexican cartels. He emphasized the urgent need for all K-12 schools to incorporate fentanyl education into existing programs and to partner with community organizations to protect the lives of young Kansans against what he termed a deadly crisis. The data he shared was sobering: 9 of the 11 child drug-related deaths in Kansas in 2021 were fentanyl-related, compared to zero fatalities between 2017 and 2019. While homicide and suicide remain the leading causes of child mortality in the state, Mattivi asserted unequivocally that the rapid rise in fentanyl deaths demands immediate action.

Two New Year's Eve earthquakes rattled parts of central and north-central Kansas. According to the Kansas Geological Survey, a magnitude 4.0 quake struck Ottawa County just after 10:30 am, and a magnitude 2.0 quake hit Marion County just before 5:30 pm. Fortunately, there have been no reports of injury or severe damage.

Teams from the Kansas Geological Survey and the Division of Water Resources are on their annual trek across western Kansas to measure the depths of over 1,400 wells tapping into the High Plains Aquifer, including the Ogallala. This survey reveals whether water levels are rising or falling. Rex Buchanan, a 20-year veteran of these measurements, believes this year's levels will be stable. Still, he paints a grim picture of the aquifer's long-term future, scarred by decades of extensive irrigation, saying: "Pumping so much you can't irrigate anymore is bad, but in some areas, the declines are so severe, people can't even get enough water for their homes and living somewhere without enough water for basic needs is incredibly challenging." Research suggests a 20% irrigation cutback could extend the aquifer's life for future generations.

Geology researchers and scientists from Kansas State University, with colleagues from Barton and Dodge City Community Colleges, have begun testing rural private wells in south-central Kansas for nitrogen pollution. Half of the 90 wells assessed so far have levels above the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's directive. One source was five times higher than allowed under federal law. While utility companies' public water sources must meet the Environmental Protection Agency's nitrate standard of no more than 10 milligrams of nitrate per liter of water, that policy does not apply to the 150K-175K Kansans using privately owned ground wells in the area that pull water from the Great Bend Prairie Aquifer.

The Kansas Department of Agriculture has proposed a ban on selling Callery pear trees due to their invasiveness, following similar actions in other states. These trees, known for their beautiful fall foliage, harm native plants and insects by profusely spreading across rural areas, often overtaking native foliage. Although removing existing trees wouldn't be required, the proposed quarantine would halt future sales and movement of Callery pears within Kansas. Conservationists support this move and offer free native alternatives to encourage responsible landscaping practices.

Kansas Chief Justice Marla Lucker's State of the Judiciary Address placed cybersecurity as the top concern after an October ransomware attack. She reported that the state did not pay the ransom demand, and the courts are implementing new security measures. Recovery is progressing gradually, prioritizing data protection. Luckert also urged inter-branch collaboration on mental health issues, rural resource scarcity, and child welfare.

U.S. Representative from Kansas Jake LaTurner has sent a request to the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States and the Department of Defense to investigate 'Cnano Technology USA' for their subversive ties to the Chinese government's campaign to access U.S. supply chains in proximity to military installations. The company plans to locate a \$94.7 million manufacturing plant in Johnson County. LaTurner expressed deep concerns over giving this company permission to operate as a critical component supplier to the burgeoning field of electronics and battery production within such close proximity to Fort Leavenworth in Kansas and Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri.

The Kansas Capitol Preservation Committee is finalizing plans to have a monument created to memorialize the eight laborers noted below who were tragically killed during the construction of the Kansas Statehouse between 1887 and 1890. A location for its placement has yet to be determined.

- **Major Hiram W. Jones**, age 68, was crushed to death on October 6, 1887, when a horse-drawn block, tackle, and derrick system hoisting heavy stone and iron collapsed directly above him.
- **William "Billy" Cullins**, age 24, fell to his death on November 20, 1888, just five days before his wedding, when the scaffolding he was standing on collapsed.
- **Charles Ewing Howell**, age 23, fell to his death on September 21, 1889, while completing ironwork on the south wing roof.
- **Jack Williams**, age 21, fell to his death on May 24, 1890, while installing a new electric winch motor to hoist heavy stone and iron works at the uppermost level of the dome.
- **John Cave**, age 24, fell to his death July 26, 1890, while tightening bolts along the outer rim of the dome when the large 2-handed wrench he was using slipped, hurtling him over the side, through a skylight and onto the north wing floor.
- **Myrtie Deegan**, age 48, fell to his death on December 9, 1890, while working inside the dome when he stumbled on loose, round pieces of iron and fell to the rotunda floor.
- **An Unidentifiable Body** of an unknown, unclaimed person assumed to have been working on-site was also found in 1890. No witnesses, explanations, or clues were ever uncovered for this gruesome death.

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This is a weekly legislative summary of Kansas government, and other statewide news, gathered and compiled independently from various media reports.

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