A Broken System (NO on State Question 779)

By Carolyn Stager, Executive Director
Oklahoma Municipal League

Quality teachers and schools are vital to our children, grandchildren and to our communities. Today's teachers are educating the future CEO's, mayors, managers and teachers themselves — the leaders of the next generations.

The Oklahoma Municipal League (OML), the Municipal Electric Systems of Oklahoma (MESO), the City Managers Association of Oklahoma (CMAO) and the Municipal Clerks Treasurers & Finance Officers Association (MCTFOA) have passed a joint resolution affirming support of teachers having competitive salaries and supporting comprehensive tax reform; however, OPPOSING State Question 779.

The problems with State Question 779 are numerous. First, voters are being asked to approve a 22% tax increase with no accountability. While giving teachers a one-time $5,000 pay increase is honorable, this tax increase will also give a blank check for over $140 million to universities without regard to how the money is spent. Also the proposal does nothing to address the stated 1,000 teacher shortage positions in the state. If you go back to the early 90's when HB 1017 was enacted by the legislature in special session it consisted of not only a "state sales tax increase" but also a "corporate income tax increase." The headlines and quotes from political figures during that time indicated this would solve all of education's issues. Fast forward and the same concerns being argued today were also present during that time: low teacher pay, large classrooms, little money for teacher supplies and equipment. Another band-aid will not solve the problem.

The killer for Oklahoma cities and towns is that we are unique in being the 'only' state where cities and towns do not receive ad valorem (property tax) for general operations, thus making our municipalities "overly" dependent on local 'voter approved' sales tax to fund almost all of their obligations including police, fire, water, wastewater, libraries, parks, roads, bridges and the list goes on with services citizens have grown to want and expect from their local sales tax dollars.

Oklahoma is currently the 6th highest in the nation for combined sales tax at 8.62%, passing SQ 779 would make the tax rate at 9.62%, making Oklahoma the highest state in the nation.

The threat of SQ 779 is already forcing business to look elsewhere instead of opening shop in Oklahoma. There are currently 54 municipalities in the state with a combined sales tax rate over 10% and five that are over 11%. There is a finite amount of sales tax that citizens will support regardless of what the local need may be.

Funding education with a "new" state sales tax increase will not solve this perceived problem. Education entities currently receive over 50 percent (50%) of state appropriations. Fixing the broken education system means real tax reform, not $615 million dollars in new taxes.

So, although this proposal looks like a shiny apple, on further examination and looking at all the
(see STATE QUESTION 779, page 4)
OMPA Begins Service to Cordell

The Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority (OMPA) officially began serving the City of New Cordell with wholesale power on June 1, less than six months after the city agreed to join OMPA’s membership.

In December, Cordell became the 42nd state municipal to vote to join OMPA in its 30-year history of delivering power. It was the third new member of 2015, joined by the towns of Mooreland and Fort Supply.

On June 16, staff with OMPA helped host an open house for New Cordell’s electric utility, serving lunch and introducing the community to the various programs administered by OMPA.

Located in western Oklahoma, Cordell had a population of 2,915 at the 2010 census.

OMPA is a municipal joint action agency, owned by the members it serves. It is governed by a board of 11 representatives from member cities and towns, who are selected by a group of electors. Each of OMPA’s members has one elector, and Cordell’s will be the person serving as the chair of the Public Works Authority.

The Authority was created on June 2, 1981, and originally supplied power to 26 cities in 1985, which was its first year of operation. It has continued to grow, adding seven members in the last five years alone.

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Waurika*
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Wynnewood
Yale*

*Job Training & Safety Participants
Pryor Municipal Utility Board Receives Electric Safety Award

Municipal Electric Systems of Oklahoma (MESO) awarded the Municipal Utility Board (MUB), City of Pryor, First place in the association’s annual Electric Safety Competition in Oklahoma for the second straight year.

“As important as electric system reliability is to citizens, knowing that each and every day, the work is being performed correctly and safely should be a source of pride for the MUB team and their customers,” said MESO General Manager Tom Rider. “Your local Public Power Lineworkers are friends, co-workers, and neighbors, we all want them to come home safely each and every day.”

MUB is being recognized for its perfect safety record for 2015. The utility’s personnel went the year without a reportable lost work time incident, either “days away from work,” “restricted light duty,” or “medical treatment” cases. MUB participates in the MESO Job Training and Safety program as one resource for ensuring safe work practices.

The utility was recognized in the category for cities under 10,000 population. MUB was also recognized by the American Public Power Association in May for achieving this level of safe operating practices.

“For any utility to achieve the type of safety performance seen in Pryor requires superior operational standards and employee training,” Rider said. “Pryor was able to achieve these results by maximizing local control and local decision-making which means investments in the system and people.

“If you want to look at a utility that is doing right in terms of safety, investing in people and reliability, you don’t have to look any further than Pryor,” Rider added.

In order left to right: Chris Samples, Ryne Abbott, Johnny Bark, Travis Willis, Tyler Schlosser, and Ryan Hinton. Not Pictured: Craig Shelton, Dub Hargrove, John Thomas, Nocona Ingram

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Exceeding Expectations

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Robert Johnston and Jim Greff each were honored by the American Public Power Association (APPA) at its national conference with the Larry Hobart 7 Hats Award on June 14 in Phoenix.

The award recognizes managers of small utilities serving less than 2,500 meters. These managers have a very small staff and must assume multiple roles. The seven hats they must wear are: planning and design, administration, public relations, field supervision, accounting, human resources, and community leadership.

As Frederick’s city manager, Johnston has many roles in the city with less than 4,000 residents. He recently led efforts to convince voters to approve sales tax measures to benefit the city, including a measure that funded improvements to the water and wastewater systems, freeing up electric revenues for distribution system improvements.

When there is a utility problem, Johnston is often out with the crews, providing direction and assistance. He has helped the city plan for emergencies, adding backup generators to the city water system. He is a former MESO Board Member and currently serves on the Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority Board of Directors. In 2013, Johnston was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame for City and Town Officials.

Greff, city manager of Prague, recently oversaw the implementation of smart meters for electric and water across the city’s entire system. He also serves on the Board of Directors for the Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority. Thanks to Greff, Prague was one of the first OMPA members to adopt a ceiling insulation rebate program.

He has helped the city to bi-annually become certified in OMPA’s Competitive Utility Program, which includes a reward of $20,000. Greff has worked to formulate a responsible electric rate for his utility, while continuing to provide Prague’s customers with the service that comes from having a locally-owned utility.

State Question 779 (continued from page 1)

facts and the rest of the story, you realize it is really a ‘wormy’ apple that you are better off staying away from.

On behalf of OML, MESO, CMAO and MCTFOA, we respectfully ask that you look at all the issues as you consider how to vote on Tuesday, November 8th. As for me, I will be voting ‘NO’!
From Public Power Weekly: Leading Through Extremes with Capt. Mark Kelly

Capt. Mark Kelly has been at the helm of four missions in space and led teams in extreme conditions. What does success come down to? Teamwork and keeping your cool. If space wasn’t extreme enough, Kelly’s wife — former Congresswoman Gabby Giffords — was shot in 2011. Kelly was at her side and his support captivated the nation. The space commander and husband-in-chief talked with Public Power Weekly in before his keynote at the American Public Power Association’s National Conference in June.

Your support of your wife, former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, captivated the nation. How can we all make sure we are available to support our loved ones while still showing up and doing our best at our jobs?

That’s hard. When Gabby was shot, I was living in the hospital for a month or two. I wasn’t doing my job, I actually left my job temporarily. Initially I thought it was permanently. You need to do the best you can and get as much support you can from the people around you. I think it’s important not to make rash decisions, especially when it comes to situations like that — situations that can change very quickly. When you have someone sick or injured in the hospital, things can change quickly and you just need to take your time to make those decisions about your career. And I think in my case, this is a personal situation, my wife Gabby was always very supportive of what I did. So in making those decisions, I certainly considered what her opinion would be even though she couldn’t articulate it at the time.

If you had to pick one thing that you learned in space that leaders can apply to their daily lives, what would it be?

It’s teamwork — by far. Accomplishing difficult goals like these incredibly complex space missions cannot be done by individuals. There is just no way. Building a team that works very well together is so critical in accomplishing these difficult goals.

There’s a lot that goes into that — it starts with picking the right people, people who work together well. This is a difficult environment to be in, so one of the things we find very important is conflict resolution. You’re living in close quarters and it’s very stressful.

As a commander of a space shuttle mission, I get some say over who my other crew members are. Finding the right mix of personalities and the right kind of people with the right kind of skills that function better as a team than as individuals, at least from my perspective, is the most important thing.

(see CAPT. MARK KELLY, page 8)
MESO has recognized the Tahlequah Public Works Authority (TWPA), which serves the City of Tahlequah, including Northeastern Oklahoma State University, and the City of Siloam Springs, and Siloam Springs Electric, the city’s electric department, for electric operations and reliability.

“These two utilities typically identified, responded to, and corrected a power outage problem in less than one hour on average,” said MESO General Manager Tom Rider. “By having local ownership of the electric system and crews located within a few miles of most customers, customers don’t wait long for electric service crews.”

TWPA earned first in the association’s annual Electric Operations and Reliability Competition. The utility was recognized in the category for cities with a population of more than 10,000 and cited for having the highest reported level of service reliability for cities within the region. The utility reported an Average System Availability Index of 99.9935 percent in 2015.

Siloam Springs Electric was recognized for Outstanding Achievement for cities with a population of more than 10,000 population and reported an Average System Availability Index of 99.9923.

Employees at both utilities meet the requirements of their work with professionalism and safety due to employer efforts. These efforts include four years of rigorous field experience and testing for each line worker before he achieves journey lineworker status. Additionally, they receive continuing education as participants in the MESO Job Training and Safety program.

“As an association, we appreciate our member utilities who participate in our annual reliability competition,” Rider said. “When you look to identify outstanding, successful utilities, there are several things to consider including service reliability. “Outstanding service is what is expected from customers,” Rider added. “This is made possible by two primary factors, first investing in your system, your people and recordkeeping and the second is local ownership which means local control and decision-making. The result is fast response, and fast response means less outage time.”
Underground Distribution Workshop Draws Large Group

MESO and Edmond Electric recently presented Underground Distribution Workshop at the Bob Waterson Memorial Training Field in Edmond to nearly 25 lineworkers.

The two-day workshop combined classroom instruction, field practice, and significant time working with experienced, journeyman lineman. Participants were given information about line design, maintenance, and fault finding and repair.

This training session was part of MESO’s Electric Supervisor Development (ESD) Program. For information about MESO Job Training & Safety Programs, contact Tom Dougherty, MESO’s Director of Training & Safety at tomd@meso.org.

PARTICIPANTS
Ivan Babb and Mitchell Darnell, City of Altus
Darrel Suffell and Paul Staehle, City of Collinsville
Jace Ogdem, Jacob Schroder, and Kyle Williams, City of Cushing
Braxton Galbraith, Clinton Hodge, and Daniel Ketch, Edmond Electric
Roderick McNeil, Ryan Walker, and Wayne Dunham, Hope Light and Water
Aaron Turner and Kyle Sommer, City of Miami
Daryl Fenski and Greg Carlin, City of Monett
Travis Willis, Pryor Municipal Utility Board
Jay Case and Jeremy Price, Ponca City Energy
Joe Spoon and Robert Reeves, City of Tecumseh
William Hatman, Wynnewood City Utilities Authority

INSTRUCTORS
Tom Dougherty, MESO
Travis Sallee, Edmond Electric
Jason Crowe, Green Equipment Company

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MUNICIPAL ELECTRIC SYSTEMS OF OKLAHOMA
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What is the backbone of a strong team dynamic, regardless of what industry you’re working in?

I’d say the backbone is the person in charge — how do they manage this group of people? I for one am somebody who wants my people to not be afraid of making mistakes, as long as they’re not critical mistakes that affect safety. Having said that, we practice what we’re going to do in space a lot in simulators on the ground for hundreds, if not thousands of hours. Some space shuttle commanders probably don’t like it when their people make mistakes, even in the simulator — I prefer it.

As you’re training for a mission, making mistakes early is better than making them in space. I look for people who kind of lean forward and don’t mind asking for forgiveness. I’d rather have the person who feels comfortable asking for forgiveness than the person who feels comfortable asking for permission.

The people who push the envelope and make things happen, I want those people on my team. I think you can build a more effective work environment when you have people who are willing to take a little bit of a risk.

What can utility leaders do to make their teams stronger? What are some practical tips for team building?

I’ve flown on the space shuttle four separate times and for each one of these missions we did team-building exercises. More recently, we started using an organization called the National Outdoor Leadership School — NOLS. We put people in stressful environments to give them the opportunity to practice leadership and followership, things like decision-making, types of leadership and conflict resolution. It’s something that we spend a lot of time thinking about and practicing, whether we’re practicing it in a tent in the mountains or in the space shuttle simulator or in the Arctic in Canada.

We do spend a lot of time and effort in trying to develop the qualities in the team that are essential to a good outcome in doing something very difficult. We also study this whole issue of team dynamics and expedition behavior, how people behave when they get under stress. It’s something, as an astronaut — especially as the commander of a space shuttle mission — that I think about a lot. People resolve conflict and deal with conflict in many different ways.

You have people who tend to elevate conflict to arguments and disputes. You have other people that withdraw. We find it’s good to try to identify conflict early and try to reduce it by talking through it and being completely open about it. It’s important that leaders have those skills to work through problems among team members.

You have led teams in extreme conditions — for utility workers, outages or electrical emergencies can get stressful, chaotic and even life-threatening. What’s your No. 1 tip for leading in a high-stress situation?

I think it’s really important that the person in charge in a high-stress situation remains calm and thoughtful and driven by the data that’s out there — the facts and not the emotions. When people are under a lot of stress, they tend to make a decision just to make a decision. You don’t always need to do that. NASA’s first flight director, a man named Chris Kraft, used to say when you don’t know what to do, don’t do anything. I always kind of took that to heart, it’s better to have the right answer than to have a quick answer.
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