

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Is more corn the answer?

By the Lawrence Journal-World

The efforts of a company that is relocating to Junction City may lessen the need to plow under more acres to raise more corn. Back in the 1890s, Mary Elizabeth Lease, a Populist political activist, urged farmers to “raise less corn and more hell.” That may have been good advice at the time, but with today’s growing interest in using corn to produce ethanol, raising more corn will be a winning strategy for many farmers. In fact, some conservationists are concerned about the number of acres that might be plowed under to meet the new demand for corn. U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns reportedly will decide by early summer whether to lower the penalties for farmers who pull acres out of the federal conservation reserve program before their contracts with the government run out. The farmers receive government payments to let land lay idle, but rising corn prices may tempt some to give up the payments to plant more corn.

Naturalists are concerned about the amount of animal habitat that may be lost if more land is taken out of the conservation reserve program. The trend to plow up more acres also may cause some concern among historians and old-timers who lived through the Dust Bowl that struck several Midwest states in the 1930s.

In hindsight, experts say that high wheat prices in the 1920s that caused farmers to plow under millions of acres of native prairie were a key contributing factor to the giant dust storms that came a few years later. Buffalo grass and other native vegetation was gone, and when drought years hit, there was nothing to hold the soil down. Precious topsoil was blown from the Midwest clear across the country in huge clouds. The devastation that was left behind, in fact, provided the impetus for today’s federal soil conservation programs. ...

Biofuels are a promising way to lessen the nation’s dependence on petroleum products, but it’s important to also protect the natural environment we will pass on to future generations. Contrary to Mrs. Lease’s advice, the answer may lie, at least in part, in farmers growing more — and better — corn.

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@nwksansas.com or pdecker@nwksansas.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect the *Free Press*.

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It's a small world after all

Even though Colby is the largest town between Hays and Denver, Colo., about a 350-mile stretch of Interstate 70, what happened Tuesday proves we are not as isolated as we may think we are.

The two protesters against the evangelical Christian stance on the Iraq War received quite a bit of attention (including our front page coverage today) as they stood on the corner of Franklin Avenue and Fourth Street.

I saw the same two men Saturday in Goodland. I wondered what direction they were headed, but didn't ask them. Editor Patty Decker said phone calls she received Monday were about the two men supposedly headed our way.

Like what they had to say or not, they deserved to be treated as news because protests like that are extremely rare in Colby. Patty, who has been here since the early 1990s, can only remember one moment since then that could be classified as a protest.

We heard business owners and managers in earshot of the two men were uncomfortable with the two men. What the two men did was not criminal. It's not like they were shouting small pox has been discovered in Colby.

It's common for people to cross the country on foot or bicycle to raise funds or awareness for causes. What happened Tuesday was not char-



John Van Nostrand

• Line in the Dust

ity work at all and they wanted us to know.

We got a tiny sample of what it is like elsewhere. Ever since the war started, there have been much larger protests and demonstrations in cities across the country. Occasional events during the past 18 months reminds us that we are not solely protected by our location.

Every so often a drug-related arrest along Interstate 70 catches another drug trafficker. Those transactions may have been planned in one of our motel rooms, at the rest areas west of town or at the empty intersection of a county road. All it takes is for the deal to go sour and guns are drawn.

Last year, two suspected murderers from Utah were spotted near Goodland and the pursuit had a deadly end in Hays. Guns could have easily been drawn and fired in Thomas County.

We live in such a mobile society, the person, or family, who moved into the vacant house across the street may intrigue us. If there is a constant stream of cars and people at the house, or if the children appear distraught, we should take the opportunity to say hi and try to know the family if we see them as we leave the garbage can on the curb or push around the lawn mower.

Not as dreadful, there has been interest in building an ethanol plant somewhere in Thomas County. The ethanol industry is becoming bigger by the day. Astronomical amounts of money are being invested in ethanol. That means astronomical amounts of corn are needed.

The price of corn is becoming more important than the price of a gallon of gasoline.

Men in Italian tailored suits and ties may one day come back and tempt our area farmers with incentives to grow more corn, or whatever else can be used to produce ethanol.

We can't get comfortable thinking no one cares or nothing happens in Thomas County. How we respond to such situations is far more important than the action itself.

— John Van Nostrand is publisher of the Colby Free Press.

Your turn

Gym will do nothing to help compete

Charles Cook

Colby

I'm 84 years old, living on a limited income and I will vote no on April 3 concerning the college's proposal.

My reasoning is, will building this facility help in keeping younger taxpayers in Colby? Will it bring new taxpayers to Colby? And haven't we been misled?

The new dorms are in the proposal, but then I read that they will not be built with tax dollars,

but by grants and donations, well which is it?

Then Skip Sharp states that this facility will help Colby compete with towns such as Great Bend, Concordia, Dodge City and Garden City all that has from three to 10 times the population that we have. A new gym will do nothing to help compete.

Then he goes on to state that if this project isn't approved that we might lose the college all together, well scare tactics like this will not work

on me. Furthermore, if not having this facility built means we lose the college, then doesn't that make the leadership of this institution inadequate?

In closing I would ask each and every taxpayer how much more in taxes can you afford? If the trend continues with the declining population in Colby, won't the taxes continue to rise for the ones remaining, and make it a very unaffordable town for new people to move to?

Have we reached the Plimsoll line?

Vernon Flanagan

Colby

In the earlier days of cargo shipping, many overloaded ships sank at sea resulting in the loss of life and property. Samuel Plimsoll proposed painting danger lines along the sides of ships so that as they were loaded and sank deeper into the water, loading could stop when the water level touched the danger line.

Most Thomas County taxpayers know we also have a Plimsoll line, and I am hearing from many that they believe we have reached that line — we've had enough. Moreover, intolerable high taxes do not attract new residents or businesses.

The college wants to expand, but the tax base may not. In fact, the county valuation is projected to actually decrease, forcing more tax increases just to raise the same amount of dollars now being spent.

Is the college building project just the tip of the taxburg? To find out, look at your last tax

statement to see how many dollars you are now paying to support the college, add a 38 percent increase, and you will be at the beginning point of what you will be paying each year should this be approved by the voters on April 3.

The college mill levy now at 33.4 mills (up 35 percent in the last five years) would increase 12.59 mills bringing it up to 46, equal to that of the public schools. This 38 percent increase does not include maintenance, insurance or any construction cost overrun.

The annual payment to cover the proposed multi-million dollar loan would be \$1.14 million bringing the total repayment to \$22.8 million at the end of 20- years (including principal plus interest). That's nearly \$100,000 per month for 20 years.

Sure, a property owner who has no taxable property but a house valued at \$120,000 might pay \$3,300 for the new building over the 20-year period; but add in what he is already paying and

his overall tax would be nearly \$12,000. Average size businesses and farmers could easily be paying \$20,000 to \$30,000 over the 20-year period for this building project alone. This is real money, not a few pennies a day. Renters will not be exempt from the huge tax increase either as landlords will be passing through their higher costs. You have a stake in this deal too. Home buyers will be impacted with larger monthly payments as the big tax bills will inflate their costs.

Now is the time to act. Buyer's remorse after the election will not save your pocketbook when you realize too late that this project is a huge tax sponge soaking up way more tax dollars than you ever imagined.

Right now the college collects 22 percent of all property tax revenues. The proposed gym would raise it to almost 30 percent, nearly a third of all property tax revenues of the county. Where is the Plimsoll Line?

The last day the Colby Free Press will run letters to the editor related to the April 3 election will be Friday.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

