



Other Viewpoints

Department failed its duty regarding coal plant reviews

This is not how government is supposed to work. An e-mail trail examined by a Kansas City newspaper reveals a disturbingly cozy relationship between the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the Sunflower Electric Power Corp., which was seeking a permit to build a coal-fired power plant in southwest Kansas. After several years of contentious dealings during which a permit for the plant was denied several times, it appears that, during the closing days of Gov. Mark Parkinson's term, elements of the permit process were virtually turned over to Sunflower officials.

Key among those was the Department of Health and Environment's decision to simply forward public comments about the power plant to Sunflower officials who then supplied responses. In many cases, those answers, or something very much like them were simply passed along in a way that made them appear to be unbiased responses that were researched and supplied by the Kansas department.

It was no secret that this project was on the fast track after Parkinson bartered a deal in May 2009 that would allow one coal-fired plant to be built. Sunflower submitted a new permit application in January 2010. The permit still was under review when department Secretary Rod Bremby was dismissed from his post on Nov. 2. The next month, acting Secretary John Mitchell approved the permit.

During that seven weeks, the e-mails, obtained through a public records request, show that Health and Environment officials boiled the 6,000 comments down to about 275 questions, which it sent to Sunflower to obtain written responses. The e-mails also show instances where department staff members asked Sunflower officials whether the department should even respond to some comments.

What the e-mails reveal is a relationship that is highly inappropriate for a state agency and a company it has the duty to regulate. It wouldn't be unusual for the department to seek input or technical information from Sunflower, but to allow the utility to pick the questions it will address and then supply the answers was, in Bremby's words, "a total abdication of responsibility."

— Lawrence Journal-World, via the Associated Press

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roberts.senate.gov/public/

U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran, 354 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510 (202) 228-6966. Fax (202) 225-5124 moran.senate.gov/public/

U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp, 126 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124. Web site: huelskamp.house.gov

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW10th St., Room 225-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us

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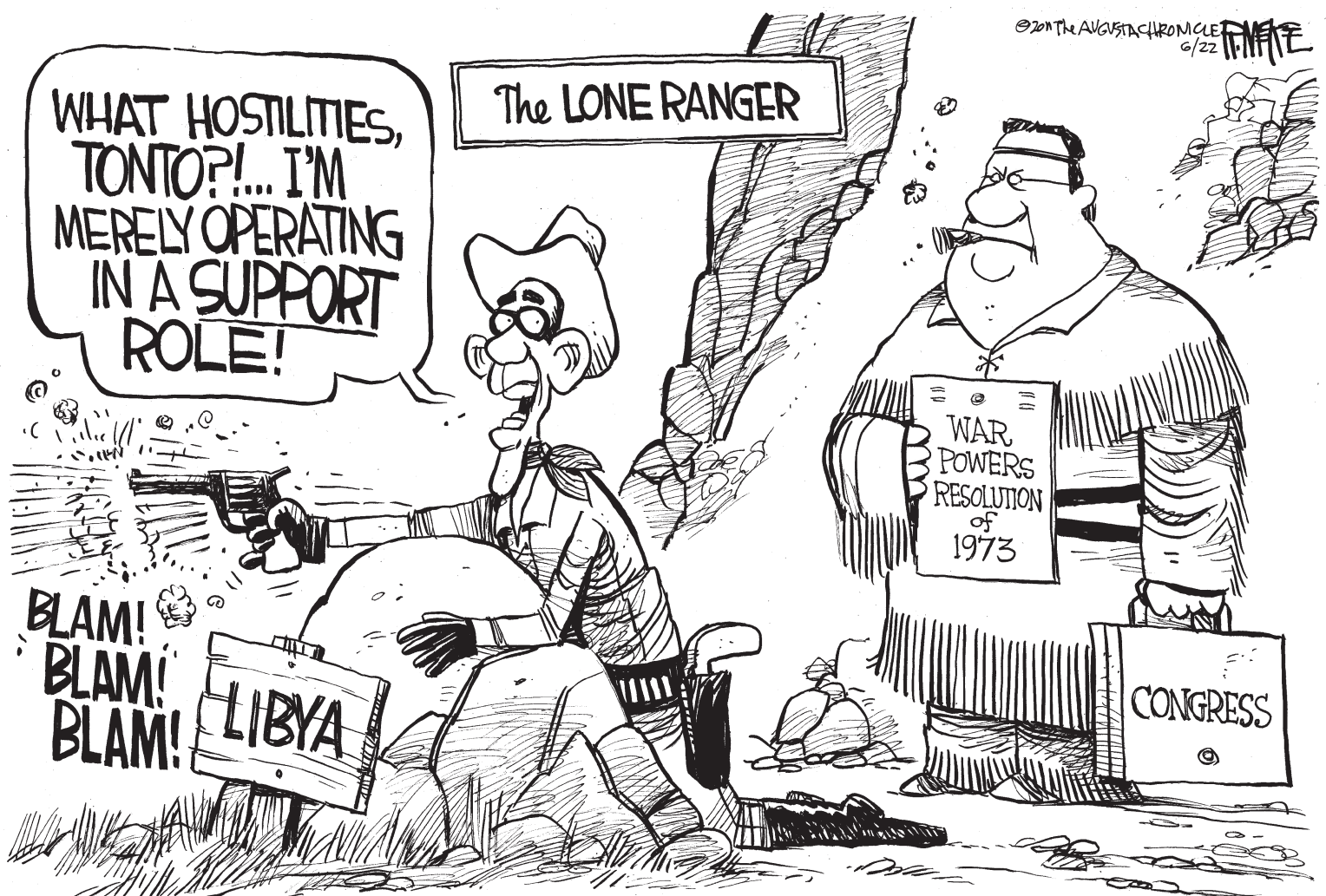
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Who goes to Arizona in the summer?

"It's a dry heat," they always say. That's just so much bunk. "They" should know if they live there.

But I don't care what they say; when it's 110, it's hot.

When we arrived at Phoenix for our meeting last week, it was, the pilot announced, 110 outside. And that's in the shade.

The walk down the jet way to the gate was stifling. The cool of the terminal only a brief respite. Outdoors, the full force of the evening hit you.

Since it's a dry heat, you have the illusion of not sweating. The droplets just evaporate straight off your skin. Dry does have some advantages. As long as you're not digging ditches in the sun, you can cope.

But then, by the time we arrived, it was evening, and the sun was no longer high.

At noon, dry heat or not, it's hard to function in the sun. Whatever they say.

And pretty soon you start to understand why Arizona does not observe Daylight Saving Time. They are in a hurry for the sun to go down. They don't need any more.

The evenings are pretty decent. In downtown Tempe, restaurants offer outdoor patios where misters spray water on the guests day and night. At night, though, with a little breeze,



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

you really don't need it. It's only in the 90s.

We found Arizona a strange place, where tourist attractions close in the summer and open again in the fall. Who'd be crazy enough to go to the desert in the summer? (Conventional wisdom does not account for convention planners looking for cheap hotel rooms, however. One museum we visited actually had to open up just for our group.)

At night, the students come out and roam the streets. Downtown Tempe and the Arizona State campus sort of meld together, the campus almost more a collection of city blocks than a park-like area.

Denizens of the night inhabit the sidewalks, college girls wearing too little and boys with more tattoos than any adult needs to see. And tourists who just shake their heads.

Street kids ride skateboards or play a guitar or dance for dollars. There's an argument. A

guy playing a sax tells a young woman to find her own corner and start singing to "earn a living." He's not very nice, but neither is she.

You wonder where they will be 30 years from now. Sleeping under a bridge, holding a sign and a cup at an intersection? They're so young to have dropped out, but society doesn't offer much to the dysfunctional.

By midnight, it may be down in the 80s. It never gets past the 70s. It might be that hot for a week or two out on the plains, but this is nothing like the heat we're accustomed to. In the desert, summer starts in May and runs to October.

I wear my shorts for three days. Most everyone else is in shorts, too. It's just a matter of survival. Going in and out, from heat to air conditioning, that's just normal. You'd have to think it'd cause a lot of summer colds.

Soon enough, we sweat our way through the jet way and let the little plane take us back to the plains, where it's cool. We follow thunderstorms east into the night, the temperature hovering in the 50s. It doesn't feel bad at all.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.

State aid to schools actually increasing

Other Opinions

• Dave Trabert Kansas Policy Institute

"Deceived" is a strong word, but there's no polite way to describe the way parents and teachers are being misled about the nature of school funding in Kansas. Some school boards, administrators, media and even some legislators are saying that state support of public schools is at 1992 levels; others are just saying state aid is declining next year. None of that is true.

State support is increasing by \$86 million next year, and that's on top of a \$261 million increase this year. Kansas Legislative Research reports that state spending on public schools was \$2.71 billion last year; this year it is \$2.971 billion and next year's budget is \$3.057 billion. And by the way, next year's spending will be more than twice what it was in 1992.

Some pieces of state funding are slightly declining next year because others are growing more than the overall funding increase. According to the school finance formula, amounts required for Special Education, pension payments and the state's portion of local bond payments are deducted from total aid; the remaining balance is then distributed according to the formula on a weighted per-pupil basis. Since the increases in those "off the top" items are greater than the \$86 million increase in total state aid, a reduction in base state aid

was necessary. Still, total aid from state, federal and local sources will still be about \$12,000 per-pupil next year, which would be a 5 percent reduction since FY 2009. (Federal aid is returning to pre-stimulus levels but local aid should be slightly higher.)

This minor reduction over the last three years is caused by the worst recession this state has seen in decades. We've lost over 70,000 private sector jobs in the last three years and average annual employment in 2010 was less than in 1998. Based on the change in income tax receipts, corporate earnings plummeted 49 percent between 2007 and 2010. The resources to insulate public schools from economic reality simply aren't available.

Schools have a number of alternatives to avoid changes that impact classrooms. Inflation increased 10.4 percent between 2005 and 2010 but per-pupil operating costs outside the

classroom jumped 17.7 percent. That's \$112 million above inflation.

Also, most districts didn't spend all of the revenue they received over the last five years; cash reserves in current operating funds (not counting capital and bond payments) increased by \$317 million and most of that money is state and local tax dollars that were intended to operate schools. Many districts claimed they couldn't use those unspent aid dollars because some of it was restricted.

But there's no question now that they can spend the money. A new law permits the transfer of unencumbered carryover cash balances from a group of twelve funds to be used for any operating purpose. There are no restrictions on how the money can be used and most districts have three or four times the amount needed to offset the change in base state aid per pupil.

Parents and teachers deserve the truth. State support of public schools is rising next year and districts have options to avoid direct classroom impacts. We hope they choose to do so.

Dave Trabert is president of Kansas Policy Institute. He does research and writes on fiscal policy and education issues. He graduated from West Liberty State College.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

