

Chris Courtwright: Good afternoon. Today is February 9, 2024 in the afternoon, and we're in the historic House Chamber at the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka. I'm Chris Courtwright who served for thirty-four years working as an economist in the Kansas Legislature and its nonpartisan research department before retiring in 2020. For full disclosure, Governor Kelly appointed me shortly thereafter to her bipartisan Council on Tax Reform, and I currently serve as a board member for a bipartisan 501(c)4 public-policy based organization known as Kansans First.

Today, I'm privileged to interview former Representative Richard Carlson who has had a long, distinguished, and very fascinating career in public service. He proudly served in the Kansas Army National Guard and also spent twelve years as a Pottawatomie County commissioner prior to his election to the Statehouse in 2004. In addition to serving as a Republican member of the Kansas Legislature from the 2005 through 2014 sessions representing the St. Mary's vicinity, he was a legislative liaison for the Kansas Department of Revenue for a couple of years and then in 2016 was appointed as the Kansas Secretary of Transportation, which of course, is considered one of the more important cabinet-level positions.

Since 2019, he has been retired from the public sector, but I gather has continued to stay busy ranching. Richard is a proud Wildcat who graduated from Kansas State with a degree in economics. Did I get most of that right?

Richard Carlson: Correct. I think so. A degree in economics with a minor in business there. Then I went on to a couple of years later to graduate school in banking at the University in Colorado, Boulder.

CC: Okay. This interview with Mr. Carlson is conducted on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and significant leaders in state government, particularly those who served during the 1960s and subsequent decades. The interviews will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, [ksoralhistory.org](https://ksoralhistory.org), and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible as a result of the generosity of KOHP donors. Former House Speaker pro tem David Heinemann is the videographer for today.

Richard, during your decade in the legislature, you served on quite a number of committees, including Agriculture; Economic Development; Pensions, Investments, and Benefits; Federal and State Affairs; Insurance and Financial Institutions; and Redistricting, to name just a few. But you also spent quite a bit of time on probably the two most prominent House committees, Taxation and Appropriations. I think in a few minutes, we're going to want to delve into these latter two in particular, if that makes sense.

RC: Fine.

CC: Before we do jump into your legislative career and committee work and big issues and whatnot, let's get into some additional background. Are you a native Kansan? If not, when did your family move here?

RC: Well, to start off, Chris, I served with you for a long time in your legislative research. Your history may be more fascinating than mine itself. But you've done a terrific job for the state of Kansas, and we appreciate that.

I didn't have anybody really in politics in my family. My mother and father were definitely not political. The only thing that I do recall them telling me that they always voted in every election, and you had no right to complain unless you voted. But neither one served in any capacity, either locally or statewide.

I did have a granddad that passed away when I was six. He served twenty-some years as school board treasurer at the local school board. That's the only involvement in politics that we had. I had a father-in-law that was appointed county clerk before I ever knew him. He did that a few years. So I really didn't have that much involvement in politics growing up.

CC: So in one sense, you were a trailblazer in your family then.

RC: Some might call it that. It depends on what you might want to call it, I guess.

CC: But I think it's fair to say you had been successful in the private sector for some years before you decided to run for the Pottawatomie County Commission in the early nineties. What were some of the issues at that time that prompted you to get involved at that level of politics?

RC: Well, before I guess we get into the County Commissioner end of it, I started out in the National Guard and went to their Officer Candidate School. I got called to active duty for two years during Vietnam. I also was at headquarters a company commander for a period of months, Fort Carson, Colorado, and then was a general's aide for the assistant division commander for the remainder of my term. [General John Breidenthal](#) was the general I was aide for from Kansas City. That introduced this farm boy to a whole different world. The general's life is a lot different than a private's life or a second lieutenant's life. So that was quite an experience all on its own.

And then after that, of course, I was in banking for a number of years, worked for Commerce Bank in Kansas City some, and then once I got out of there, we bought a little bank in western Kansas on credit, and ran that for a while, and then moved back to Topeka and stayed in the financial institution business. But then we got involved in Burger Kings, but we also got involved in raising Texas longhorn cattle, registered cattle. That's about '79 or '80, 1980.

That was my introduction to politics. I guess that's a long story. I'm trying to make it a little shorter. Someone nominated me to be the national treasurer at a national convention, given my banking background, I guess. So I accepted and ran for it. That wasn't really a run. You were just appointed basically to that job.

So then I ran for second vice president. Then I ran for president. Then when I ran for president itself, it was the most contentious election they've had in many, many years. There were two of us—a very wealthy Texas oilman and me as a Kansas farmer. So, anyway, we ended up having a very close election, and I had a thousand-some votes. I won by twenty votes.

CC: Oh, wow.

RC: So that was my introduction to politics. I stayed with that for about eight years total in terms of elected offices there. Then I stayed on their board for twenty years until I was elected to the legislature. Then I resigned from that Longhorn Board because it conflicted with their annual meetings.

But in-between, that's when I wasn't really deciding what to do, that's when the County Commission piqued my interest. We had a commissioner that had been there twelve years. I ran against the incumbent for twelve years, and I did win. I think it surprised us both perhaps. So then I spent twelve years and three more elections with the County Commission. That was a great experience.

CC: It would have been from 1992, when you got elected to 2004, when you ran for the legislature. I do want to get back into your days on the County Commission here in just a second. But I wanted to ask you during the years I knew you when we both had offices here in the Statehouse, I seem to recall that you had a picture prominently displayed on the wall of your office with you standing alongside of a fairly recognizable national political figure from here in Kansas. Was that just a vanilla-flavored fundraiser, or was there any kind of interesting back story there?

RC: Probably no interesting back story. I think it was an ALEC [American Legislative Exchange Council] meeting in Washington for legislative policy, and several of us had our pictures taken with Senator Jerry Moran who still hasn't built my bridge across the—Belvue River Bridge. So I'm going to have to contact him here again about that.

CC: Exactly. Okay. I imagine when you were sitting on the County Commission in 2002, 2003, and all state revenue-sharing programs that helped with local property tax relief were suspended in the wake of the 9/11 recession, that must have been upsetting as a county commissioner. Was there any frustration from that that prompted you to run for the legislature, or was it more generally some sort of frustration with what was happening in Topeka?

RC: Well, actually I remember when it happened. They quit doing the LAVTRF or something like that, the initials, but it was not a significant part of our budget. I don't think we even noticed when it wasn't paid. I was more upset with the county association, the statewide association, the [Kansas Association of Counties](#), actually with some of the positions they had taken that were mainly big city issues and not rural issues. So we actually dropped out of the county association for a period of several years and then rejoined later.

No, I had no problem at all as long as it was uniform across the state, as long as they didn't pick out any single county or county commission, I didn't really have any problem at all with it. I believed in limited government. I liked the fact that we had a good tax base in Pottawatomie County. We were fortunate. We still are fortunate there. We didn't notice it.

CC: Okay. Were you approached initially by party officials encouraging you to run for the legislature? Or was it your own decision to sort of jump into the 2004 race for the legislature?

RC: Perhaps I'd have to think about that a little bit. Probably more than anything, Vern Osborne was my previous legislator. He was down here I think seven years, and he decided to retire. I'd been there going on twelve years. I'd become the institutional knowledge. "Carlson, why did we do this ten years ago?" So I thought, "It's time," and that was actually the main reason I ran. I had three main opponents I think for that open seat when I first ran.

CC: If I read those twenty-year-old results correctly, it looks like in that 2004 election, you prevailed in a landslide in November against candidates from the Reform and Libertarian Parties, but did not have a Democratic opponent.

RC: That's true. We had a hard primary. I think it was Barb Jones who ran. She was head of the Republican Party here in Pottawatomie County, had a long history. There were two others then that also ran in that race. There were three of us. Barb told me after the election, I think I ended up not in the majority, about 43 percent of the vote, somewhere in there, and her with probably the 30-some percent.

She told me afterwards—and we're still good friends—that "I did everything I possibly could to win this election. Congratulations." That's the way I think elections ought to be ran where partisan, whether opposite party or people in your own party, don't mudsling. Stay straight with your public and run a positive campaign on your own.

CC: Absolutely. In this three-way primary in August 2004 in the GOP that you're discussing, were there forums or debates? Do you recall what some of the hot issues were when there were three of you running for the GOP nomination to the 61st District?

RC: We had a number of forums, I think. I don't remember what the hot issues might have been back then. I think we ran on our own record of where we've been, if it was limited government or not limited government. It was a positive campaign as far as I know with about everyone that was in that one. Now the 2012 got a little different.

CC: Yes, we're going to get there. Once you got up here to Topeka, even though Republicans enjoyed healthy legislative majorities, you served during your first six years under Democratic governors, first [Kathleen Sebelius](#) and then Mark Parkinson. How would you characterize your own relationship with them? How effective do you think they were in terms of dealing with the legislature, its competing ideologies, and the whole separation of powers thing?

RC: A lot of subject matter to cover there. Of course, the first two years, the 2005 session and the 2006 session as a freshman, basically you have no interaction with the governor. Once you get into leadership positions, yes, you have some. So I really have no memories of working with the governors during that period of time.

Later when I became Vice Chair of Tax and Chair of Tax, I basically still had no interaction with the Governor's Office. It was all with the Senate and the House in terms of negotiations. I think Kathleen Sebelius was a very astute politician.

CC: I know that especially during your early years, you were a big supporter of the Second Amendment. You have mentioned being on Fed and State Affairs [committee], that became one of your key issues. You often carried bills out here on the floor relating to guns and making sure there wasn't going to be a lot of state effort to further regulate them. Is that correct?

RC: That's correct. I had basically, I think any legislator needs to specialize somewhat within their interest. If you try to deal with every issue that comes up and speak to every issue at the well, many legislators have a tendency not to listen to you. If you only go up and talk at the well when you have something to say that's important to the bill—so I carried most of the tax bills. I think I carried basically all of the Second Amendment bills from 2006 through maybe 2010. They weren't all my bills. They were bills that some other people have come in—as a matter of fact, when I quit carrying them, my work load got too busy, I had a freshman legislator came up to me and said, "I understand in talking to other legislators, I want to run a Second Amendment bill, but nothing's going to happen unless you give the okay." I said, "Well, I wish I had that kind of power, but I don't. So the legislature will pass what the will of the body is. Unless you get sixty-two other people to agree with down here, you have nothing."

So I explained that to him, and he went on, and I think was successful with it, but the bill that I got, the main one that I carried, was in 2006. Gary Hayzlett was my predecessor and my very good friend and still is to this day. He went back to being a County Commissioner again. Anyway, Gary carried on with the concealed carry for a number of years and was unable to get it passed. Or if he got it passed, it was vetoed by both Republican and Democrat governors.

When I came in 2005, I ran it again, and of course, Gary was in charge of it, and it passed, and we also overrode, I think, the governor's veto on that bill, too. So it became law.

In 2006, I was very interested in the Castle Doctrine and the extension of using reasonable force against force in anywhere you have a right to be. So I contacted Marion Hammer in Florida who was the past president of the NRA and asked her if she would send me the information on what had passed in Florida so I could take a look at it and see how we could adapt it to the state of Kansas, and she did. We rewrote it to be more compatible with our state statutes, and we did that.

[Mike O'Neal](#) was the Judiciary Chairman at the time. It passed the House, but he actually got it into a conference committee report. That's how it went through. He got part of it in. The next year, he got the rest of it through. We had to adjust it a couple of times because legally it had some ramifications that we needed to change, and we got those done.

The other one, which was probably— don't know if it's interesting or not—we had a pastor in Wichita that was fined or arrested trying to board an airplane with a four-inch pocket knife that had a thumb opening on it. So I ran a bill that would legalize and update our knife laws in the state of Kansas. That went through. It was, I won't say "contentious," but it had its opposition, and we passed that, and it became law. Later, I didn't even know it, but there is a National Knife

Rights Association, and I won their Legislator of the Year award for passing that bill, and they presented that to me in a Sportsman Caucus in North Carolina, I think it was.

Then there were several other minor bills. The constitutional carry and all those came after me. I didn't carry those bills.

CC: Understood. We're going to get into your time as Tax Chair here in just a few minutes. Before we jump back into your days on Tax and Appropriations, I want to finish up a little bit with your electoral history here. You were in a safely reliable red district, if memory serves, and maybe didn't always have an opponent. I don't know if there's anything worth recalling about any of your re-election campaigns in 2006 through 2010, but in 2012, this was after reapportionment, and the new map ended up pitting you against another incumbent. Is that correct?

RC: That's correct. If you want me to expand on that, I would be glad to, Chris.

CC: I think that's why we're here today.

RC: Trent LeDoux was the incumbent from District 50, and then there was also a jeweler from Holton, and myself, but what was never really discussed, there was a young doctor from Holton that had signed up to be a candidate on that election, but he wanted to run against Trent LeDoux.

Well, when the courts stepped in and we had like from Friday noon to Monday noon or something like that to actually refile for a district—I didn't have to because it included the district—I picked up all of that county, Jackson County, except one small township in the northeast corner. Of course, I lost a little bit of Pottawatomie County and Wabaunsee County. Mainly, half of it was a district for me.

The young doctor who has become a very good friend is a super-bright, young individual and has done an excellent job in the professional field. I knew he would probably be my primary opponent, and he would also split the vote too many ways.

So I called him up and we met and visited. I said, "I intend to run." He said, "I wanted to run, too, against Trent." And I'm paraphrasing here. I don't mean to misquote him by any means. He asked me, "Do you intend to run?" I said, "Yes, and if I run, I will win." I said, "But I would like for you to be my Jackson County Chairman."

He agreed to do that and was very supportive throughout it. He had had a doctor lined up to cover his practice. I had hoped he would come back into politics when I retired, but he said he just couldn't. He was a super younger guy, and I wish he'd get reinvented in politics. We need people like that.

But, at any rate, we did have a what you'd call a candidate forum in Rock Creek School District, and all of us were there except him, of course. One of the candidates came up to me in the room behind and said, "Richard, I've been door to door in every door in Pottawatomie County. They're tired of you. They're just tired. I'm going to get elected." I said, "Well, that's fine. We'll

see on Election Day.” I smiled, and we went out and did our candidate forum. I think in the final vote, he got 18 percent of the vote out of both districts.

So it was interesting. Trent LeDoux had a lot of health problems when he was here in the legislature for a couple of years. I know that probably affected him, too. He had other troubles later on.

CC: We’re going to get into your time as Tax Chair shortly, but I wanted to ask you a little about simultaneously being on Appropriations and what both a challenge and an opportunity that must have been. I know that back in the eighties and nineties, there was sort of an informal House rule that members who served on Appropriations could not also chair another committee. But during your last four years, during the 2011 to 2014 sessions, you not only chaired House Tax but also were on Appropriations. I’m guessing this was because you were one of Speaker [Mike] O’Neal’s top lieutenants. I always thought it gave you the unique ability to understand both the expenditure and revenue sides of the equation, frankly, and I was not sad to see that the old precedent had kind of been abandoned. I imagine it was a huge time commitment on your part to be so heavily involved on both fronts during that time.

RC: Well, during the tax season, not the federal income tax but our tax season here in the legislature, when it really got busy was, of course, normally in the middle of the session when you’re trying to do conference committee reports, whatever, it was good to know what was going on, what budgets were being considered, and the dollar amounts in Appropriations.

Now, I attended all their meetings, but I was not in leadership of any sort in the Appropriations Committee, more so just from the standpoint of gaining the insight of where that committee was going. I may not have known the actual dollar amounts that they would end up appropriating, but I could see at least the daylight of where the proximity they would be and what I would need to also do then back in the Tax Committee and how to handle that.

The Tax Committee got very taxing towards the end of those sessions in 2010 and ’12. I recall nights when we left here at 1:30, 2:30 in the morning. I was telling my granddaughter earlier that I went to sleep in the car at 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning down in the parking lot. My wife drove down from St. Mary’s and brought me clean clothes so I could start session the next morning. So that didn’t happen often, but it happened.

CC: Yes, sir, it did.

RC: Of course, you were there, too, for all of that. You had to go home and generally write up everything when we finished. Those were good years in terms of being able to see what was going on both in Appropriations and Tax. I think I understand the philosophy behind it and agree with it.

CC: Yes. Well, as you mentioned, you did chair the powerful Tax Panel 2009 through 2014 sessions during some fairly interesting times. We know that Governor [Sam] Brownback had gotten elected in 2010 and was still settling in during 2011. So there weren’t too many tax changes that he pushed in that initial year.

But 2012, as we will recall, was a different story. He rather famously proposed some dramatic changes to the state's tax code in 2012, and many of those ended up getting enacted. There were some parliamentary maneuvering over in the Senate, of course, and to be fair to the governor, we should point out that the final version that landed on his desk was not exactly the version that he preferred. He did sign it into law, and the great self-described [Tax Experiment](#) was off and running.

What are some of your memories from 2012? Arthur Laffer, the famous economist, was flown into the state as a special consultant. Did I remember that correctly?

RC: I assume that's correct. I remember him being here, and he spoke to us at our caucus in the Old Supreme Court Room and visited with us about the different tax laws and the tax ramifications, I guess. He spoke to us for probably about an hour or so.

Back to the bill itself, the bill was considerably different when it got to the governor's desk. I had worked with the bill and had gone with the negotiations with Les Donovan who was a member at that time of Senate Tax. Les is an absolute gentleman. I enjoyed working with Les every year that I worked with him. If I shook his hand, that's the way that it was, and there was no backing up or changing his mind. He was a good guy, although I used to kid him at every meeting. I said I want to count my fingers with a used car dealer before I started negotiating with him. But he really was, and I enjoyed working with him a lot.

But the tax bill that we originally sent over was considerably different than the bill that the Senate passed. We had limits on the individual corporations filing as individuals with \$100,000 limits on those instead of open-ended, which I think ended up being a major mistake because I think a lot more people apparently moved to that than apparently what the Department of Revenue believed there would be.

So the bill didn't have a lot of other things in it. We went back and forth with the Senate. Les would try and come up with a proposal. I would come up with counterproposals. We worked those different ones back and forth. Les would take it over. It wouldn't pass. He'd come back, and pretty much the same over here although Les said, "You go run it on the House side. You can pass anything you want over there in the House." I said, "Les, that is not true."

We finally ended up I guess with one. It would have gone to the Senate first. The Senate then, and I can't speak for any of the leadership of the Senate. That's just from my perspective. They thought that they weren't going to pass any major tax reform from my perspective. So I think more than anything, they just opened it up on the floor and let it run, and we had ultraconservatives add amendments to it. They had other people add amendments to it. It became a hodgepodge that was really unsustainable, and I think we all knew it, but it was the only thing that passed the Senate.

And that's when the governor [Sam Brownback] came and spoke to our caucus and said, "I told the Senate unless they revise that bill and revise it down to where it's sustainable, I will sign it." Well, it hadn't passed the House yet. That ended up being a whole different story, too.



Finally after the governor talked to us and others, the House—I made the motion as well to concur with the Senate. That’s the first time I’ve seen Speaker [Mike] O’Neal have to bring down the gavel hard because it got very contentious, not so much from the opposing party as much as our own party. We went in to debate for forty-four minutes, and one of the Rules Chairs, Lance Kinzer, kept track of how long you can be in debate to shut it off. At the end of the forty-five minutes, he shut it down, and we closed it.

So that’s how it got there. I knew very well that it was not going to be a sustainable deal, not with many of the provisions that were put into it because they just weren’t [sustainable]. The dependent rates were very high in it, so were limitations. I think one of the bills that I originally sent over would only reduce the income tax rate, which I was in favor of reducing, but [only] if the revenues were high enough to reduce it with. And you [Chris] and Gordon [Self] I think tried to write that formula which turned out to be a nightmare somewhere.

But anyway it came and it became law. Then, of course, go ahead if you have more.

CC: Following up on that, I noticed you used the word “unsustainable” a couple of times, and another way of saying that is I think it’s fair to say that because the fiscal impact of that 2012 legislation turned out to be more costly than some of that law’s proponents may have hoped, the legislature then for over a period of years seemed to have spending cuts, so-called smoke and mirrors budget gimmicks, and even backfilling tax increases on the table pretty much annually for the next five years.

On this latter approach of backfilling tax hikes, you were still around in 2013 and had to preside over getting that legislation across the finish line here in the House. I seem to recall that the Democrats were not eager to help to bail the governor out at that point. So that particular 2013 tax increase had to be enacted almost exclusively with GOP votes. That 2013 bill had a sales tax increase and reductions in both itemized and standard deductions from the income tax as among its most controversial features. I imagine the challenge for you and leadership must have been getting anti-tax Republicans, especially a number of nervous freshman who may have gotten elected initially in 2012 to vote for this. Is that—

RC: A pretty accurate representation, Chris. I believe that’s a session that we were here for almost three weeks or something close to that in conference committees. We met in rooms downstairs and had charts on the walls and about everything you can imagine. I even met once with the Senate. I think it was that session. I’m not positive. Well, yes. Ray Merrick was Speaker, and Ray and I got along very well. I had a lot of respect for him.

Anyway, we were in the President’s Office of the Senate, and there were five or six senators around the table and just me representing Tax from the House. Ray was sitting over to the side. I looked around the room. There was the Vice President, and there was the Tax person. I think it was Caryn Tyson at the time. The President of the Senate now was there, [Susan Wagle](#) was there, too, who was then president.

I just looked around the table and I said, “Who am I negotiating with? Is it you? Is it you?” I went around to each one of them at the table. And then I kind of smiled and I said, “I realize the Senate is just trying to make it fair.” That’s how we started the negotiations on that one.

Some things are so terribly serious that you need some levity in the conversation to break that silence and get people to start thinking. So I think that helped. We worked on that for numerous days. Actually, Susan Wagle really helped me on that on finding the final solution to that. Earlier we had had KDOT funds in it, and I never was a proponent of taking KDOT funds, but I had to find some other way to balance that tax budget. I think I ran one bill here, I got like forty-two votes, it didn’t pass earlier on. I knew that I had to find another one, and I had to find a bill that had enough in it that both the moderates and the conservatives in the House would support, that neither one of them liked. That’s where you’ve got to be in some of those situations when you’re in a corner.

So I visited with Susan Wagle privately, and she mentioned the dependent level, and I think it was raised like triple what it was raised originally in the original bill, which was hundreds of millions of dollars. So I had [Legislative] Research do the numbers on it, and we were able to do that and tweak a few other things at least. There were more [things] that I would have liked to have done, but I didn’t think it was physically possible at that time with the body that we had here to get sixty-three votes. So I brought it back with those deals with no KDOT funds being taken out of it, and it passed without a problem at all.

CC: I always thought it was clever because you had this challenge of getting people to vote for what at that time was a tax increase in 2013, again sort of a backfilling tax increase. The [Glide-Path-to-Zero formula](#) was put in that bill. My impression was that was a shrewd move politically on behalf of you maybe and legislative leadership because at least if you could get people to vote temporarily for some tax increases, they could say that ultimately they had voted for the final repeal of the income tax, right? This Glide-Path-to-Zero formula was going to trigger four or five years out and begin dialing down the income tax rates.

RC: And it was only dialed down when revenues were sufficient, I think, too. It didn’t just automatically dial them down. So, yes, that was I’m sure part of it. And I explained to people, too, when we started it that there’s no misconceptions here. This bill is unsustainable. We will have to modify it. Don’t look at it as a tax increase. Look at it as making it sustainable. Until I took the KDOT out, they didn’t believe me. But they believed me after that.

CC: We’ll get back into the tax things in just a second, but I want to note that your last two sessions here in this body in 2013 and 2014 were characterized by a number of new faces on the scene, especially over on the Senate side of the rotunda where there had been some hotly contested primaries in 2012. Do you have any recollections as to the overall legislative dynamics, and how they may have shifted in your final two years in the House?

RC: Certainly, there was a lot more cooperation with the Senate President and the House Speaker. I think they got along. There’s always the friction of we’re the Senate and we’re the House, and you’ll always have that. But I do think there was more cooperation between the two bodies. It became a lot easier for a lot of the legislation to pass.

CC: Okay. During your last session in 2014, the state's financial coffers were still struggling financially, but it was an election year, of course, and tax cuts were going to be high on the list of priorities. Since the state really didn't have any wiggle room, I thought it a little interesting that lawmakers instead opted to repeal the mortgage registration tax, which went almost exclusively to counties. The Kansas Association of Counties I'm guessing was not happy with that. Did you ever get any pushback from them or from any of your former colleagues in County Commission circles?

RC: Probably, but I don't recall specifically. Yes, that was an issue. There was no doubt about it. I had visited with our County Commissioners and County Clerks and different offices in the county and knew most of them in my county because I had served with a lot of them.

CC: Sure.

RC: It was somewhat contentious, but it went away relatively calmly.

[audio troubles]

CC: You opted not to run again in 2014 and instead took a job for a time over at the Department of Revenue as one of their legislative liaisons, a role which you, of course, were quite suited for, given your years of chairing the Tax Committee. Why did you not run again in 2014? Was it just that you had your ten years in? Or was it time to move on and try something else?

RC: I think it was a combination of everything—age. You get tired. There's a lot of heavy responsibility, and it wears on you on time after time. I was turning seventy years old. I thought it was time to retire.

CC: Okay. While you were over at Revenue, back to the Tax stuff, right? You're still in the middle of it, albeit across the street, and policymakers in 2015 had to enact yet another backfilling tax increase with pretty much only Republican votes, the same kind of challenge that was there in 2013. And I know the 2015 session was one that languished all the way until late June. There was another sales tax increase, a cigarette tax hike, and a postponement of some income tax cuts that had been set in 2013 to help get that previous measure across the finish line.

As we've said, you were no longer tax chairman in 2015 and instead were across the street, but I'm guessing your job remained pretty much the same in that you were having to help round up votes to get this legislation across the finish line and working in this case on behalf of the governor directly to do this. Do you have any recollections of 2015?

RC: Well, first, I think you guessed wrong. It is a totally different atmosphere.

CC: Okay.

RC: Going from the legislature, you have one vote, and I never tried to influence people on how they vote. I spoke at the well and encouraged people to follow that line of thought on the topic,

but working for the Department of Revenue was a totally different picture. I was visiting with legislators. I was also promoting a budget I didn't write. I mean, whether I agreed with it or not, I didn't write that, not the budget, but the tax bills. And so it was very difficult for me to work with them, and I did, but I found at the time that I would not like to be a lobbyist. It's a fine profession, but it takes a unique individual to do that.

So I worked with them a lot. There are certain things when you come from the legislature you know aren't going to pass the legislature.

CC: Yes.

RC: Cigarette tax, some of those types of items. It was difficult, but I did enjoy it, and it certainly wasn't anywhere near the high-pressure job that being Tax Chairman was.

CC: It sounds like the change of perspective has started.

RC: Yes.

CC: Then, of course, in 2016, Governor Brownback appointed you to be Secretary of Transportation, one of the most prominent and powerful cabinet-level positions in state government, where you continued to serve until the end of the Brownback-Colyer term in 2019. Before we leave the tax talk aside, the third and sort of final backfilling tax increase enacted in the wake of the original 2012 law occurred in 2017. At that time lawmakers in both parties approved a bill that repealed the non-wage business exemption that you mentioned earlier and also restored the three-bracket system that had been reduced to two individual tax brackets. Even though the governor vetoed that measure, legislators subsequently overrode his veto with two-thirds majorities in both chambers.

As KDOT Secretary, I would imagine that your perspective had shifted a little by this point in time. Were you at all surprised that the veto was overridden in 2017? Was one side of you worried about ongoing raids on the so-called Bank of KDOT if they had not done so?

RC: That's kind of a hard question to answer I guess without some thought. Being a Secretary of KDOT, the Department of Transportation, I mean, it's a huge agency. We had 2,300, 2,400 employees throughout the state of Kansas. We did so many different things from small airports to short-line railroads. We helped finance grants for both of those types of institutions. So they're all important to us.

But my perspective was much, more more so in the Department of Transportation, not what was going on here on the legislative side. I got questions a lot when I was out in public speaking as KDOT, what about, are they going to do a new transportation plan? How will this affect the transportation? And my answer was generally always the amount of funding that comes to KDOT is subject to legislature approval. Whatever they decide to appropriate is what we will work with and we will make it work somehow. Would we like more? Yes, but that is the way the system is supposed to work.

So it was not a contentious relationship at all in terms of what the legislature was doing, whether they had approved a plan or not approved a plan. It takes tons of money to keep the road system up in the state of Kansas. And we have a good road system here today.

CC: Yes. Tell us a little more about your [tenure leading KDOT](#). Certainly as you've alluded to it, it must have been a challenge to lead an agency, presiding over so many of the state's critical infrastructure issues for nearly three years. You're there from 2016 to 2019. In addition to highways, there's short-line railroads. There's all these other transportation modes. Can you give us a flavor for the big picture and some of the issues you were dealing with during this time?

RC: Of course, most of our funding went to highways without a doubt, repairing or extending or improving highways. We completed the freeway project between Lawrence and Kansas City, which was a major improvement there for four lanes. We also completed the whole intersection and bypasses down in Kansas City there with I-35, I-435, and all of those through there which was a major bottleneck with 165,000 cars per day even then going through that intersection. So those were very, very much needed projects.

Of course, you always have the Highway 177 between Alta Vista and Manhattan. Those types of highways, 10,000 miles out there, and of which probably 9,000 or 8,000 at least are those types of highways. They're two-lanes. They don't have very much shoulder. They don't have enough right-of-way. You have to widen them to making the sloping shoulders that you'd like. So they take a lot of money to actually improve. And I think they finally just finished up the one on 77 going to Wamego.

So those are projects that you involved in and it's all over the state, whether it's in Dodge City providing four lanes in a certain area going through where you have a lot of extra traffic or whether it's Highway 400 going through the Wichita area down to Pittsburg with 69 traffic.

Pittsburg [State] University has always been a high proponent of getting a four-lane all the way from Kansas City down to them. I think it's been a very high profile subject for that town. So we've worked with them on numerous occasions. We've worked with Northeast Kansas, met with a lot of the different district engineers. Every year, they'd put together a plan of what needed to be improved in their district, what needed to be rebuilt if it's a highway. Highways need to be built, just repairs in general, bridges. We had massive programs going on in Wichita with Kellogg and the turnpike and exit and also on the west side with I think it was Highway 254, one of those roads that went around that way. We placed several bridges over there plus four-lane work.

As those cities grow, you've got to be able to grow with them. And so you do that. And then not only that, but I mentioned earlier that we were also involved in a much less dollar amount with aviation in the state of Kansas. We may have a \$6 million, \$8 million dollar budget, not a \$300 million budget for aviation. But you take a little airport in Lakin, Kansas, for instance. The county that has really no funds to build a little airport. They have a huge meat-packing plant nearby in Garden City with 5 thousand, 6 thousand employees over there that need hospital care and that type of thing. So it was important to improve their airport.

So we would give out grants, and not all of them small, anywhere from \$20,000 probably to \$250,000, that would help some small airports, whether it was to light the airport runways, to improve runways, make them longer. There's tons of little airports throughout Kansas that you don't believe that are there. I think it's Marysville or Belleville, in that area, that airport there, and it really needed some improvements because what was happening—there was also at that small town a small hospital. They were flying in doctors from Denver to do surgeries so their patients would not have to be transported a hundred miles away to a different hospital somewhere. So it was extremely important to the economy and to the health and welfare of a lot of the people throughout the state on airports.

The short-line railroads, they make up the gaps throughout the state of Kansas that the main lines don't want to bother with. They're unprofitable for their mode of doing business, not that they're doing business wrong, but they are geared for long runs. They're not geared for short lines. They don't like to have their cars sitting for periods of time, the big railroads, they need them on the move on the railroads. The short lines, they go on to where there's manufacturing or mining or different things going on that they can pick up goods, deliver them, and move them to a different area, just fifty miles away maybe. Not five hundred, but fifty miles or a hundred miles.

So I believe there's four, I think, something like that, I can't recall all the names of them in the state of Kansas of short-line railroads, and they've done very well. We would help them with grants to do improvements in their respective fields. I think it's money well spent.

CC: It sounds to me, Mr. Secretary, that you must have traveled a lot as Secretary. In terms of public speaking and ribbon cutting, were you a Secretary that got out of Topeka and went out for the hands-on approach to oversee some of these projects?

RC: Well, first of all, I'm not an engineer. We hire great engineers. But I do work well with people, I think. And I did a lot of traveling throughout the state of Kansas, I mean at such things that may not have been important to the state of Kansas, but if I had an employee that put in fifty years and was retiring, I think I needed to be there, and I would be there for that employee.

We also had—I had a county meeting one time, and I got up and I gave a talk for thirty minutes and no notes. All the different mileage of Kansas, how many highlights, the budgets, a lot of detail. I asked, "Are there any questions?" at the end of it. A gentleman raised his hand. He stood up, and he said, "I just have one question. How do you remember all of that?"

Well, the memory isn't quite as it was, but I guarantee you that when you work on something every day, and you're interested in what you're working with, we tried not to have more meetings of staff than we needed to. We probably still had too many, but when you have good people, you work with those people, and you let those people do the work, and that was always—it's been my motto in business, in the military, or anywhere else—treat people right, and they will treat you right, and they will do their job.

CC: Yes. You served over at KDOT longer under Governor Colyer than you did Governor Brownback. We haven't really gotten into Governor Colyer as much. Do you have any memories or funny stories of your interactions with him over the years?

RC: He probably has more funny stories about me than I have about him. Not really. He's a great guy to work with. I enjoy his personality. I flew with him on two or three occasions during the time he was governor to different projects we had. He was always interested. But I was more interested in his history and what he was doing in other countries as a medical MD working pro bono, whatever they call it, for free to help people and do plastic surgery and different medical issues that people had. Those people are important in this world.

So the political career—I mean, he got up every morning and went to the doctor's office and sometimes did surgery at 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning before he came to the Capitol, and I think he did a lot of that in the evenings, too. An extremely intelligent individual. I enjoyed working with him.

CC: Again, by way of full disclosure, I would point out that we've, as you mentioned, known one another for many years, and I was a member of your committee staff during the years you served on and chaired Tax. I can honestly say that I have never known a single person who had a bad word to say about you. I always thought that you had this old-school, country-gentleman approach to politics that must have been a little disarming for your political opponents. I'm guessing "Richard the Nice Guy", was that the way you were raised? Has that always been the way that you've dealt with others? Is that correct?

RC: I don't know. I just always had a policy in business or anywhere else of how you treat people and how you work with business and how do you influence decisions. I never ever went to that well and attacked a person personally. I always talked to the issues. Even if I was attacked, I never went there because then I think you lose track of the issue itself that you're trying to promote, and I think people respect you for that.

In terms of what you bring for the well, if there was something in it in a bill that I didn't like and somebody brought it out that I didn't know about, I acknowledged it. I mean, you work with people, not against them. Obviously though you've talked to some of the wrong people apparently in your past, there's got to be a few out there. But, no, I've enjoyed my tenure here. I might tell you one little story if you have time.

CC: Sure.

RC: Mike O'Neal, the Speaker, of course in 2006 or '08 through '10 or '12, '08 through '12, I think it was, the four years. When he first came in, he ran against the sitting Speaker, Melvin Neufeld who I got along with fine. I'd been on the Tax Committee since Day One since I came in the legislature as a freshman. In my second year, Melvin made me Vice Chair with Kenny Wilk which I was happy with, although a side story to that, I did make a remark that I replied—they give you a little sheet of paper saying what position you'd like to be appointed to. I put Chairman of Tax, and I heard—he didn't know I overheard him, but Melvin was talking to somebody in the hallway and said, "That Carlson thinks he can be Chairman of Tax the second time around here and laughed." He was probably right.

But, anyway, then Mike O’Neal ran against Melvin for the second term. And Mike was a great guy. I got along with him great, too, very intelligent, very intelligent, quick-witted, quick-minded, and Mike was trying to get me to support him for Speaker. Melvin was trying to get me to stay with him as Speaker. And I tend to be very loyal. I told Mike, basically I said, “Melvin’s made me Vice Chair of Tax in my second year here. So I can’t complain.” I said, “I will remain neutral, and I won’t campaign against you. If you become elected Speaker, I will support you and be loyal.”

Well, lo and behold, he became Speaker, and I thought, “Well, I’ll probably have my office between the yellow lines out on 10th Street out here, and that will be the end of that.” I don’t know, two or three weeks later, I get a call from Mike asking me to be the Tax Chair. So that to me is the respect that someone has in terms of hopefully your ability and your character. I appreciate that.

CC: I know Richard as a student of politics, you must continue to follow developments at the Statehouse and here in Topeka. Looking back, I guess, a final time at your decade in the legislature and then subsequent service in state government and comparing and contrasting the institutions today with the way they were maybe ten or fifteen years ago, I guess what are some of the biggest differences in your mind, and were those differences generally positive or negative?

RC: I think the national scene probably influences a lot of thinking on that point. And the national scene is really acrimonious. It’s become almost ridiculous in terms of the accusations that go back and forth. Civility to me is still an important factor in governing for the people of Kansas.

I think overall the Kansas House does a very good job of that when you compare it. Now there are times when tempers rise, and there’s heated arguments. I was showing my granddaughter the pictures out on the wall out here with the rifles in their hands of the legislators during the Populist Uprising. I’ve never seen that since I’ve been here, and I don’t see it now.

So some disagreement between parties, between philosophies, whatever, is perfectly acceptable, and I think desirable as long as they’re left polite and with civility with some civility. I think Kansas has a good future and will do that.

CC: Yes, sir. We should note that you served in the legislature with current Governor Kelly when she was in the Senate. Did you have many interactions with her? Were you surprised at all when she initially opted to run for statewide office in 2018?

RC: Not really surprised, I guess. I’ve known Governor Kelly for a number of years. Her Senate district actually overlapped a little bit of my House district for some time. So I knew her reasonably well. We actually agree on some subjects when we go out to forums and so forth.

I do remember kind of a funny story after the election. St. Marys is a very conservative Republican town, very. Anyway, she came up to me and said, “Richard, I only got 20 percent of the vote”—and I’m paraphrasing—“I only got 20 percent of the vote in St. Marys. What can I do



to get more?” and I said, “Laura, I think you did pretty well in St. Marys.” We never had an acrimonious relationship. We certainly didn’t see eye to eye on many issues. But she’s a fine lady.

CC: Anything else you want to add on what the future may hold for you?

RC: I think the good Lord’s in charge of that one at my age now. I’m enjoying what I’m doing. I’m retired. I’ve got all these great-grandchildren around me and a couple sons and their families that have been very successful in their own right. I’m a happy guy.

I’ve been married—it will be fifty-nine years come April. We were married in college. She called me up for a ride home, actually at Emporia State at the time. I was proceeding to be on academic probation at K State, and I transferred to Emporia because a previous principal at St Marys was now at that time the Dean of Business down there, and I called him up. He said, “Come on down, Richard. I’ll get you in down here.”

So he got me in, and I met my future wife down there.

CC: At Emporia.

RC: At Emporia State. She graduated from there. Of course, I went back to K State after we were married. We were married for two years while I was in college and finished up my work there and then had military training and all that in-between different things that we did.

It’s been a different life for me, and I’ve enjoyed every bit of it. She still comments about it. There were seven of us that lived in one house there, and we call it the House of Laughs. She called up, and I answered the phone. It’s all history since then.

But I’ve had a terrific wife for all these years. She’s supported me in everything I’ve done. She’s very independent, very strong-willed in her own right, and I let her do that.

CC: And brought you clothes at 2:00 in the morning when you were sleeping in your car at the Statehouse.

RC: That’s right. We have been I think very good partners for a lifetime. We’re both fortunate.

CC: Absolutely. Well, Mr. Chairman, thank you for being with us here today.

RC: Thank you, Chris. I appreciate it.

CC: Good to see you again here at the Statehouse.

RC: It’s been a pleasure.

[End of File]