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## It's the end of the road for the GOP's big tax experiment in Kansas

Matt Pearce

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The grand economic experiment on the prairie has ended.

Kansas' Republican-held Legislature delivered a stunning defeat to Republican Gov. Sam Brownback on Tuesday, voting to demolish his massive tax cut that led to massive budget shortfalls and sent Kansas into a political tailspin.

It was a Waterloo moment for the conservative second-term governor, who refused to back down from the tea-party-inspired plan he signed in 2012 to promote business growth in the state.

After the Legislature passed a bill Tuesday morning, just after midnight, to roll back most of Brownback's tax agenda, the governor exercised his veto power to kill it. But a coalition of Republicans and Democrats united Tuesday night to override the veto with a two-third's majority in both chambers.

The Senate voted 27 to 13 and the House of Representatives 88 to 31 to increase income taxes and raise a projected \$1.2 billion over the next two years. The state had been facing a \$889-million budget shortfall through June 2019.

"Last night was a really big deal," said Rep. Melissa Rooker, a moderate Republican from the greater Kansas City area who voted in support of the override. "We're swinging back to a more centrist position, which is where our comfort level is in Kansas, in my opinion."

Democratic House Minority Leader Jim Ward, who represents southern Wichita and also voted to raise taxes, said he felt "relieved" once he realized victory was assured.

"It was time," Ward said. "I think last night the vast majority of legislators said 'enough was enough; we have to move away from this failed tax experiment and on to sound fiscal policies.'"

Addressing the media on Wednesday, Brownback said the Legislature made the "wrong move," calling it a shortsighted decision that would hurt Kansas in the long run.

It had all been about the future, said Brownback, whose future has been the subject of speculation over whether he might leave office early to join the Trump administration. His term ends in 2018 and he cannot run for governor again.

“We’ve been declining as a percent of the population in the country,” Brownback said. “We haven’t had robust economic activity, and we tried to move in a place, in a way that would be pro-growth so we could attract more people, attract more businesses, attract more opportunities.”

Brownback’s tax plan, enacted with the help of a conservative-dominated Legislature, initially earned him praise from small-government advocates as a potential model for elsewhere in the nation. Brownback had called on the economist Arthur Laffer — famous for theorizing that tax revenue can increase if tax cuts promote enough growth — as an advisor for the plan.

“We’ll see how it works,” Brownback said in one television appearance. “We’ll have a real, live experiment.” A Kansas City Star story on Brownback signing the tax cut in 2012 asked: “Economic gold rush? Or fiscal wreck?”

It definitely wasn’t a gold rush.

As the years passed, the promised growth failed to materialize. Monthly tax receipt reports became a drumbeat bearing the same bad news: revenues were lower than expected, meaning budget shortfalls would be greater than expected.

State programs had to be slashed, but it still wasn’t enough. The state Supreme Court intervened, saying the budget didn’t provide enough funding for the state’s public school system. The state’s credit rating got downgraded, then downgraded again.

Brownback’s approval ratings plummeted so far that he became the least popular of the nation’s 50 governors, a status Brownback only recently relinquished to Republican New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that favors tax cuts and scores governors on their fiscal policies, downgraded Brownback from an “A” grade in 2014 to a “D” in 2016.

As Donald Trump reclaimed the White House for the GOP in 2016, Democrats and moderate Republicans in Kansas defeated more conservative opponents to gain power in the statehouse, paving the way for Tuesday’s tax increase.

“The primary issue in most elections was the road Sam Brownback had taken us down, and the consequences of his bad decisions,” said John Gibson, chairman of the Kansas Democratic Party.

Burdett Loomis, a professor of political science at the University of Kansas, said the elections gave “a lot of energy” to Brownback’s opponents.

“Legislators got an earful in town meetings, people emailed them; they kept the pressure up,” Loomis said.

Rooker, the Republican representative, lived in Los Angeles for 18 years but moved back home to Kansas in 2004 because she wanted the affordable education offered by the state’s respected public schools in the Kansas City suburbs.

The tax cut’s impact on the school system turned her and many other Republicans into opponents of Brownback’s economic agenda.

“It’s not just in blue districts; it is statewide,” Rooker said. “People recognized the damage being done to infrastructure, schools and the services and the state functions they depend on.”

Rep. Dan Hawkins, a conservative Republican, had initially opposed the Legislature’s proposed tax increase.

But after a meeting with the governor earlier in the week, Hawkins said he realized that Brownback wasn’t going to compromise and agree to any significant tax increase.

So he flipped his support.

“My thought is, this is probably as good as it’s going to get,” Hawkins said. “Let’s just stop this nonsense and make sure the state can move forward and pay our bills and do what we need to. It really was a realization that our governor wasn’t going to work with us on anything else.”