State government in September again fell short of revenue projections. This time $21 million short.

The under-performing revenue, coupled with previous bad economic news, present short- and long-term challenges for school funding as Gov. Sam Brownback’s income tax cuts reduce one of the major streams of revenue to the state.

In fiscal year 2013, the state collected $2.9 billion in individual income tax. In fiscal year 2014, that figure dropped 14 percent to $2.5 billion. The nosedive continues.

From July through September of this year, the state collected $574.8 million in individual income tax, which is 8.8 percent less than the same three-month period from the previous year.

Currently, the state is looking at a revenue shortfall by July 2016 of $238 million, according to the Kansas Legislative Research Department.

Outside observers have sounded the alarm that Kansas is headed over a fiscal cliff. State bonds have been downgraded by Standard & Poor’s and Moody’s Investor Service. S&P said the huge tax cuts pushed by Brownback and his allies in the Legislature have not been offset by equal spending cuts.

And if that wasn’t enough to raise concerns, the issue of whether public schools are adequately funded remains in the hands of a lower court. A remedy in the school adequacy dispute could require huge expenditures.

As the gap between revenue and what has been budgeted has increased over the past several months, a former 12 year Kansas state budget director, Duane Goossen, who worked for both Republican and Democratic administrations, said the prudent public policy would be cutting spending now instead of waiting until later in the fiscal year when cuts will have a more dramatic impact.

But that would require politically unpopular decisions during the campaign season. Currently, the state is working off of projections that were made in April by budget experts that make up the Consensus Revenue Estimating Group.

This group will meet again next month to adjust the current fiscal year estimate and the estimate for the next fiscal year, both of which will be used by the governor and Legislature during the 2015 session that starts in January.

The revenue figures for October will be provided by the Kansas Department of Revenue by the end of the month. Election Day is Nov. 4 and the Consensus Revenue Estimating Group meets again Nov. 10. Stay tuned.
State Board sets schedule for selection of new commissioner of education

The Kansas State Board of Education will hold its regular meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 14. The second day of the meeting, Oct. 15 date has been cancelled, and the board will meet again on Oct. 29 to identify finalists for the position of Kansas Commissioner of Education. Interviews are scheduled for November 5, 6 and 7. The State Board hopes to name a Commissioner shortly thereafter.

Special Elections Committee sets meeting dates

The interim Special Committee on Ethics, Elections and Local Government charged with studying proposals to move school board and other local elections from Spring to Fall and several other topics has set three meeting dates: Oct. 10, Nov. 21 and Dec. 12. However, legislative staff says the first meeting will probably spend little time on the election issue.

Read more at www.kasb.org/wcm/_NB/14/NB0930a.aspx

Districts undergoing LPA efficiency audits announced

Three school districts have been identified for Legislative Post Audit efficiency audits in the 2014-15 school year. They are Attica USD 511 (Small – less than 500 students), Prairie Hills USD 113 (Medium – 500 to 4,000 students); and Auburn-Washburn USD 437 (Large – 4,000 or more students).

The only volunteer of the three was Prairie Hills. The district faces the loss of consolidation incentives it received in the past and requested LPA help to identify possible cuts in expenditures to deal with declining revenues. Auburn-Washburn was selected in a lottery last year, but requested the audit be delayed until this year due to an IRS audit conducted last year. Attica was the district selected by the lottery process this year.

Attica USD 511 efficiency audit delayed a year; no replacement named

The Legislative Post Audit Committee on Thursday approved a one-year postponement of an efficiency audit for Attica USD 511. Another district will be selected for the current year. When chosen in a lottery last month, other districts were selected as backups; however no official replacement has been named at this point.

Learn more about the LPA at www.kslpa.org/lpac.html

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Northwest Kansas school leaders discuss Rose Standards cost and benefits

The so-called “Rose Standards” for education have been accepted at the state level, but school officials at KASB’s fourth Fall Education Summit on Tuesday in Oakley raised concerns about how to achieve them when classrooms are facing challenging budgets.

Two additional Summit meetings were held Wednesday in Junction City and Thursday in Shawnee Mission.

The Rose Standards refer to goals for education achievement in several areas designed to produce well-rounded students who are ready to take on the challenges of adulthood.

Earlier this year, the Kansas Supreme Court set out the Rose Standards for determining whether the state has adequately funded public schools. Gov. Sam Brownback and the Legislature endorsed the Rose Standards in approving a school funding bill during the Legislative Session.

“We now have a law that says this is what we have to do for kids,” John Heim, KASB executive director, said.

Specifically, the Rose Standards, named after a Kentucky school finance case cited by the Kansas court, cover several areas. Those are communication skills; knowledge of economic, social and political systems; knowledge of one’s mental and physical health; a grounding in the arts; and sufficient preparation in academic or vocational fields to enable students to choose a career and enter either post-secondary education or the workplace.

About 25 school administrators and school board members at the summit discussed issues surrounding the Rose Standards and other education issues.

When asked what challenges they faced in achieving the standards, Jim Hickel, superintendent of Graham County USD 281, said, “money.”

He and other education officials said that many school districts have had to cut budgets in recent years in areas that would directly impact achievement of the Rose Standards. “We’ve taken all these things out; how do we put them back in? It takes people and money, and we don’t have it,” Hickel said. He added, “The more you individualize things, the more people it takes to make that work.”

Linda Zeigler, superintendent of Quinter USD 293, said she agreed with the goals of the Rose Standards.

“We want these for our children. I want them to find their gift before they leave us,” Zeigler said. But she expressed concerns over how schools would be measured to see if they are meeting the goals and if the needed funding would be provided. “It’s getting scary now,” she said of her district’s funding. “What else will we have to cut if the funding doesn’t come through,” she said.

Veteran Statehouse Reporter joins KASB

Scott Rothschild has been hired for the new advocacy communications position at the Kansas Association of School Boards. Scott has been the Statehouse reporter for the Lawrence Journal-World for the past 14 years and before that worked at the Wichita Eagle and The Associated Press. He has written extensively on education policy and politics.

He and his wife Susan, who is a former journalist and now a Title I math paraprofessional, have two sons in college and live in Topeka.

“We are proud to welcome a journalist of Scott’s experience and ability,” said KASB Executive Director Dr. John Heim. “Scott will help us give school leaders the best information possible to improve student achievement and success, and help KASB be an effective voice for public education.”
If you cannot quote at least one line from Cool Hand Luke, I am calling you out. A few days ago at our office, a reference to the movie was lost on young Brian Jordan who was forced to admit he had not seen the movie. (Always the learner, Brian raced home that night and watched it on Netflix and was in full quote mode the next day.)

Cool Hand Luke epitomizes the anti-hero movies of the late 60s and early 70s. Those of my vintage grew up with classic anti-heroes that started in the 50s with James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause and Marlon Brando in The Wild One, who responded to the question “What are you rebelling against?” with the iconic answer, “What’ve you got?”

Folks my age grew up with rule-breakers who were trying to do the right things outside of, or in spite of, “the system.” Recently, I read a book that includes the other side of the story. Nixonland is a fascinating look at how America reacted to the rebellious bikers and hippies that my friends and I thought were so cool growing up. In my mind, my grandfather’s disdain for long hair, groovy music, peace signs, and happenin' threads was what proved it was all alright, alright, alright.

Until reading Nixonland, I did not realize that my grandpa was the norm, not the exception. The book discusses how the 60’s were a time when American culture began to splinter, and how politicians capitalized on this splintering for their own good. Looking at our culture now, those splinters have become chasms of blue and red. The anti-heroes may have won at the box-office, but they led to the rise of radicals on both sides of political spectrum.

The author explains that as protests grew in number and scope, public opinion turned against the protesters. Protests for ending the war in Vietnam and for civil rights begat less overall public support for those causes. It also led to violence on both sides. At a time when America needed leaders to help them heal, we got politicians who saw an opportunity to capitalize on the division.

Fifty-years later, we are left to deal with the aftermath. Politicians of our decade have learned the lessons of the 1960s. Wedge issues, retribution, vindictiveness, dirty tricks, demonization, and personal attacks are the tools of division and only serve the politicians.

A professor told me once that it is one thing to understand the game; it is another thing to win it. In our current political environment, we first need to redefine winning. If winning means my party is in charge then there are still a lot of losers. If winning is redefined as making our country, state, or schools better, different tactics must be employed. Wedge issues, retribution, vindictiveness, dirty tricks, demonization, and personal attacks have to be replaced with building trust, looking at data, meaningful dialogue, and compromise.

Cool Hand Luke was a great movie, but <SPOILER ALERT> Luke dies in the end, and the abysmal prison system just keeps right on going. Captain America was cool, but he and Billy die for no reason in the end. Captain America was cool, but he and Billy die for no reason in the end. Cool Hand Luke was a great movie, but...</SPOILER ALERT>