Page 2 Colby Free Press Wednesday, December 31, 2008





Free Press Viewpoint

Your right to know a freedom to keep

Across Kansas, groups that represent public officials are gathering support for a massive assault on your right to know.

The main focus this year will be a push to end or severely limit public notices, which for nearly a century and a half have been published in the state's independent newspapers.

Many cities and counties have adopted "platforms" for legislative action written in Topeka by the state League of Municipalities and the Kansas Association of Counties.

These two groups, financed by taxpayers' money, spend much of their time trying to find ways to keep the workings of government hidden from the taxpayers.

In a democracy, that just ain't right.

In the past, the municipal league and the counties have fought most attempts to strengthen open meetings and open records law. You'd think public officials would understand that the taxpayers need to know what government is up to.

Instead, these groups use your money to fight any attempt to open up government and end secrecy. Now, they've set their sights on public notices.

City, county, school and special district governments are required to publish many things, including budgets and financial reports that detail how tax money is spent. Tax-sale notices bring in far more money than any county spends on them. Other notices include ordinances, that have the force of law; zoning changes, which can affect hundreds or thousands of people; and election polling places and candidate lists.

All these are critical to our democracy. Without them, people would know far less about what government is up to.

In the name of saving money, these tax-funded groups want to end publication of notices in favor of posting most on the Internet, on a government website. That's not a good idea:

• Not as many people will have access to notices on the Internet as in a newspaper in their hometown.

• Notices on a government website would be difficult to verify and subject to control of government employees who are not independent. Links easily could get "lost.'

• Costs saving would be illusory. It costs big money to build and run a government website.

• Taxpayers would have to go looking for notices, rather than having them delivered to their homes.

The agreed-on definition of public notice includes:

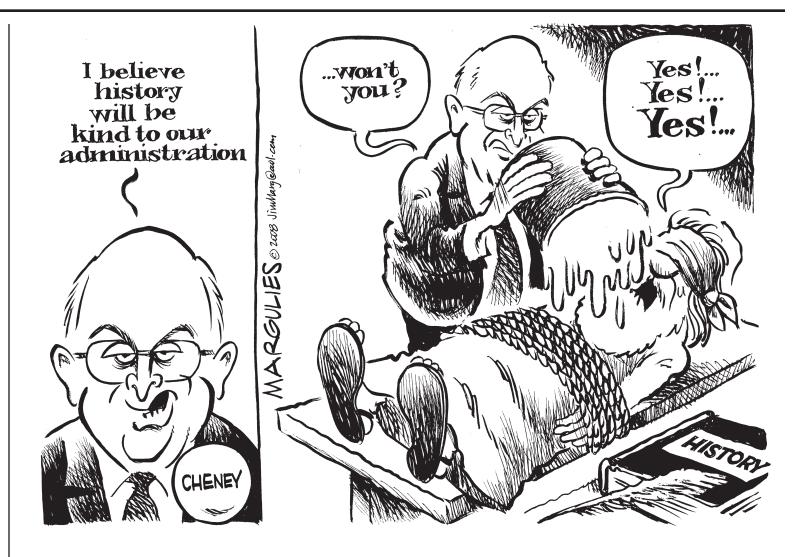
• Published in a forum independent of the government, such ۲ as a local newspaper.

• Archived in a secure and publicly available format.

• Available to all segments of society.

• The public and the source of the notice must be able to verify that the notice was published, and its information disseminated to the public.

For nearly a century and a half, newspapers have been guardians of the public's right to know and sentinels of public notice. Independent newspapers can verify and archive public notices, making them available to everyone. Why change?



Cleaning day takes resolution

Steve says I'm a workaholic.

That's sort of true. However, there are some things I really don't do - housework, for one.

I'm allergic to cleaning. It makes me lethargic and out of sorts.

It took Steve a few years to figure this out. His mother was a housewife, who despite raising four children, kept an immaculate home.

My mother was a teacher, who, like me, is allergic to housework.

Since I've always worked full time, we've tried to have someone come in to help do the floors, bathrooms and dusting.

We've been so lucky to have Barbara for the els. last few years. She's an absolute jewel. She showed up once a week for four hours, and when she left, the house was clean and smelled wonderful.

Did you notice I changed to the past tense? Barbara got a new job and she's not available to clean houses any more. I'm in mourning.

After she left, I made a list of jobs that need doing around the house and assigned a job or



everything at once.

Tuesday — kitchen counters and floors. Wednesday — downstairs bathroom/change

towels. Thursday - upstairs bathroom/change tow-

Friday — dust and change bedding.

Saturday — vacuum rugs and furniture. Sunday – sweep and mop hard floors/do laundry.

Monday — work at office and forget house. After the first week, though, every day seemed to be Monday.

I do change the bedding and towels, keep the dishes and laundry done and do lots of general picking up. What I didn't do was sweep, two to each day so that I wouldn't have to do dust or mop unless there was a major spill or

the cats left a present.

By last week, however, the fallacy of this started dawning on me as I found everything I owned was covered in cat hair. We have three, and when it's nice, they go outside. When the weather is bad or it's cold, they become house cats

Without a pretty consistent program of dust and hair removal, the place soon becomes overrun with dust bunnies and cat hair.

So, I took Thursday off to clean.

I swept. I washed. I dusted. I scoured. I cleaned.

I hated every minute of it, but just turned the Christmas music on high and dove in.

Now, I'm very proud of my handiwork.

The only problem I see is, I'm going to have to do it again next month.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes @ nwkansas.com

School consolidation likely coming

A better suggestion: Taxpayers would save more money if the Legislature banned lobbying by tax-supported groups, such as the municipal league and the county association. Why should they be able to spend your money to work against you?

Taxpayers who've had enough of this kind of nonsense should say so. — *Steve Haynes*

COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920)

155 W. Fifth St. Colby, Kan. 67701

(785) 462-3963 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor @ nwkansas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, 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 days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 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 herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby by carrier: 4 months \$40, 8 months \$56, 12 months \$74. By mail within 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.

Is school consolidation ... inevitable?

A new state Legislature has just been elected. But will the members have the guts to tackle the biggest educational and economic challenge facing Kansas — school consolidation? With both a growing shortage of rural teachers and a state economic crisis (63 percent of our state taxes go to education), the dreaded "C"-word may have to be spoken.

In 1945, Kansas had 8,000 mostly small school districts. By 1960, the number had dropped to 2,600. In 1963, the Legislature set up a unified school district system that gave us 303 districts. Then earlier this decade, a plan was proposed for just 40 Regional School Districts. It was rapidly dismissed.

I visit both large city schools and small rural schools in Kansas. Rural schools are a comfortable place for students to grow up. Classes are small and everyone knows everyone. Each student is a big fish in a small pond, and in sports, most get to play.

Often one person teaches you English from the freshman to senior level. And one Mr. or Mrs. Science teaches middle school science through biology and chemistry and senior physics.

Most small-school teachers have from four to six different classes to prepare for each day, and that means that there is usually less science equipment. Some teachers are teaching some topics "at arm's length," if not exactly out-offield. Personal attention is high, but small class size makes efficiency low. Rural schools need more state aid per pupil.

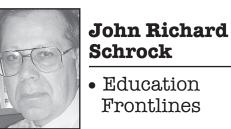
Politically and socially, small communities center around their school. It is a big part of their identity. When a school is lost, it can leave a ghost town.

In contrast, teachers in larger high schools have only one or two "preps" a day. Class sizes are closer to 24 or more. Larger schools offer a wider array of advanced courses. "Local option" money often supplements the budget and facilities can be substantially better.

With rural schools unable to replace retiring teachers in more and more fields, and with state tax revenues likely to fall for some time, consolidation may now have legitimacy.

The proposed "regional district model" is based on businesses. It looks at McDonalds restaurants and Wal-Mart stores ,where a 60 mile radius in the west or a 30-minute travel rule in the east determines the minimal population necessary to support a store.

An administrator might say, "if we have a McDonalds, we can keep our school." Regional school districts also resemble the Kansas Rural Health Network, where smaller community hospitals are hubbed around a few large, specialized hospitals. This model would



transport young students to nearby elementary school and have secondary students ride the bus on to a few larger high schools.

Several of the 40 proposed regional districts were examined in detail to estimate how much change might occur. A South Central Regional District around Pratt could consolidate 17 current districts into one and 36 schools into 30, a net loss of six schools although there would be some reconfiguring of the schools involved.

A Manhattan Regional District could consolidate nine districts into one and 45 schools into 30, a loss of 15 schools. And a Southwest Regional District consolidates 17 districts into one and 36 schools into 30, a net loss of six schools.

This last case preserves one "necessary small school." If the travel distance is over one hour on the bus, a small local school would not automatically be closed. The regional plan uses optimum sizes; while some rural schools are too small, and some current schools in Salina and Manhattan are considered too large.

Those models are theoretical. The actual regional districts would have their own elected school boards to determine the consolidation for each area.

Consolidation would address a small part of the teacher shortage. If one small school has a qualified teacher teaching a class of ten students and a second has an out-of-field teacher doing the same, a consolidated school could teach the 20 students with the one qualified teacher.

Savings for each regional district could come by eliminating all those small school boards and district offices, reducing the associated operational costs, and most of all, reducing the teaching staff and support costs. In normal economic times, this could translate into higher teacher salaries and better health coverage. And with more course offerings, including a regional technical school and more qualified teachers, there should be less need for remedial courses at state colleges and universities

A drawdown from nearly 300 unified districts to 40 regional districts might solve the shortage of superintendents and other administrators. However, such a plan would require action by the Legislature. And if approved, it would take five to 10 years to accomplish. Forty regional districts might save Kansas from \$240 to \$480 million per year, but there would be up-front costs for reconfiguring some buildings. And the higher cost of fuel for busses is a development not considered when these districts were first proposed.

Consolidation is definitely a "gray" issue, balancing the community pain of losing many local high schools with the benefits of better facilities, utilizing a smaller staff, and improving curricula.

However, some legislators could look at the possible saving of \$480 million per year as a possible tax cut. That would mean the pain of consolidation and no educational improvements, a clear no-win situation for both communities and schoolchildren.

When the regional plan was proposed several years ago, we did not have a severe rural teacher shortage and our economy was not in crisis. No one would take the political risk to promote a statewide consolidation plan.

Meanwhile, rural Kansas is shrinking. Some small districts are holding out. One northwest Kansas district shrank from 360 to 240 students but had enough teacher retirements that they did not have to let any teachers go. The superintendent retired and continued on for \$1 a year in salary. Such tactics are desperate. They attest to the commitment to small-town culture, but they only delay the inevitable.

Since the regional proposal was ignored, eight school districts have found their shrinking student enrollment too expensive to maintain. They disbanded or merged with adjacent districts. Kansas has dropped from 303 districts to 295.

Whether the newly elected legislators move toward the politically difficult decision to establish 40 regional districts in a quick and organized fashion, though, or whether Kansas slowly combines districts in a haphazard order, school consolidation is going to occur in Kansas.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

We encourage comments on opinions expressed on this page. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701, or e-mail s.haynes @ nwkansas.com or colby.editor @ nwkansas.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Free Press, its staff or the owners.