

THE PECK PERSPECTIVE

(From the Capitol)

January 19, 2026

The 2026 Legislative Session officially began at 2:00 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 12th with the swearing in of two new Senators — a republican and a democrat. Other than being named as Chairman of a budget sub-committee, my responsibilities remain the same as last session. I'm chairman of the Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee, vice-chairman of the Assessment & Taxation Committee, a member of the Ways & Means Committee, and the Utilities Committee. My office location remains the same, 234-E, as does my phone number, 785-296-7742.

Pre-Session Caucus: Prior to gaveling in, Senate Republicans gathered for a 3-hr. pre-session caucus. During the caucus we received reports on the Chiefs announced move to Kansas, the latest budget numbers, tax revenue to this point in the fiscal year, the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System (KPERS), and discussed our priorities for the session.

Although I've been a huge fan of the Chiefs since 1968, and have long wanted them in Kansas, the deal to bring them across the state line is sweeter for the team than for taxpayers. My thoughts on the other topics we heard: The state spends far too much taxpayer money, taxes are still too high, the KPERS is in good shape, and I'm confident a supermajority of Kansans support our priorities.

The top priority for Senate Republicans remains property tax reform. We're also focused on housing affordability, tort reform, improving educational outcomes for Kansas kids, and cracking down on crime. This session will be the second in a row Leadership is limiting it to 90 calendar days. That means work must progress quickly as we strive to improve the lives of Kansans.

In the last two years the Republican majority eliminated the state portion of your property tax for 2026, eliminated the state sales tax on groceries, lowered income tax rates, repealed the state income tax on Social Security, and increased child tax credits.

Redistricting: One topic I'm urging we do not spend time on — because it would not make it through the entire process — is redrawing congressional district boundaries. I say this even though many other states are continuing to push redrawing their congressional lines. Just last week the Virginia House Democrats (for a 2nd time) voted 62-33 in favor of drawing new congressional boundaries prior to the November midterm elections.

Hitting the Ground Running: Generally, the first week is reserved mostly for the pomp and circumstance of the State of the State and State of the Judiciary addresses. However, such was not the case this year. Important bills are already moving their way through the committee process, including a constitutional amendment I cosponsored (SCR 1616) to cap assessed (not appraised) valuation increases at 3% annually, or less if the legislature decides, (should help control property tax increases) and a bill I cosponsored (SB 302) to ban cell phones in schools during instructional time. Additionally, budget sub-committees, including the one I chair, are studying various governmental agency budgets.

Wrong Way to Dissent: On Wednesday, January 14th, there was ugliness in the Statehouse as a crowd showed up for a "human rights rally". I have no problem with dissenting opinions and welcome an open and honest discussion on issues we disagree on. However, obviously yelling at legislators, including the use of profanity (yes, there was a lot of cursing), is not helpful to the process. Some on the left apparently think intimidation is acceptable, but it's not. Although some legislators cower in such circumstances, for many it only strengthens our resolve to maintain our original position.

Cell Phones in Schools: As it relates to SB 302, the cell phone ban bill (there's a similar House bill — HB 2421), on Thursday (15th) the Senate Education Committee held a hearing and although there was some light opposition, I'm confident we'll work things out and ultimately pass a bill that benefits student achievement.

Eighteen other states have passed what's called the "bell-to-bell" policy of banning cell phones and other wireless communication devices for the entire instructional day. Preliminary data shows that strict school cell phone bans, such as SB 302, have led to better educational outcomes and a more focused student.

The transition for some students can be a little rocky. For example, in Florida, the first state to entirely ban cell phones in schools (in 2023), the first year the ban took effect saw an increase in suspensions. However, by the second year, suspensions had dissipated, test scores increased, and there were fewer unexcused absences. As this bill works its way through the process, we must remind ourselves that a ban on cell phones in schools is not meant as punitive but to help Kansas children have a better educational experience — leading to higher test scores and better academic achievements.

Until next time, may the blessings of God be yours.

Virgil Peck
State Senator