

Sam Brownback's illusions dissolve under scrutiny

By: Barbara Shelley – February 21, 2013

Mirages have always loomed large in Kansas lore.

Stagecoach travelers described visions of lakes that didn't exist, with fantastical trees growing right out of the water. One journeyer wrote about seeing a small city suspended above the horizon.

A few years ago, while visiting the statehouse in Topeka, I was approached by a gentleman who said he had an urgent problem to convey to legislators. Out on the High Plains, he said, the mirages were disappearing.

I swear this really happened, though it begs the question of how something could vanish when it never existed.

But the gentleman from western Kansas need not worry. Mirages are still plentiful in the Sunflower State. Gov. Sam Brownback's administration and Republicans in the Legislature are conjuring them fast and furiously.

For weeks, Brownback has been spinning a case for his controversial fiscal policies. One thing he's been telling people is that state spending has fallen by nearly \$2 billion since 2010, the year he was elected. It's a beautiful vision — finally, a downward arc in the state's cost curve.

But an alert reporter from the Wichita Eagle challenged that claim, leading to an admission from Brownback's budget director, that, oops, due to a spreadsheet error, the governor was working with incorrect information. Instead of falling, state spending under Brownback was slightly higher than it was when his predecessor, Democrat Mark Parkinson, was governor.

Well, hey, everybody makes mistakes, and the budget office was only off by \$2 billion or so. But the corrected numbers certainly change the narrative. The downward spending arc was a mirage.

Brownback often uses numbers to create illusions.

He claims to have increased funding for elementary and secondary education, but has cleverly included bond debt, capital improvement funds and mandatory increases in teachers' retirement contributions in the total. Actual classroom spending has fallen since Brownback took office.

Without documentation, the governor says his proposed merger of the Kansas Turnpike Authority and state Transportation Department will save \$30 million in two years. When questioned by a legislative committee, the state transportation secretary said he assumed the savings would come through eliminating duplication, though of what he was not sure.

But Brownback isn't the only one in Kansas government willing to suspend reality.

This week the state Senate's public health and welfare committee held a hearing on Medicaid expansion. Members received an earful from two staffers of the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank where government-subsidized health care for the poor is viewed as about as helpful as a global cyber attack.

The institute's economist cited a cost estimate for Medicaid expansion that is not in the same ballpark, or even the same universe, as several other projections.

Its policy analyst asserted that Medicaid encourages fraud, drives up the cost of private health insurance and has poor health outcomes.

Medicaid is not perfect. But there is a worse system, and that is leaving thousands of people without health insurance and causing hospitals to go broke by having to care for them.

The committee won't hear about that, however.

After a couple of hours of testimony, committee chairwoman Mary Pilcher-Cook moved to adjourn the meeting. Sen. Laura Kelly, the ranking Democrat, interrupted with an inconvenient question.

"Shouldn't we hear from some proponents of a Medicaid expansion?" she asked.

Pilcher-Cook was having none of that. The public health and welfare committee will hear only one side of an issue with profound implications for Kansas, its economy and its citizens.

So it goes in Kansas, where reality is what the governor and the conservative Republicans who control the Legislature want it to be.

If you look long enough across the horizon, you can see what might be the greatest mirage of all. It's the illusion, spun so artfully by Brownback and others, that a state can be bled by deep income tax cuts and not be profoundly weakened.