

PARKS IN PERIL

A bubbling brook, a snow-capped mountain peak, a pine forest ... and an oil well or two. The Colorado State Parks Board is considering a plan to increase oil and gas drilling in parks to help keep them operating. State funding has dropped from \$6.7 million in 2009 to \$2.6 million in 2010 to possibly nothing this year, although the 42 parks receive money from the Severance Tax Trust Fund. The board already has cut 12 full-time jobs, trimmed salaries, and raised camping and boating fees. Meanwhile, in Michigan, two auctions of oil and gas leases on state land brought in \$188 million to the state Natural Resources Trust Fund. Once it hits its cap, the extra money goes into the State Parks Endowment Fund, which pays for capital improvements and operations at Michigan's 98 parks.

SCHOOLS SUE

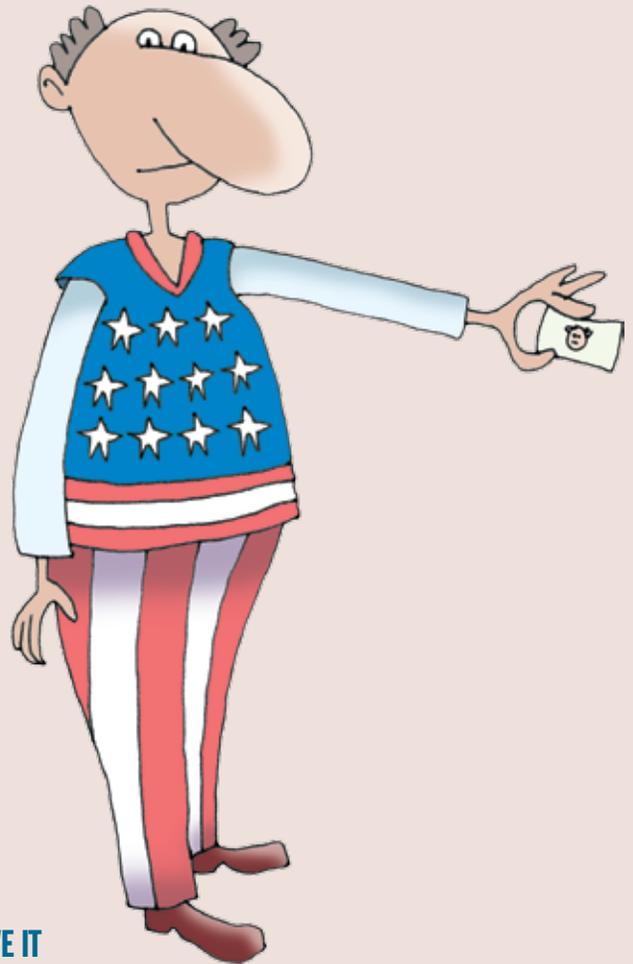
Kansas school districts have sued the state over budget cuts they say violate the state constitution. The suit by 63 districts contends lawmakers cut more than \$303 million for K-12 funding since the economic downturn began, even though they had agreed to increase funding. Senate Vice President John Vratil told Education Week that given the current economy, the Legislature had no choice but to cut school funding. The court could take three to four years to decide the case.

THE SILENT OPTION

Requiring New Hampshire schools to set aside time each day for students to say the Pledge of Allegiance, if they want to, does not violate their rights, a federal appeals court ruled in November. Even though it contains the words "under God," students can choose not to recite them. New Hampshire passed the law a few months after 9/11. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy and went through minor revisions until 1954, when Congress added the words "under God."

IT'S COMPLICATED

Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller has filed a lawsuit against several filmmakers claiming millions of dollars in tax credits are gone with the wind. The tax credit program was halted last year after questions were raised during a state audit about improper management and abuse. More than 40 states have used film incentives to attract film producers. But the real cost of the incentives is difficult to calculate. In 2007, a study in New Mexico found the state collected \$1.50 in state and local taxes for every \$1 refunded to movie makers. In Michigan, however, the Senate Fiscal Agency, in a September 2010 report, found that, "as is true for most tax incentives, the film incentives represent lost revenue and do not generate sufficient private sector activity to offset their costs completely." And most recently, a report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities argues the best jobs created in connection with the credits go to out-of-towners. According to Bloomberg News, film credits have been lowered in Wisconsin, capped in Rhode Island and, along with Iowa, halted in New Jersey, Kansas and Arizona.

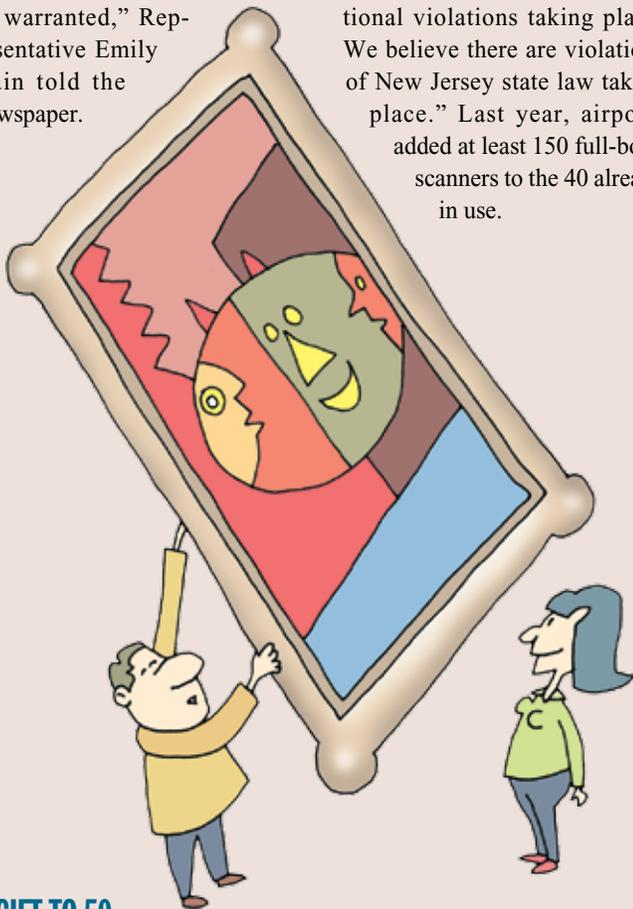


PROVE IT

Since the U.S. Justice Department has yet to approve Georgia's 2009 law that requires voter registration applicants to prove their U.S. citizenship with a birth certificate, passport, naturalization document or driver's license, the state has filed suit in U.S. District Court. The suit, according to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution asks the court to declare that the law does not violate Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which requires all voting changes to be pre-cleared in states with a history of discrimination.

TAXING TIMES

Maine spends more in tax breaks, credits and exemptions than it does on programs. A recent study by a working group created by the Legislature discovered that tax reimbursements, exceptions and preferences add up to about \$6.6 billion every two years, compared to \$1 billion in state spending. According to the Bangor Daily News, the study recommends lawmakers adopt the kind of analysis used in Washington state to measure the success and value of these tax programs every four years. "We need to ... make sure these tax expenditures are needed or warranted," Representative Emily Cain told the newspaper.

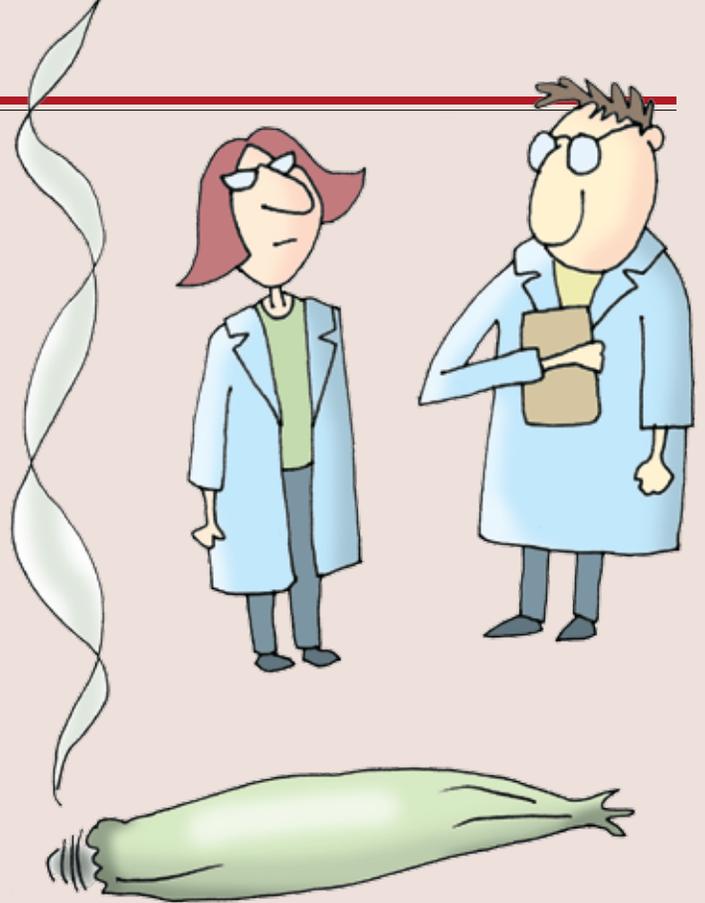


A GIFT TO 50

Dorothy and Herbert Vogel, one a mailman the other a librarian, loved contemporary art so much they managed to collect more than 4,000 pieces since their wedding in 1962. Now, they have given one institution in each state some of 2,500 works of art from their collection as part of their Fifty Works for Fifty States project. You can view most of the art on their website, vogel5050.org, where you can also find a list of recipient institutions by state.

SCANNERPHOBIA SPREADS

As full-body scanners and pat downs become more prevalent in our nation's airports, more people are becoming uncomfortable and questioning the need for them. Joined by civil liberties advocates, a group of New Jersey lawmakers introduced resolutions last November calling on Congress and the president to review the Transportation Security Administration's airport screening processes and address the growing privacy concerns. "Enough is enough," Senator Michael J. Doherty told the New Jersey *The Star-Ledger*. "We believe there are constitutional violations taking place. We believe there are violations of New Jersey state law taking place." Last year, airports added at least 150 full-body scanners to the 40 already in use.



PUPILS OF POT

Arizona passed a medical marijuana measure on the ballot this fall, making it the 15th state to do so. "We're going to be in a position to learn from other states," Arizona Department of Health Services Director Will Humble told Fox News. One thing Michigan has learned is that legal medical marijuana can bring people, and a new industry, to the area. Med Grow Cannabis College in Southfield, Mich., is attracting students from out of state and already has graduated more than 1,000. The school's website says, "Med Grow Cannabis College is a medical marijuana trade school dedicated to the education and advocacy of patients and caregivers. Our primary goal is to provide our students with an education that will allow them to be extremely successful in the medical marijuana industry. We teach students how to operate within the provisions of the state law, while providing quality, compassionate care to those in need. Med Grow welcomes students from all medical marijuana states." The six-week course at the trade school costs \$475 and includes a full range of classes, from horticulture to hydroponics, bloom cycles to business development. Med Grow Cannabis College is one of several unaccredited schools that have sprung up in the legal states. Oaksterdam University in Oakland, Calif., founded in 2007, was the first cannabis college.

IN-STATE TUITION OK

The California Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the state's law giving illegal immigrants the in-state tuition rate at public universities is constitutional because U.S. residents can also get the reduced rate. Nine other states have similar laws. A 1996 federal law bars illegal immigrants from receiving any state residency benefit not available to U.S. citizens.