

Taxes, budget big concerns this session

By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

Kansas State Senator Garrett Love called the 2013 session of the state legislature an interesting one.

The state's lawmaking branch is scheduled annually for 90 days of session, but this year's went a little long, with 99 days of talks and votes taking place.



Love said at a legislative luncheon Tuesday at Liberal's Rock Island Depot that this was due to a longer than usual break in the action during the legislature's calendar.

The senator did say many different issues were looked at in session, including two of the most important to many taxpayers – taxes and the state's budget.

Love said during the House and Senate's annual conclave, lawmakers voted on a tax plan, part of which would essentially eliminate taxes on small businesses. He said this is a big help to small business, which he called "the engine to our economy."

"By eliminating those taxes, we wanted to grow, attract people to come to Kansas and encourage our businesses to grow that are currently in Kansas and also lower the individual rates on Kansans," he said.

The state's sales tax rate was also lowered from 6.3 to 6.15 percent, after a law had passed a few years ago to put it at that higher rate. Love said initial plans had called for the tax to decline to as low as 5.7 percent, but overall, the legislature perceived the sales tax as the most fair of all taxes and thus voted to only lower it to 6.15.

"Everyone pays it," he said. "People from out of state pay it. People who don't own property pay it. Everybody pays it."

Despite having both a Republican-controlled legislature and a GOP governor, Love said no rubber stamping took place during the 2013 session.

"It was a lot of good discussion, a lot of good debate on what policies are best for Kansas and what we want to put in place," he said. "We were able to do that."

The state's lawmakers likewise passed a bill requiring drug testing for welfare recipients "upon reasonable suspicion." Love said this is a different law than ones passed in other states.

"In Kansas, we took the path that has been upheld in court which is when there's reasonable suspicion," he said. "The thought there is we don't want subsidized drug abuse. Let's try to help these individuals both in terms of helping their families, make sure the money's going towards the kids."

Love said the new welfare law also puts in place a workers training program and drug treatment all to help “the individual get better.”

“At the end of the day, the best kind of welfare is a good paying job,” he said.

Love next addressed a problem that is quite common in both Kansas and America – human trafficking.

“We’ve got over 300,000 human slaves in America right now,” he said. “That’s a problem. We have that going on in Kansas right here within our state. That’s a big problem.”

Love said he believes both the Kansas Senate and House want to continue to do everything possible to stop trafficking.

“It’s sometimes something people don’t think about or don’t want to think about, but in our world, we have more slaves currently than we’ve ever had in our world history, which is also hard to think about,” he said.

Petty: ‘Common Core misunderstood’

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Both the Kansas House and Senate recently voted to lower the state's sales tax rate from 6.3 percent to 6.15 percent.

A move was also made to basically eliminate taxes on small businesses, and Kansas Representative Reid Petty said that has already paid dividends for the Sunflower State when compared to neighboring Missouri.



“On the Kansas/Missouri border, in Kansas City, Kan., since January, which is when the large income tax cut took place from last year, the session before, they have gained 8,000 jobs,” he said. “In Kansas City, Mo., right across the border, they have lost 400 jobs. They’re all businesses from the Kansas City, Mo., side that are moving over to the Kansas side to move their business there because of the income tax cut.”

Petty was at the Rock Island Depot Tuesday, and he said a trend that has been taking place for some time is that Kansas has lost population and become a not-so attractive place to live. For this reason, he said the state must do something to “jump start itself.”

“I think we’re generally going in the right direction,” he said. “There may be some tweaks that are going to be made, but I think with keeping the sales tax at 6.15, we can at least fund some

of the core functions of government.”

Petty said the legislature also voted on a new tax plan in the recently completed session, and he said he would not vote for one that did not fully fund the state’s Transportation Works for Kansas, or T-Works, program that helps finance state highway

improvements.

“Leadership would come and say, ‘What’s it going to take for you to vote for a tax plan?’” he said. “We ended up voting on three or four. I said T-Works needs to be fully funded. I said that every time, and it got to the point where they wouldn’t even ask me anymore. They’d say this tax plan has T-Works fully funded. Do you want to know anything else about it?”

In the end, the tax plan state lawmakers approved did fully fund the T-Works program, and this came in addition to the lowered Kansas sales tax.

“This tax plan will also create \$3.86 billion in tax relief over the next few years because of the income tax coming down as well,” Petty said.

The legislature also made some headway with education issues during the session, and Petty said one of the major highlights in that area came with an opportunity for 10 Kansas school districts to apply to become “innovative school districts.”

“What that’ll do is it’ll take a real hands off approach from the state,” he said. “They’ll have to follow common laws, but for the most part, they won’t have to follow a lot of the state regulations. They’ll be more free to do what they can. In a way, it’s kind of a way to see what school districts do when they don’t have much government intervention, how well they do. They can apply for it, and 10 will be chosen and go forward with it.”

Another hot topic in Topeka was the issue of Common Core Standards in schools. Petty said

the subject is a very complicated one, and he feels there is a lot of misinformation floating in the court of public opinion.

“Common Core doesn’t do what a lot of people are saying that it does,” he said. “There’s a lot of groups out there that are really pushing to get rid of it. When the House voted on it, it did go down.”

Petty said Common Core is merely a set of general standards for schools.

“It doesn’t tell what textbook you have to use to do it,” he said. “It doesn’t tell you how you have to teach it. It allows the local school districts to still choose whatever textbooks they want. They can still choose to teach it however they want. It’s just a simple set of standards so if kids were to move from state to state, they’ll all kind of be around that same range.”

By a narrow vote, the Kansas House recently voted ‘no’ on a bill that would have put a freeze on the implementation of Common Core Standards in schools. Petty said he fears if that legislation had passed, it would bring a return to the federal No Child Left Behind program, something he said has much more governmental intervention.