



Free Press Viewpoint

Rural problems need rural answers

What can people in rural Kansas do to preserve our way of life from the depredations to eastern legislators bent on making government efficient, "just like Wal-Mart?"

How can the state encourage better and more efficient government far from Topeka without forcing consolidations that would gut our county-seat towns and leave kids and taxpayers on the road for much of their lives.

The simple answer is, let us take care of our own problem. In this day of centralized solutions, that may seem odd, but

why not? In the last few years we've seen a movement among small school districts to close when the time comes or merge with nearby districts to form a stronger unit. Sometimes this just sort of happens; other times, there's a plan and a public vote.

In tiny Greeley County (population 1,534), voters agreed to merge the county with the city of Tribune. They hope government will become more efficient and more affordable.

Closer to home, the Jennings School District just went put of business when its enrollment dropped. In Herndon, voters agreed to merge with the Atwood schools.

Other counties have talked about merging law enforcement and other functions with their dominant city, though not much has happened. One reason is that under Kansas laws, it's difficult to merge government functions.

It takes – really – an act of the Legislature, and that is hard to get, as Sherman County reformers have learned. A few recalcitrant officials can thwart the will of the people and prevent an election on any kind of reform – often for years running.

Basically, legislators don't want to get involved if they sense there's a fight. It's not worth their trouble. And sometimes, public officials seem more concerned about their jobs than what the people want. So what to do?

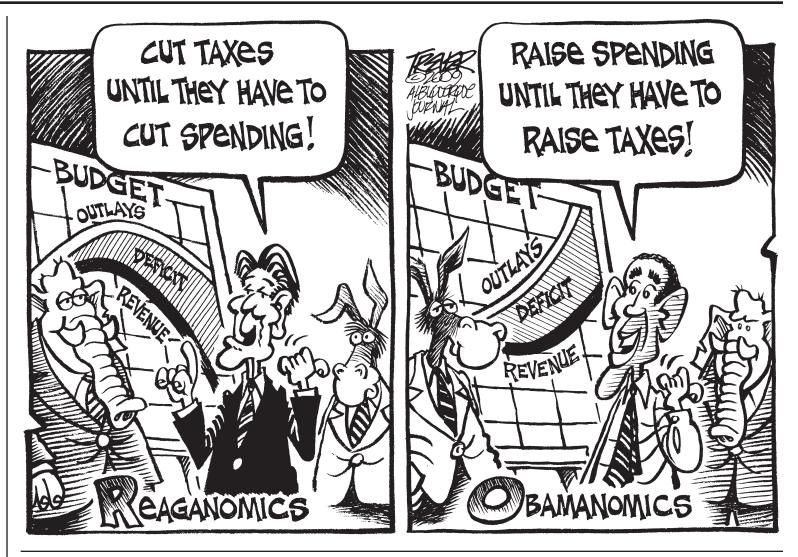
One bill advanced this year in Topeka had the right idea: just leave decisions up to local officials and local voters. As it has to some extent with school districts, the state should step aside and let rural people decide how they should be governed.

As far as saving money goes, the state should stay out of it. If it's state "aid" money, just let them keep it. Let cities and counties and school districts raise their own.

What we have today is a patchwork of government, brought on largely by state aid rules. Many counties share tax assessors, a move brought on by state requirements for high-end training. Others share emergency preparedness directors (a really bad idea, but popular) and others extension districts.

While all of these could be seen as preliminary moves toward county consolidation, often the sharing goes several directions for a single county. There's no plan or pattern.

Rural cities and counties and school districts could accomplish a lot with local plans for consolidation at the local level, avoiding 150-mile-wide megacounties and two-hour bus rides for school kids. But that's only going to happen if the Legislature makes it easy to merge and combine, then steps back (the hard part) and lets it happen. Put our fate in our own hands, and we can deal with it. And given the chance, we must. It's the only way to avoid forced consolidations on the Wal-Mart model, where if your town is too small for a supercenter, it's too small to live.



She's got a great bird hangout

Four and twenty black birds baked in a pie. Or in the case of my yard, three and twenty blackbirds and one fat dove hanging out at the bird feeder.

I have four feeders up. Two are just plastic tubes with six or eight holes and little plastic perches at each opening. The little birds really enjoy perching on those pegs and enjoying the bounty within. The problem is, they are messy little birds. It seems that they spill about as much as they eat.

The bigger birds pick up the stuff on the ground but can't sit on those tiny little perches and get anything to eat at the same time. I did see one enterprising black bird hang on for dear life on the perch and reach around the feeder to a hole on the other side. It sort of worked, but seemed like quite an acrobatic feat. Most of the blackbirds don't want to go to that much trouble.

So they were really happy when I put up the second pair of feeders.

Again we have a pair of plastic tubes with itty-bitty perches, but on the bottom of the plastic tubes are dishes to catch the spilled



seeds. It keeps the ground so much cleaner and provides a nice large perch for a hungry blackbird or dove.

Or so it seemed until I realized that the big birds love sunflower seeds but don't eat the hulls. Now the ground is littered with black sunflower-seed shells.

I have the big-bird feeders in a tree out back and the small-bird feeders on the side of the house. So far we've moved the small-bird feeders a couple of times.

The first time I wanted them nearer the trees to give the birds more cover. The second time was to move the mess off the grass and into a flower bed. This way, Steve can mow the yard when the time comes and if one of the lost seeds decides to germinate, I'll just pull it as another weed or have a sunflower, millet or corn plant growing there.

Actually, that happened to us a couple of years ago, even before we had bird feeders.

We ended up with several giant sunflowers growing in the corners of the garden. We just let them grow and they were really pretty until they got overage. There's nothing sadder than an overage sunflower, head drooping toward the ground. The birds might like the seeds but I sure didn't like the giant petal-less seedheads out there.

I guess the birds must have enjoyed the seeds, however, because I left the seedheads until late fall and then cleared them when I cleaned up the dead tomato vines and denuded corn stalks.

The next year, we didn't get any giant sunflowers. The birds must have done well.

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

Budget passes, sales tax holiday does not

The House considered hundreds of bills last

medallion, medal and a certificate of apprecia-

Steve Haynes

(785) 462-3963

Next week: Consolidations that might make sense.

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Steve Haynes - Publisher s.haynes @ nwkansas.com

<u>NEWS</u>

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter aheintz @ nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor mballard @ nwkansas.com

Vera Sloan - Society Editor colby.society @ nwkansas.com

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Jasmine Stewart - Advertising Manager j.stewart @ nwkansas.com

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week as we finished up for first adjournment. A few highlights:

2010 Budget

By a vote of 71-53, the House passed a balanced FY 2010 budget that expands health insurance for children and services for those with physical disabilities.

The bill ensures that the state will receive all education-related federal stimulus dollars. The House took measures to allocate this money solely for education in Kansas. Kansas public schools, with additional federal support in federal Title 1 education dollars, will get more money than they did last year.

Total General Fund expenditures (including operating expenditures) for public education, compared to FY 2008, will increase \$140.5 million or 4.6 percent in 2010. Money for state universities will increase 1.25 percent.

House Bill 2373 will add \$4 million to the Home and Community Based Services Physically Disabled waiver as well as \$1.2 million to expand the state Children's Health Insurance Fund.

We have a responsibility to help those who cannot help themselves. While cuts are inevitable to every agency, a balance must be struck to protect the most vulnerable without unfairly disadvantaging other vital state agencies.

By holding firm on the position that education must be considered for a reduction in the 2010 budget, House Republicans were able to limit the harm done to public safety and social service budgets.

Unfortunately, further cuts to all areas of the budget may be necessary.

Sales Tax Holiday

HB 2328 would have created a once a year "back to school" sales tax holiday starting in August 2011. Schools and nonprofits, as well as individuals, will be able to take advantage of the exemptions, including personal and clothing items under \$100, software, and personal and school computers. Though this didn't pass this year, I will push for a vote on it next year.



Random Drug Testing

The House passed HB 2275 a few days ago. This bill will allow for random drug testing of a sample portion of those receiving cash assistance welfare beginning in July 2010. If a recipient fails the drug test, he or she must undergo counseling and drug rehabilitation.

On a third failing drug test, the recipient will be cut from the cash assistance program and must go before a review board from the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. This can improve life for these families and is respectful to taxpayer funding.

Right to Bear Arms

Senate Concurrent Resolution 1611 authorizes the submission of a state constitutional amendment to section 4 of the Kansas Bill of Rights that would be considered at the general election in November 2010.

The proposed amendment would insert new language that states:

"A person has the right to keep and bear arms for the defense of self, family, home and state, for lawful hunting and recreational use, and for any other lawful purpose."

Changing the wording of the Kansas Constitution to read "Individual owner right" from "The right of the people" will ensure individual gun ownership rights. The right to bear arms should be extended to the people, not just the government. I encourage all of you to vote on this issue when it reaches the ballot.

Veteran's Medallions

HB 2171, as amended, creates, within the Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs, the Vietnam War Era Medallion Program. Under the program, eligible veterans would receive a

tion.

Promoting Employment Across Kansas

HB 2365, passing by an overwhelming vote of 124-1, seeks to create new jobs and opportunities for the citizens of Kansas. The bill, known as PEAK, is designed to compete with other states, particularly Missouri, Oklahoma, and the 25 other states that are using more creative and aggressive business development and recruitment tools.

To qualify, new jobs must come to Kansas through the relocation of business operations and jobs from other states or repatriation of jobs from foreign countries.

A qualifying company is eligible to retain the state income tax withholding that would ordinarily have been sent to the state for a set number of years. This means that there are no "up front" costs out of the treasury or any economic development fund.

The companies are required to pay 50 percent of the health insurance costs for the employees. Also, the higher the wages paid, the more benefits the qualifying company is allowed. This creates an attractive situation for both the employer and employee.

This program will help modernize our economic development tools and make Kansas competitive so we can create new jobs for our citizens by attracting new companies to the state. It is the right thing to do for Kansas workers, families and communities.

While the legislature does not return to Topeka until April 29, I am available to speak with you during some of the interim. Please contact me to set up an appointment. It is an honor to serve as your representative; I look forward to discussing your individual cares and concerns.

Write State Rep. Jim Morrison, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St. Room 143-N, Topeka, Kan. 66612, call (785) 296-7676 or e-mail jmorriso@ink.org

