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Taxes and Budget

Op-Ed by Gov. Pete Ricketts: Restoring taxpayers' government control ([The Grand Island Independent](#)) - Nebraska has 529 cities and villages, 245 K-12 school districts, 93 counties, 23 natural resource districts, 17 educational service units, and six community colleges. These are just some of the hundreds of local governments responsible for levying property taxes in Nebraska. Property tax revenues fund local government, not state government. The state, however, is responsible for setting the rules for how property taxes are levied. This means the state can put measures in place to encourage local governments to control spending over the long term. When taxpayers are demanding structural property tax relief, it is incumbent upon us as state leaders to take action. Slowing the growth of local government spending is the focus of the property tax relief plan I proposed with Sen. Kate Sullivan, chairwoman of the Education Committee, and Sen. Mike Gloor, chairman of the Revenue Committee. Last week, I detailed LB958 in the Revenue Committee, a bill aimed at encouraging fiscal restraint and accountability by political subdivisions like cities, counties, and natural resource districts.

Governor Kasich signs bill ensuring Ohio taxpayers' access to tax benefits ([The Highland County Press](#)) – Governor John Kasich has signed Senate Bill 2 into law, sponsored by State Senator Bob Peterson (R-Washington Court House), which harmonizes recent changes to the federal tax code with Ohio's income tax law, saving Ohioans up to \$18.9 million in taxes. "As Ohioans begin filing last year's tax returns, it's imperative that we make sure they have access to every possible deduction and credit they are entitled to," said Peterson. "This bill provides the necessary updates to make sure no one pays more taxes than required." Several changes were made to the federal tax code in 2015 necessitating the passage of Senate Bill 2 in order to avoid conflicting state and federal tax rules.

Transportation and Infrastructure

Gov. Baker pledges more money for potholes, bridge repairs ([The Eagle-Tribune](#)) – Gov. Charlie Baker is pledging more money to help cities and towns fix potholed roads and decaying bridges, but municipal leaders say the money won't go far enough to address the state's myriad transportation woes. Baker has filed a proposed \$200 million bond bill that would be divided among the state's 351 municipalities to repave roads and pay for other transportation projects. The Republican's proposal would also create a new \$50 million statewide bridge repair fund to help cities and towns fix bridges not eligible for federal assistance. "Every city and town depends on access to these flexible transportation funds and these investments will ensure municipal improvements remain front and center," Baker said in a statement.

Economic Development

Florida tourism tops 100 million mark ([News 4 JAX](#)) – Florida has surpassed Gov. Rick Scott's goal of attracting 100 million visitors in a single year. And Scott is setting a higher target for tourism officials in 2016. The governor and Visit Florida, the state's tourism-marketing arm, announced Thursday that an estimated 105 million tourists made their way to the Sunshine State in 2015, topping the 98.5 million reported the previous year. Scott has focused on hitting the 100 million mark, and the preliminary number released Thursday reflects the fifth year in a row that the state has reported an increase in visitors. "Tourism plays an important role in supporting our economy, and we will continue to make strategic investments in the tourism industry to keep Florida on track to becoming first for jobs," Scott said in a prepared statement. "With five consecutive record years for tourism, it is time to set our goal even higher, and I look forward to welcoming 115 million visitors to the Sunshine State this year."

Governor McCrory's Veterans Employment Initiative Headed to Fort Bragg ([The Stanly News & Press](#)) - Governor Pat McCrory's commitment to supporting veterans, and making sure their skills and talent remain in North Carolina, will be reinforced on Friday at an information technology (IT) job fair at Fort Bragg. The event will be led by the North Carolina Department of Information Technology, in partnership with Cisco, as part of a public-private partnership

launched by Governor McCrory in early 2015 to help veterans find employment in North Carolina. "I've made it a priority of my administration to ensure we connect our veterans with jobs right here in North Carolina, and to make our state the most military and veteran-friendly state in the nation," said Governor McCrory. "As we continue to focus on better serving our citizens, I can think of no stronger background or training to help us accomplish that goal than that of our military veterans." More than 65 military service members attended a similar job fair last week at Camp Lejeune where they talked with information technology leaders about job opportunities in the IT sector, specifically in state government.

(Kansas) First-of-Its-Kind Study Shows the Power of Work ([Forbes](#)) - For too long, thousands of Kansans have languished in welfare, without hope of a better life. But thanks to one simple policy change, many Kansans are now on the path to a better life. Under federal law, all able-bodied, childless adults in the food stamp program are required to work or train for work at least 20 hours per week. But with help from the Obama administration, most states have been waiving those requirements in recent years. Last year, for example, more than 40 states waived these critical requirements, fostering a culture of long-term dependency. But in 2013, Kansas Governor Sam Brownback bucked the trend and instructed state officials to reinstate work requirements and time limits for able-bodied adults. Within three months, half of all able-bodied adults on food stamps had cycled off the program. Enrollment is now 75 percent lower for this group of adults than it was before work requirements took effect. The Brownback administration also set in motion a first-of-its-kind tracking system to monitor the state's success in moving Kansans from welfare to work. Over the course of two years, the state's Department of Labor and its Department for Children and Families tracked earnings and employment for nearly 41,000 able-bodied adults leaving food stamps after the work requirements went into effect.

Government Efficiency

Ducey deregulation initiative advances in House ([The Arizona Daily Sun](#)) – Gov. Doug Ducey has won at least a preliminary victory in his bid to cut state regulations. On a 5-3 vote Wednesday, the House Commerce Committee agreed to end state licensure of geologists, landscape architects, assayers, fruit and vegetable packers and those who operate free-standing crematories. And just for good measure, Rep. Warren Petersen, R-Gilbert, added language to deregulate courses that teach people how to become yoga instructors. HB 2613, crafted by the governor's office, is the first step in plans announced by Ducey during his State of the State address last month to not only curb state regulations but to scrap some state oversight entirely. "Arizona requires licenses for too many jobs, resulting in a maze of bureaucracy for small business people looking to earn an honest living," the governor said.

Public Safety

(Nebraska) Drug monitoring program passes Legislature ([The Lincoln Journal Star](#)) – A measure to tighten up Nebraska's prescription drug monitoring program — aimed at preventing abuse — passed in the Legislature on Thursday. No senators opposed the bill (LB471), which now advances to the desk of Gov. Pete Ricketts for his approval. An emergency clause on the bill means it would take effect almost immediately with the governor's signature. "It's a huge win," Omaha Sen. Sara Howard said after the vote. Howard, whose mother was also a state senator, lost her older sister to a prescription drug overdose in 2009. Her bill will require all dispensers to report Nebraska prescriptions into the prescription drug monitoring system and will prohibit patients from opting out of the program, which tracks medications to help prevent abuse.

Education

Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam proposes Flexibility for Teachers ([Clarksville Online](#)) – Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam today announced he would seek additional flexibility for teachers as the state continues its transition to the TNReady student assessment. Under the proposal, teachers would have the choice to include or not to include student results from the 2015-2016 TNReady assessment in his or her evaluation score, which typically consists of multiple years of data. The proposal keeps student learning and accountability as factors in an educator's evaluation while giving teachers the option to include this year's results if the results benefit them. The governor will work with the General Assembly on specific language and a plan to move the proposal through the legislative process. "Tennessee students are showing historic progress. The state made adjustments to teacher evaluation and accountability last year to account for the transition to an improved assessment fully aligned with Tennessee standards, which we know has involved a tremendous amount of work on the part of our educators," Haslam said. "Given recent, unexpected changes in the administration of the new assessment, we want to provide teachers with additional flexibility for this first year's data."

Governor Rauner creates education specific cabinet ([AP](#)) - Gov. Bruce Rauner has created a special cabinet to streamline education and issues regarding young people across Illinois. Rauner signed an executive order on Thursday morning at a middle school in Riverton, outside Springfield, creating the Governor's Cabinet on Children and Youth. He says the cabinet will bring together all state entities that deal with children into a central unit. He's calling it the Children's Cabinet. The governor says he wants the cabinet to make sure state resources are used effectively and working together. State Secretary of Education Beth Purvis says that the current system in Illinois is "fragmented." The cabinet has nearly 20 members, including the chiefs of state agencies like the Department of Children and Family Services and Department of Juvenile Justice.

Healthcare

(Arkansas) Governor: No coverage cap tied to assets; income-based premium still on Medicaid pitch list ([Arkansas Online](#)) - Charging premiums to private-option enrollees with incomes above the poverty level and requiring some Medicaid-eligible adults to receive coverage through subsidized, employer-sponsored plans are among the changes Gov. Asa Hutchinson told lawmakers on Wednesday that he still plans to propose as part of an overhaul of Arkansas' expanded Medicaid program. But Hutchinson told reporters he won't propose limiting coverage or charging higher premiums to enrollees with substantial assets as part of the revamped program, which would be known as Arkansas Works, because the idea is a "nonstarter" with officials in President Barack Obama's administration. Addressing the Health Reform Legislative Task Force, Hutchinson said Arkansas should make changes to improve the expanded Medicaid program as much as possible under the limits set by the federal government.

Proposed bill would use alternative to Medicaid expansion to provide health coverage for Georgia's poor ([The Florida Times Union](#)) - The bill may not get very far this year, with time running out in the General Assembly session and without the fiscal impact yet studied. But a Senate health committee broke new ground Wednesday by holding a legislative hearing on a proposal, Senate Bill 368, that would create a Medicaid expansion alternative in Georgia. The panel's discussion of the plan represents what experts say is the first time that a bill to pursue expansion or an expansion-like alternative has actually gained a hearing at the General Assembly since Congress passed the Affordable Care Act in 2010. The hearing on the bill, before the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, came as a surprise to many in the health care industry. No vote was taken Wednesday on the legislation, which is based on Arkansas' expansion alternative. It's sponsored by state Sen. Michael "Doc" Rhett, D-Marietta. Senate Bill 368 doesn't mention the term Medicaid expansion, and its author deliberately avoided the phrase in connection to his plan.

Funding boost for Kansas mental hospital in works ([AP](#)) - Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback will push for another boost in funding for the state's two mental hospitals and could propose pay raises of up to 10 percent for some of their workers, a top social services official said. Legislators from both parties on Thursday said they welcomed the news that the Republican governor is working on proposals to help the Larned and Osawatomie hospitals fill staff vacancies. But they also remained wary of the administration's interest in exploring whether the Osawatomie hospital should be run by a private company. The federal government in December decertified the Osawatomie hospital, about 45 miles southwest of Kansas City, costing the state up to \$1 million a month in federal funds. It and the Larned hospital in western Kansas had more than 350 open positions at the end of January, a combined vacancy rate of about 38 percent.