



Other Viewpoints

Is Kansas heading into school crisis?

It will surprise no one if the Kansas Supreme Court again sides with school districts and says the state is underfunding education. But because the Statehouse is a very different place than it was the last time the court ordered a funding increase, Kansas then could see a showdown that would make the federal shutdown seem tame.

Imagine Gov. Sam Brownback and legislative leaders denouncing and then defying the court, and further undermining its authority with legislation to change how justices are chosen, when they must retire and how much say courts have over school finance and other issues.

Envision a new zeal to justify spending less on education by reforming it to allow vouchers and more charter schools and to shift more funding responsibility to locals.

And think of how the high court might escalate the conflict, which last time included a threat to shut down schools (a power lawmakers subsequently tried to legislate away).

It would be a disaster for Kansas and potentially Brownback, who is up for re-election next year.

During three hours of oral arguments last week, the state's attorneys ably tried to persuade the justices that a three-judge special court panel got it wrong in January in ruling that funding is unconstitutional and in ordering the Legislature to "begin to effect a cure to the constitutional deficiencies" by increasing base state aid from the current \$3,838 per student to \$4,492. The state was on track to meet that latter benchmark, based on the Legislature's own cost studies and set by statute for "2009-10 and each school year thereafter," until cuts began under the previous governor amid the recession. The Wichita School District alone has had to cut more than \$50 million, including axing teaching jobs and closing schools.

"If that promise had been kept, we wouldn't be here," commented Justice Eric Rosen during the hearing, of the \$4,492 commitment.

Complying now could cost at least \$440 million a year — more than the \$430 million in current state reserves, and hard to come by as the massive 2012 income-tax cuts sharply reduce revenues. In fact, the state's defense is badly weakened this time by the passage of those tax cuts, which clearly mattered more to the governor and legislative leaders than any constitutional obligation to make schools whole.

As Wichita attorney Alan Rupe argued for the districts: "They took all the resources out of the system and then stand here and plead that they can't afford to increase funding to schools."

And because the Kansas Constitution's language requiring the state to "make suitable provision for finance of the educational interests of the state" has not changed since the last school-finance showdown ended seven years ago, the court can be expected to concur with the panel and, in effect, itself.

It will be up to state leaders to play their roles responsibly after the high court releases its decision in a few months, and for Kansans to make sure that public schools are as highly valued at the Statehouse as they are statewide.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*

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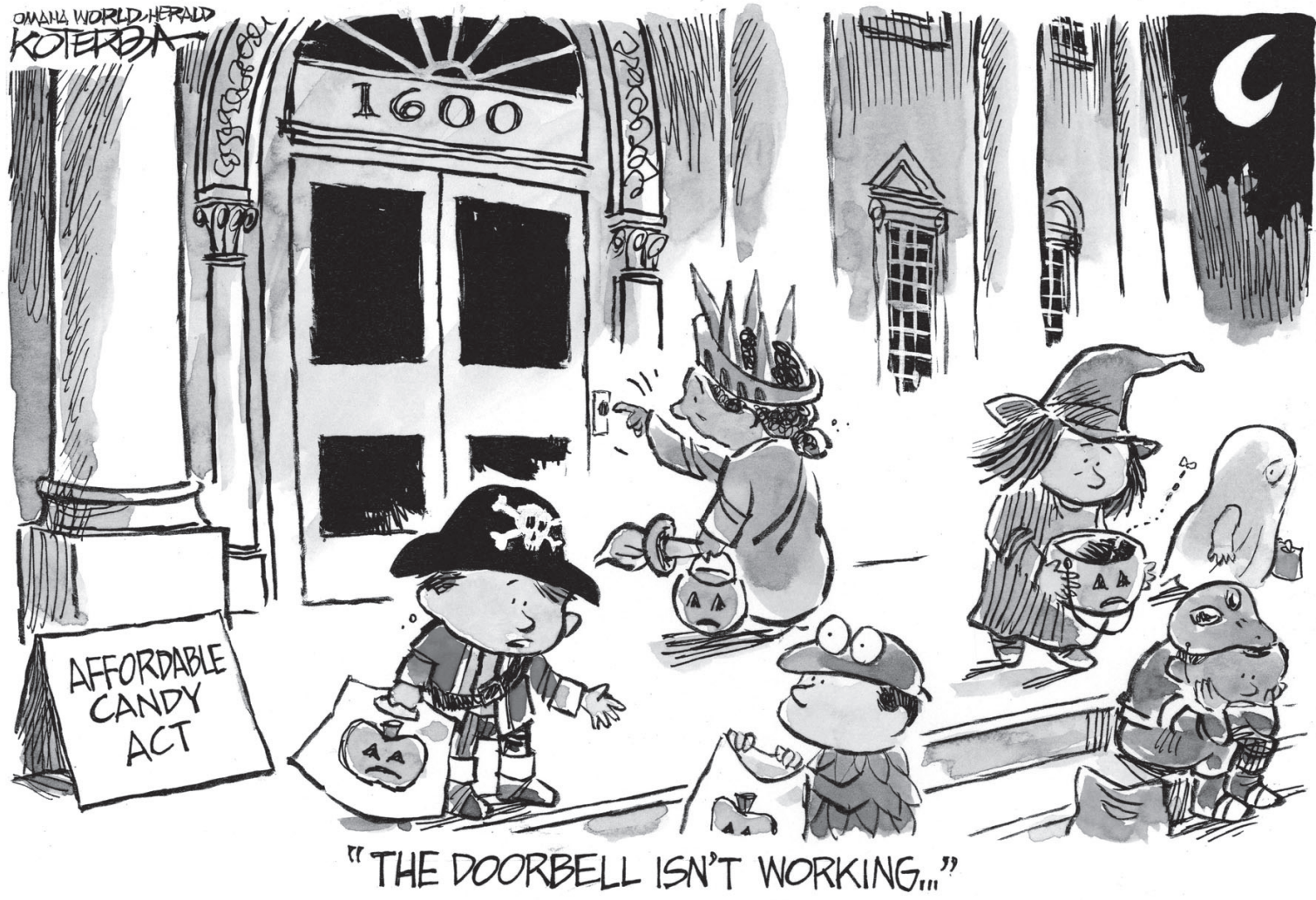
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Rain a welcome boost to fishing hole

Rain!

An inch Monday morning, three-fourths of an inch later, and counting. Water was running in the creek, and maybe, just maybe, some of it will get all the way to the Sappa Park fishing hole.

Wow did it sound good on the roof. Soon, the farmers will be complaining that they can't get into their corn and milo fields with a combine, and some fields may be flooding.

By the time the second storm came around, the ground apparently was saturated from the first. It's taken all the water it could hold. Ditches and gullies just kept running all afternoon, with a steady flow in the creek.

All that's something we can deal with after nearly two years of dry weather, however.

A couple of inches of rain does not a drought end, I know, but it's sure a pleasant change from last fall, when many people didn't have enough moisture to get their wheat up and out of the ground before winter.

It's starting to look like a good crop for next



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

spring, we're already 4 1/3 inches on moisture ahead of last year, and it can just keep raining.

Then there was the football game Friday. Our Oberlin Red Devils stuck their pitchfork in the Grant, Neb., team on Friday, 44-0. That brightens up the boys' season. Good job, guys.

And finally, the firefighters' ball.

The slide show was great, the march and lineup of the firemen impressive, and for music, "Amazing Grace" with bagpipes. Awesome.

A great crowd turned out, somewhere be-

tween 10 and 15 percent of the county's population at that one event. Almost everyone was dressed "to the nines," as they say, and the women were lovely in their party dresses.

I think women like these events because they get to wear cute dresses. Men should appreciate that, even the ones who don't much like to dress up.

And is it just me, or do some young men today have mothers who never taught them how to dress for a dance or a party?

Don't get me started.

Everyone seemed to be having a great time. Play-money gambling tables were full of people playing blackjack and betting on dice and the roulette wheel. Still to come were the auction and raffle.

It was a great night, and my hat's off to the volunteers who put made it happen.

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.

Congress' dysfunction doesn't reflect us

"While we've been busy promoting democracy abroad our own has kind of gone off the rails at home." — Thomas Pickering, retired U.S. diplomat

Individuals channel surfing late at night a couple months ago might have come across an interview with Thomas Pickering on PBS in which he uttered the above statement. His comments came back to me this past week while watching our federal government sit paralyzed with dysfunction.

Pickering has the experience and perspective to offer insightful commentary on the subject. During a long and distinguished career in the Foreign Service he served as U.S. Ambassador to Russia, India, Israel, El Salvador, Nigeria, Jordan and the United Nations. In addition to his native English he speaks fluent French, Spanish and Swahili, and is proficient in Arabic, Hebrew and Russian. In short, he has seen quite a bit of the rest of the world and has in-depth knowledge of how various peoples try to govern themselves around the globe.

During most of the interview he offered his thoughts on foreign policy — issues ranging from the Arab Spring to Syria and China. But for the final moments the interviewer brought him back home and asked a few questions regarding domestic policy. Pickering offered a few general comments before zeroing in on the partisan polarization that grips Congress, frequently grinding the business of governing to a halt.

A couple months later the problem to which he alluded is on display for all to see. Clearly the U.S. House is no longer the part of our gov-



Alan Jilka

• A Voice of Reason

ernment that reflects the popular will. Public opinion surveys at the beginning of this month consistently showed that over 70 percent of those polled opposed linking the Affordable Care Act to keeping the government open or to raising the debt ceiling. Even majorities of those opposed to the new health care law also opposed efforts to hold the government hostage to demands to defund it. Yet here we are in a place where few wanted to be.

Our partisan polarization has real consequences in the international sphere as well as fostering an attitude of cynicism among our own citizens. Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, an international political consulting firm, wrote this past week that "American dysfunction at home is undermining our credibility abroad." He singled out the fact that President Obama had to cancel a trip to an Asian summit to deal with the government crisis at home, effectively ceding the leadership position at the gathering to the ascendant Chinese. The group photo of leaders taken at the summit showed Chinese President Xi Jinping front and center with American Secretary of State John Kerry (not a head of state) in the back row.

So where do we start to get our government functioning again? Never mind whether one likes or dislikes President Obama or John Boehner. How do we address the systemic problems that lead to this inability to deal with critical issues facing us?

Pickering suggests a starting place — undoing the gerrymandering of congressional districts. Due to extreme gerrymandering the majority of congressional races nowadays are decided in primaries. Politicians respond by running towards the extremes. With so few members of the "people's house" coming from competitive districts (only 19 Republican congressmen, for example, come from districts won by President Obama in 2012), there is little reason to compromise. Competitive congressional districts would give members more incentive to compromise and appeal towards the political center where most of the populace lies.

We can only hope that the current crisis will give added impetus to efforts to "fix" flaws in our democratic system. The wisdom of retired public servants like Thomas Pickering can guide our efforts and help channel our anger and frustration in a positive direction. Hopefully our current quagmire will give impetus to movements to refine and perfect our country's great experiment with democracy.

Alan Jilka is a former Salina city commissioner and mayor. He was the Democratic nominee for Congress in the 1st District in 2010.

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