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Building a Solution

The following is a column by Governor Mark Parkinson:

Not since the Great Depression have Kansas families, workers and businesses faced the severity of financial troubles that we are seeing today. I am deeply concerned by the challenges and struggles being experienced by each and every Kansan.

This recession has also decimated state revenues. Kansas has never had two consecutive years of revenue declines; so it is incredible that we are now entering our fourth straight year of shortfalls. As a result, the legislature and I have cut nearly a billion dollars from our six billion dollar budget.

This past week, as shortfalls continued and our deficit grew, I had to make another \$260 million in cuts to keep our budget in balance. I could have called a special legislative session and put the burden on our legislators, but I saw no point in that. A special session would have cost additional taxpayer money and shifted the responsibility to the legislature. Governors should lead and I'm honored to meet that responsibility, so I've made these cuts and adjustments myself.

I entered this budget cutting process with two principles: the first is that the solution we would reach would be a shared solution. Everyone must pull together; we must work towards ushering Kansas through this difficult time. The second is that we would make cuts that are undeniably painful, but not crippling. Unfortunately, this second principle can no longer be achieved.

We have passed the point of crippling cuts. The cuts I had to make this latest round are so severe that basic state functions are now in jeopardy. In some areas, such as education, it is clear that if revenues do not recover we will see permanent damage done to our most critical assets.

As a result of these cuts, children's classrooms will be overcrowded, creating an environment in which learning is a challenge for every student. Some districts will be forced to lay off teachers and close schools. The arts, athletics and extracurricular opportunities that make our schools and communities great may be a thing of the past.

This latest round of cuts means that our Universities will have fewer professors, will offer fewer classes, and will see higher tuition. Universities are critical investments in our future, but this investment is now in peril.

This latest round of cuts means that supervision of released prisoners will decrease, that waiting lists for services for the most disabled in our state will grow, and the quality of our roads will deteriorate.

For all those who felt that in good times, waste in government could be found, I agree. As anyone with a business can tell you, when times are tough it is easier to find efficiencies and savings. But we are beyond that point now. We have cut every ounce of waste, streamlined every program and squeezed every last saving we could find – we are now cutting basic services.

If I've consistently demonstrated one thing over the last seven months, it is that I am fiscally responsible. I am now personally accountable for more cuts in Kansas government than any single person in our state's history. This is not the legacy I ever thought would be attached to my name. I entered into public service to strengthen our schools, not fracture their very foundation.

Kansas can't do well if we don't invest in our public schools and universities. Kansas can't do well if we don't invest in our roads and infrastructure on which a strong economy relies. Kansas isn't safe if we're at the point where we are forced to continue to cut public safety. And Kansas just isn't Kansas if we're not willing to provide a minimal safety net to our most vulnerable citizens.

As I said on Monday, we cannot make it through this recession by cutting ourselves into an incurable position. When the Legislature returns in January, together we must look towards building a solution for the years ahead or else we will permanently damage the foundation of our state.

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