

# Opinion



## Letters

### Column sparks interest

To the Colby Free Press:

Thank you for publishing the long letter I wrote as a commentary (in Wednesday's edition).

This evening I received a call from Dorothy Francis. She said she'd read about the 'Notch' in the *Colby Free Press* and wondered if I thought it would be passed this time and what should she do about it so I told her she could write to the chairman and ask for the "Petition to Members of the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate" and that in addition to signing it and sending it back she might also send a copy to Sen. Sam Brownback and to Sen. Pat Roberts as I had done.

I told her that in addition to sending it to them I'd also send a copy to Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, to Kansas Rep. Jim Morrison and to Kansas Sen. Stan Clark. She was told that when she got the petition they'd probably also ask for a donation. Actually what they want is more members so you pay what you feel you can afford.

Probably several petitions would be sent if they were requested: This is the address I gave Dorothy:

George A. Smith, Chairman  
TREA Senior Citizens League  
P.O. Box 97173  
Washington, D.C. 20090-7173

I got the website at: <http://www.tscl.org> and found the telephone number which is: 1-800-333-8725.

I can't say whether or not the bill will pass this time but if individuals from an area or a group of individuals wrote to their congressmen/congresswomen and lit a fire under them they might move in the direction of getting 'Notch Reform' passed!

**Ms. Edna A. Hatcher**  
Colby  
[hatcher@st-tel.net](mailto:hatcher@st-tel.net)  
(Letter #17)

#### About those letters . . .

The *Free Press* encourages and welcomes letters from readers. Letters should be typewritten, if at all possible, and should include a telephone number and an address. Most importantly, all letters must include a signature. Unsigned letters cannot be published.

#### Addresses of elected officials:

**U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts**, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. 202/224-4774

**U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback**, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. 202/224-6521

**U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran**, 1519 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. 202/225-2715

**State Rep. Jim Morrison**, State Capitol Building Rm. 171-W, Topeka 66612. 785/296-7676 e mail: [jmorriso@ink.org](mailto:jmorriso@ink.org) web:<http://www.ink.org/public/legislators/jmorrison>

**State Sen. Stan Clark**, State Capitol Building Rm. 449-N, Topeka 66612. 785/296-7399 e mail: [sclark@ink.org](mailto:sclark@ink.org)

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## Kennedy lecture was a plus

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., son of the former attorney general and presidential candidate gunned down in 1968, was in Colby last Thursday as part of the Dr. Max Pickerrill lecture series at Colby Community College.

Although I had some reservations about his solutions and even perhaps some of his thinking on why we need to do what he said, he was well worth hearing simply because he made us think about an issue that needs thinking about.

Speaking out about pollution, especially corporate pollution is not as popular as it was at one time. In light of recent economic downturns, many are unwilling to put any restrictions on businesses which might slow down a recovery or move even more jobs overseas than are already going.

However, we have to ask ourselves about the long-term effects of any short-term solution we try, whether those effects are environmental or economic. It is easy to dismiss such talk as alarmist, but ultimately our chickens will come home to roost.

No, we cannot predict everything that will happen in the future. Nor can we expect the federal government to fix everything. We can, however, take reasonable steps to protect ourselves.

One of the things he said that rang most true was about free markets. His contention that the little guy was outgunned when large corporations received subsidies and tax breaks along with passing on clean-up costs to the locals was something I hadn't thought of in quite that way.

His biggest problem was in the contradictions



### Jay Kelley

- Speaking MyMind

between the belief that the feds need to be involved and the success of grass-roots campaigns. If it is so apparent that the EPA and other agencies have been impotent, why should we rely on them?

I was disappointed when an agricultural reporter missed that point and instead misconstrued what Kennedy had said about fat cats and subsidies to imply he thought small farmers were fat cats.

What he had actually said was the major polluters were fat cats getting subsidies, which could be true. He never said, or implied, everyone getting a subsidy was a fat cat.

There is a good piece of advice to would-be reporters. Listen to what people actually say. If they are honest, they deserve that respect. If they are dishonest, you don't need to twist their words to catch them.

Overall, Kennedy had the passion of a preacher, but that was his downfall as well. You see, those with real passion are sometimes guilty of overstating the case. Preachers, including this one, have to be careful about saying always and

never. Yes, there are things that are always and never true, but there are also things that are not always or never true and honesty demands we differentiate between the two. The other piece of advice is stick to a subject you know.

Some of his references to the Bible and the prophets were off-base factually, although his point was a good one. However, those who know and respect the Bible could have been turned off by that.

I know it affected my own opinion of his credibility.

Overall, though, we need to hear more people like Kennedy. There are too many people who do not understand the problem, don't have any answers at all and, most importantly, don't have any idea of the real costs of implementing solutions.

Some will probably call me to task for defending a liberal, but on this one I'll take the heat. One can be open-minded without letting our brains fall out; something some seem to have forgotten.

Kennedy didn't give answers as much as he helped define the question. It's not about the environment verses humanity ^ it's about humanity thriving in the best environment possible.

Ultimately, I don't think Kennedy had the right answers, but I'll give him credit for trying.

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*Jay Kelley is a local minister and writer who speaks his mind from time to time. His e-mail is [jkelly@nwkansas.com](mailto:jkelly@nwkansas.com).*

## Word 'fair' enters the picture

### John Hanna

- Statehouse Scribe

Passing a school finance plan would be difficult enough for legislators if the only question were how many more millions of dollars elementary and secondary schools need.

But the debate encompasses another huge issue — whether the formula in Kansas law for distributing state aid to school districts is fair.

Addressing only one of the two big issues will not be enough to satisfy the Salina and Dodge City school districts, which sued the state in 1999 over school finance — and it might not be enough to satisfy the Kansas Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, legislators seem overwhelmed in trying to deal with both big problems at once.

"There are two tracks upon which school finance runs," House Speaker Doug Mays, R-Topeka, said last week.

The current budget provides \$2.6 billion in aid to the 302 school districts, but the Dodge City and Salina districts argued in their lawsuit that the amount was too little. They have suggested an increase of \$1.03 billion is necessary to provide a "suitable" education to all children.

The two districts also argued that the state is unfair in distributing its funds, so that extra dollars do not follow poor, disabled and minority students who need extra attention to do well in the classroom.

In December, Shawnee County District Judge Terry Bullock issued a preliminary order siding with the two school districts and gave Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and legislators until July to fix constitutional flaws in the school finance system. Attorney General Phill Kline has appealed to the Supreme Court.

The Dodge City and Salina districts argued that the school finance formula, enacted in 1992, provides too much money to small districts, while shorting programs for poor students, bilingual education and special education.

"Our formula is out of whack," lead plaintiffs' attorney Alan Rupe said last week during the annual Day at the Legislature program for reporters, editors and newspaper publishers, sponsored

by The AP and the Kansas Press Association. "That's the essence of what our case was."

Under current law, the state provides \$3,863 per pupil in general state aid to each school district.

But the state also "weights" — artificially inflates — each district's enrollment, shifting money among districts to provide additional dollars for items such as transportation, bilingual education and vocational education. For example, a student who receives a free lunch also is considered at risk of failing and counts as 1.1 students when a district's enrollment is tallied.

Some \$250 million in special education funds are distributed separately, based on the number of teachers and paraprofessionals employed in a district, as well as the costs for transporting special ed students.

How much the state should spend on education is the biggest budget issue facing legislators each year because aid to public schools consumes more than half of the state's general revenues. Annually, the debate pits education officials and their allies against legislators who want to hold the line on spending.

Sebelius has proposed higher taxes on sales, property and individual income so the state could phase in a \$304 million increase in spending over three years. Democrats are willing to settle for the first year's installment of \$137 million, while some Republicans are talking about an even smaller package.

"Education's over here with an insatiable ap-

petite for money," said Dan Biles, an attorney for the State Board of Education. "On the other side of the continuum is the Legislature, which has an uncontrollable penchant for mischief."

Yet money alone — even \$1 billion — couldn't solve all of the problems Bullock and the Dodge City and Salina districts saw with school finance, because of how the formula works.

"Money that you pump through the current formula perpetuates — and in some cases, even exacerbates — inequities," said John Robb, another attorney for the Dodge City and Salina districts.

There's little doubt that rewriting the formula is politically difficult, because each tweak creates dozens of winners and losers. When millions of extra dollars are added to the pot, a change in the formula means some districts won't get as much money as they could absent a change.

Early in the 2004 session, criticism forced Sebelius to withdraw a proposal to redistribute special education funds so that districts would receive \$434 for each student, regardless of whether they needed services.

A Department of Education computer run doomed the idea. While other parts of Sebelius' plan protected districts against actually losing money in the 2004-05 school year, the special education plan meant some districts would see their increases in total aid scaled back — by hundreds of thousands of dollars in some cases.

The department's computer runs are common each session, and legislators consult them routinely before deciding how to vote on school finance issues. They can tell exactly how a plan will affect their local districts, and how other legislators' districts fare in comparison.

"The most difficult task is to work out a formula," Mays said.

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*Political Writer John Hanna has covered state government and politics since 1987.*