

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

How serious are we?

Kansas Secretary of State Ron Thornburg and others want the state to have a presidential primary. A lot of things have to change. A lot of things. For starters, voters must want one. Kansas primaries in 2000 and 2004 were both canceled to save money — and there just was not the interest. A primary is estimated at \$2 million. At the Western Governors Association annual meeting in 2004, members approved a resolution to create a committee to develop a presidential primary among its members states in 2008. Kansas is one of those 18 member states. Even if Kansas has enough money and interest a year from now to hold a primary, don't count on the state to get the attention or results to make a difference. In fact, Kansas may be forgotten by the association and the rest of the country. Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback has already said he will run for president in 2008, which may sound like Kansas will get the attention. But look what he is up against already. Arizona Sen. John McCain told late-night television talk show host David Letterman this week he will run for president. McCain plans on making a more formal announcement in the near future.

McCain has received much more attention in the political realm than Brownback because of his history. Brownback's traditional conservative values will also be challenged. Don't be surprised if Brownback is forgotten because of that. Many mainstream national media outlets do little, if any, for traditional conservative values. Don't expect Brownback's campaign to help Kansas.

But what really counts for a presidential election is something Kansas may never have enough of to be a serious player in primaries.

California and Texas, both members of the association, have a combined 89 electoral votes. That is one-third of what is needed to win a presidential election. Kansas only has six electoral votes. That's not enough for presidential candidates to take Kansas seriously.

Kansas first needs to ask itself how serious it is about having a primary.

— John Van Nostrand is publisher of Colby Free Press

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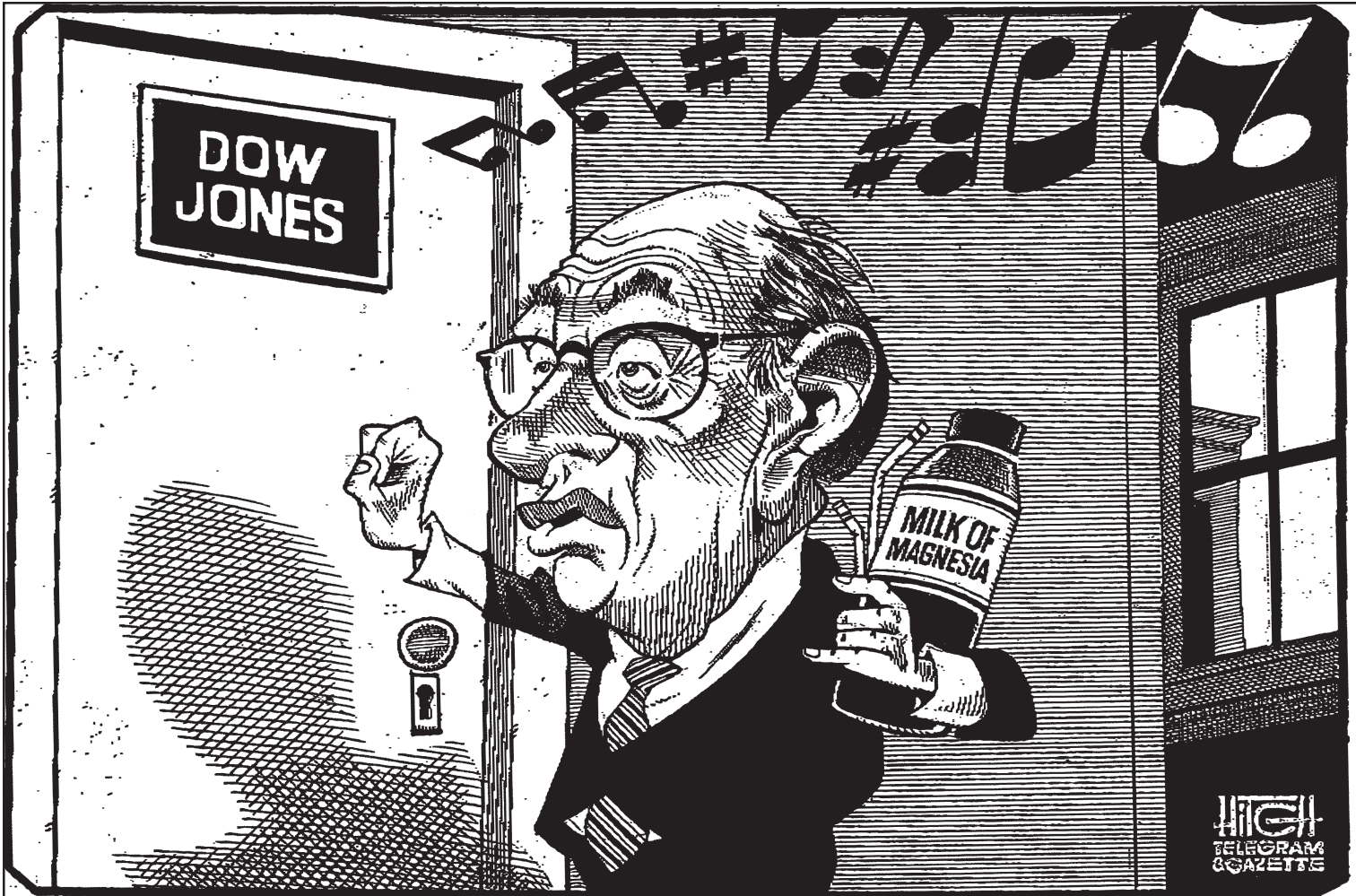
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ALAN GREENSPAN — PARTY CRASHER

Your turn

Why the rush?

Publisher's Note: The Colby Free Press does not normally accept letters to the editor this long. Because of the content of the letter, which reflects a critically important aspect of Northwest Kansas, we have made an exception to our rules, in this case.

Emery L. Hart Grinnell

As I sat in the court room on Wednesday, Feb. 21, listening to the debate on who met the time line regarding the recall of school board members of USD 291, I asked myself if we were putting children and their families first in our county. The students have shown us by their academic achievements and athletic accomplishments that we as parents and community members have a lot to be proud of all three of our schools. Therefore, we should work very hard to keep all of them open, K - 12.

Board members in each of our schools were put into office by the patrons of their respective districts. Being a school board member is a very important position to hold; I have even served on the USD 291 Board.

As a school board member, I believe, your number one priority is the children in your district. In children's young lives, the school is their second home, and in some cases, it is their first. For the past 40 years I have been directly involved with school systems, and as administrator I have been directly involved with the closing of three school districts in western Kansas. I am not proud about closing these schools, but they had become so small that we had no choice.

By small, I am talking about 60 or fewer students, K - 12. The budget was not there which resulted in the inability to offer an appropriate curriculum. The students were starting to be hurt educationally. When that happens, it is time to close.

It is my personal opinion that this is not the case in the Grinnell school system at this time. USD 291 has an enrollment of 115 students this year; therefore, the district has more than a million dollar budget. The students receive a curriculum that is second to none for small schools. Each and every year the students meet the standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act, and consistently score above the state averages on the state assessments and earn the standard of excellence awards. The board has recognized their achievements for many years now by awarding the students an earned excellence day in the spring to celebrate their academic achievements. Students from Wheatland and Quinter excel as well. So, if we have the students, the budget authority, and the curriculum which meets the needs of our students, why are we rushing to close buildings, and within a short time, districts as well?

I believe that it is time to rethink the decision that the Grinnell School Board made to close our high school. The board members knew that the vast majority of the patrons of USD 291 wanted to keep our high school, middle school, and grade schools here, in Grinnell.

Each month numerous members of the community went to the board meetings and expressed their opinions, nearly unanimous in opposition to the proposed action. Surveys ad-

ressed the combined sports agreements but no input was sought on the part of the board of education about the community's wishes regarding an academic agreement. More time and resources were spent on choosing a new mascot and colors than were spent on deciding the fate of USD 291. People who were opposed were ignored and only those who supported the academic cooperative agreement were given any credence.

At one meeting, the board president said he felt only people with children in school should have any input in what happens and that the old people in the district had no say, regardless of them being taxpayers who finance the schools. In spite of the local opposition, the members voted 4-3 to close the high school and enter into an academic cooperative agreement with USD 292 (Grainfield).

As a past board member, teacher, coach, athletic director, principal and superintendent of the Grinnell Public Schools, I know how important it is to listen to and value the opinions of the patrons. I feel the board did not do this, and therefore, our community is divided and is being torn apart from within. We are already losing families and students out of our school system and out of Gove County. I can guarantee there will be a lot more.

Younger children follow older siblings to school. People will take their students out of Gove County to neighboring schools and communities. Decisions will be made based on distance, loyalty, anger, or any number of reasons. New families will hesitate to move into a community in which the schools are closed, especially high schools, because they see there is little future in the town for them. Property values diminish significantly and local businesses suffer and some are forced to close.

I know what I am talking about due to my experiences with three small communities in recent years. Support your local businesses (while closing one of the largest consumers in the town) is a false cry clouding a very serious reality. Vibrant communities become spots on the map with such shortsighted thinking.

When children lose their school and in many cases have to move, it is very upsetting to them and you can see a big change in their personalities and attitude. I have seen this in every school situation when schools were closed. It affects students from kindergarten to seniors in high school. Think about yourself when you had to move to another town to find work or whatever. You had question marks inside of you that made you feel uneasy.

Think about children doing this. It is twice as hard, not taking this into account places an unnecessary burden on our children. It doesn't have to happen yet.

I have had people tell me that we need to do this before the state comes in and does it for us. I have worked directly with the Legislature on Kansas educational issues. By doing what the local board of education voted to do, we are doing what they want to happen, just voluntarily they say. What they want is for us to make the difficult decisions so that they as politicians don't have to risk their elected positions by making them.

The Kansas State Constitution says that the

public school systems are to be financed by the state of Kansas, not local taxes. When they put into effect the local option budget of 25 to 30 percent they effectively told the local communities, if you want to keep your schools, you finance them. In the early 1990s when the school finance bill changed financing to a head count basis, or the number of students on the school's roll on Sept. 20, it started. The ever-increasing trend of schools fighting with each other for the diminishing number of students available in our area of the state.

The Legislature's goal today is to cut the 304 school districts to 204 and eventually to just over 100. Because of declining enrollments and thus budget authority, that number is beginning to happen, one small district at a time. I agree that a district can be too small, but I truly don't believe that is the case in Grinnell yet. There may come a day, and perhaps in the not too distant future, when we will need to close. Until that time arrives, I feel we must fight to maintain the excellent schools we have in USD 291 and continue to support our students and teachers here at home.

This step currently being taken will not appease the state for long. Their goal, as is stated in numerous places, is to have one school in each Kansas county. With this possibility, comes the other major issue, that of transportation. Some of our students already are on the buses almost an hour, twice a day. The added distances with this agreement will not only add time to the bus routes, but the costs for each school will increase greatly, especially with the rising cost of fuel and other related expenses. Students driving are going to add increased costs to the family budgets. It has been proven that money is not saved by closing buildings. Think of all those savings we were supposed to see when we closed Angelus. Where are they?

For all these stated reasons and many more which time and space do not permit me to address adequately, I feel we have rushed to make a decision which is not in the best interests of our students, their families, or our community. We can't operate the Grinnell schools on a budget of over a million dollars, then we have a problem greater than what has already been discussed. Believe me when I say that I have worked a lot of budgets with a lot less money and have been able to lead those districts to provide good education's for our students.

I am not one to work against boards of education because of my long experience as an administrator and I understand what a difficult job they have, for no pay and little thanks. I guess I wonder who told the local B.O.E. that they didn't have an adequate budget authority to operate the Grinnell schools and that USD 291 lacks the curriculum and opportunities our students need to succeed. In these cases, I feel the board received inaccurate information.

You will notice, I have not discussed the sports component. That is another issue which should not be the basis for making decisions about closing schools. I truly hope that this decision was not all about sports. In that case, no matter if the team wins or not, the community of Grinnell loses.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce

Tinsley

