

# Opinion



## Free Press Viewpoint

### A lesson for elected officials

From The Hays Daily News

While we encourage interested citizens of all stripes to run for public office, we do not assume for a minute that any of the elected officials possess all of the knowledge necessary to be effective. On-the-job training takes care of many details and nuances. So does mentoring by others and one's willingness to learn. Some offices even have orientation sessions provided to ease the transition into governance.

You might be surprised to learn, however, that there is no mandatory training regarding two very basic laws — the Kansas Open Meetings Act and the Kansas Open Records Act. The laws govern the very manner in which elected and appointed officials conduct business. And of the approximately 10,000 elected officials in our great state, not one of them has been required to verse themselves on KOMA or KORA. While many of them take the time on their own to sit in on such basic training, there are many who don't.

Legislation presented in the Senate (SB 194) hopes to correct that. The bill would mandate such training to take place within 90 days of being elected. It would cover members of all local offices and bodies — from county and city commissions to the specialty districts such as water, sewage, cemetery, etc.

We believe this legislation not only needs to be worked out of committee, it needs to be signed into law.

The number of KOMA and KORA violations every year is extremely high. And while there are the occasional purposeful skirtings of the law, most of the violations are committed out of ignorance. Not every district court clerk, for example, knows exactly what portions of a criminal procedure need to be made available upon request. Not every county commissioner knows that if they are a member of a three-person commission, it's illegal for two of them to discuss public business outside of a declared public meeting. Not every nonprofit organization that receives public funding understands what portion of its financial records needs to be shared with whomever asks for them. Not every city commissioner or councilperson knows what can be discussed in executive session or even how to properly excuse themselves into executive session. Examples abound.

We believe the public is served best by a government that is transparent. We also believe the open meetings/open records laws codify that very sentiment. It is incumbent on every decision-maker involved with conducting the public's business to learn these laws. While common sense should prompt such voluntary education, it is not working in all cases.

For the sake of the public, the Legislature needs to force all elected officials to learn the law.

**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. We reserve the right to edit for clarity and length, and, likewise, reserve the right to reject letters deemed to be of no public interest or considered offensive or libelous.

Comments to any opinions expressed on this page are encouraged. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. 5th St., Colby, Kan., 67701. Or e-mail [jvannostrand@nwkansas.com](mailto:jvannostrand@nwkansas.com) or [pdecker@nwkansas.com](mailto:pdecker@nwkansas.com). Opinions do not necessarily reflect the *Free Press*.

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State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout Excellence, Column Writing, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography.

Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

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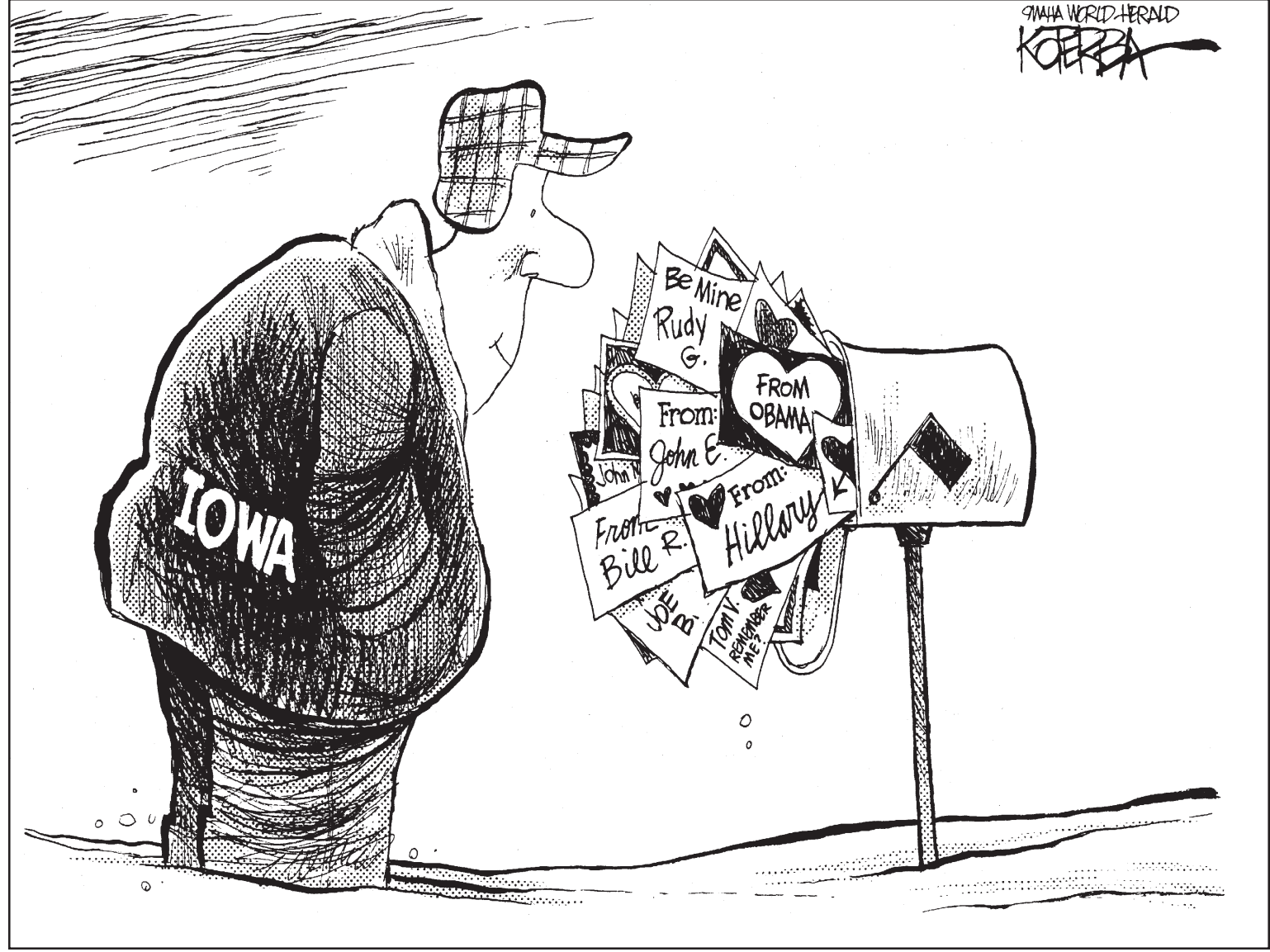
THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the day observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Haynes Publishing Co., 155 W. Fifth, Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE is paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to The Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth, Colby, Kan., 67701. THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news credited to it or not otherwise herein. Member Kansas Press Association, Inland Press Association and National Newspaper Association. **SUBSCRIPTION RATES:** In Colby by carrier: 4 months \$40, 8 months \$56, 12 months \$74. By mail with in Colby and the nine-county region of Thomas, Sheridan, Decatur, Rawlins, Cheyenne, Sherman, Wallace, Logan and Gove counties: 4 months \$53, 8 months \$65, 12 months \$82. Other Kansas counties: 4 months \$60, 8 months \$70, 12 months \$85. All other states, \$85, 12 months.

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Haynes Publishing Company

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### Some stories are just overdone

Publisher's note: The following is purely fictitious but I wouldn't be surprised if it happens ....

I.M. King, president of Media Evaluation and Supervisors System (MESS), has filed a complaint against the Colby Free Press for not having any stories related to the death and ongoing personal life of Anna Nicole Smith.

Smith, 39, who had a career in the adult entertainment industry and a reality television show, died Thursday. The cause of death has not yet been confirmed, but prescription drug use is speculated.

In addition to her death, other related stories have been about determining the father of Smith's 5-month old daughter. Smith's son died at the age of 20 in September.

"How dare an American media outlet not have a story about Anna," said Nutts. "She was a celebrity, one that the masses loved and respected or there wouldn't be so many stories. It's criminal the Colby Free Press did not have a story to inform their readers about this tragic moment in American history. According to our preliminary research, the Free Press may be the only American news source without a Smith story."

Colby Free Press Publisher John Van Nostrand defended the paper's stance about not having any stories about Smith's death and personal life.

"The sad part about Smith was the lifestyle she had. Where are the stories about that? She had been in the adult entertainment industry, substance abuse and no one knows who the father of her child is," Van Nostrand said. "Those stories you see today seem to downplay, or just avoid, the lifestyle choices she made. We could learn a lot from her — in the appropriate setting."

**John Van Nostrand**

- Line in the Dust

Van Nostrand said the freedom of the press rings true at times like this.

"Smith stories don't belong in the Colby Free Press. We are members of the Associated Press and try to use their state and national stories that have some connection to northwest Kansas. But there was no connection to Smith to Thomas County or Colby — unless someone steps up and says they are the father of her child. That wouldn't surprise me. Everyone else has."

Van Nostrand said there were more pressing stories of a local interest than about Smith.

"Our community college board of trustees announced plans to build a new gymnasium and other amenities. Our city fire department roof was damaged during a heavy snow Dec. 31 and plans are in the works for a new firehouse. I hope our readers are more interested in knowing how their property tax dollars could be spent and where the fire department will operate from than Smith," Van Nostrand said.

Van Nostrand even questioned the committee.

"I was surprised how many national radio news outlets led with Smith's story at the top of every hour days after her death. I watched college basketball in Dodge City Saturday and on

the way home, hourly news reports still led with Smith. She died Thursday. I am waiting for cable television and satellite radio to debut the Anna Nicole Smith stations. It was still too much two days later. When will it stop? Sure she had fans, but Smith's death stories should have been short and in the back pages, not the front"

Van Nostrand said he knows how the national news media works with such stories.

"Smith had hundreds of thousands of fans based on her diverse work. So those news sources justify those stories based on the number of people supposedly interested in her," he said. "In principle, that makes sense, but that does not mean that many stories are still needed. Michael Jackson sold millions of records and every time he sneezes, it's on the front page."

But Van Nostrand accused the national media for missing an excellent opportunity to do the stories about Smith that really need written and broadcast.

"I can't imagine there are many parents out there who want their daughter to be like Smith was. She contributed to the adult entertainment industry which is an ongoing threat to ruin fathers, families and young boys and girls. Substance abuse speaks for itself. Not knowing who is that kid's father is disturbing in so many ways. Where are all of those stories? Is the national media afraid of doing those because they will have to shed some light and honesty on things our society either likes to shove under the carpet or act like there is nothing wrong?"

John Van Nostrand is publisher of the Colby Free Press

### Tax relief highlights bill details

SB 29, 50 and 213 — Tax Relief: The Senate Assessment and Taxation Committee is moving closer to sending legislation to the Senate floor after hearing a report from the subcommittee established last week to review a number of tax reduction options.

Generally the main areas of tax relief proposed relates to income tax and the potential exemption for Social Security benefits; corporation franchise tax; corporation income tax; and tax credit and tax incentive restructuring.

The committee is aiming for a \$15 million package of tax relief that the Legislature should consider for FY 2008. However, if the revenue picture brightens in the near future, additional resources could be earmarked for enhancing the tax relief package.

The subcommittee believes providing a tax exemption for Social Security benefits should be a priority and recommends there should be an elimination of the Kansas tax on earnings by exempting from income tax altogether benefits received by both single and joint filers with the federal adjusted gross income of \$50,000 and below.

This would allow for \$5.4 million attributable to social security tax cut.

Franchise tax relief is being addressed by recommending that the franchise tax exemption be raised from \$100,000 to \$500,000 and compu-

**Ralph Ostmeyer**

- Senator 40th Dist.

tation of the tax starts with only the amount of net worth in excess of the exemption threshold level. This proposal contributes \$10.4 million to tax relief.

The tax credit and tax incentives restructuring recommendations of the governor claimed to be revenue-neutral are still a work-in-progress.

The subcommittee finds that some additional changes are necessary to allow small and medium-sized businesses to continue to participate in the programs and this will have a slightly negative fiscal impact. They are still considering several options at this point.

SB 252 — National Bio and Agro-Defence Facility: The Senate acted quickly on all the bills in response to Senator Pat Roberts address to the joint session of the Kansas Legislature on Monday. SB 252 would in effect deed over to the United States government 60 acres on the north side of the KSU campus contingent upon this

site being chosen for the new facility.

Sent over from the house this week were HB 2303 and HCR 5009. HCR 5009 pledges the Legislature's support for the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility and HB 2303 would create an interagency working group to support and assist the United States Department of Homeland Security in conducting an environmental impact statement on any site in Kansas selected for the location of a the facility.

SB 252, HB 2303 and HCR 5009 all passed the Senate unanimously.

SB 131 and SB 135 — Election reform: SB 131 establishes a deadline of two working days before the election for the appointment of authorized poll agents and SB 135 outlines the qualifications by requiring poll workers to be 18 and registered voters in Kansas, reside in the Kansas county or contiguous county in which they are to serve, and wear an identifying badge. SB 131 passed 32 yeas and 7 nays. SB 135 passed 29 yeas and 8 nays.

SCR 1606 — Designation of Animal Health Corridor: Noting that 37 global or U.S. animal health companies have their headquarters and an additional 120 have a presence in the corridor between Manhattan and the Kansas City metropolitan area, this resolution designates the region as the KC Animal Health Corridor. SCR 1606 passed the Senate unanimously.

**Mallard Fillmore**

- Bruce Tinsley

