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State needs tax system that is efficient, fair

By Gary Brunk

When it comes to balancing the state budget, I think we can all agree that it takes a fiscally responsible, common-



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sense approach. But for too long, the conversation about what that approach might be has been hampered by rhetoric and half-truths. As the economy continues to soften and Kansas families feel the pinch, we can no longer ignore the fact that our tax system is broken.

Right now, working-class Kansans who pay taxes and play by the rules are bearing the burden while a growing number of tax loopholes — implemented to benefit select groups — deplete the tax base. We all rely on services paid for in the state budget, so it's common sense that we should all contribute fairly toward the costs of providing those services. The school system that educates our next generation, the roads and highways that enable interstate commerce, and the justice system that ensures our public safety are among the essential services that our families, businesses and economy depend upon every day.

Though the costs for maintaining these public structures rise naturally over time with inflation and the economy, the level of spending in Kansas has changed very little in comparison with personal income trends. In fact, in 1960, our taxes were equal to 10.5 percent of personal income.

Nearly six decades later, taxes

in Kansas are roughly 12 percent of personal income. That doesn't mean that spending isn't part of the equation. As we address the factors that are hurting revenues, we also must address the factors that are affecting state spending.

If we want to get serious about the state's budget shortfalls and give Kansas families a real chance to achieve economic prosperity, we have to talk honestly about fixing our tax system. We can start by forming a tax commission in Kansas — similar to the federal Base Realignment and

Closure system — that would be charged with conducting a top-to-bottom review of our tax system, including:

- Whether outdated aspects of our tax system, many of which were established in the 1930s, continue to make sense in today's economy.

- Whether to

address the tax loophole problem that is increasing the burden on taxpayers like you and me. Sales-tax loopholes alone drain more than \$4 billion from state revenues.

- Whether to update our personal income-tax structure so that the tax burden is fairly distributed between our state's wealthiest citizens and working-class families.

A commission that is accountable to taxpayers and can operate outside of the political game will be positioned to make commonsense recommendations. Those recommendations stand to make our tax system more efficient and lessen the burden on working Kansans who have been footing more than their fair share of the bill.

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