

from our viewpoint...

Good to examine fire chief options

Sherman County does not have a full-time fire chief — yet. For some, that is a disappointment, but based on the discussion at the Sherman County commissioners meeting on Thursday, a couple of major obstacles have to be overcome.

The commissioners continue to look at their options on the fire department and fire chief issues, and they are including the county-appointed Rural Fire District board in those discussions.

Thursday, fire board members at a commission meeting said they had voted at their last meeting against hiring of a full-time chief right now. They said they couldn't see how to pay the person's salary, benefits and support expenses in future years with their current budget.

The district includes the entire county except the city of Goodland, plus a small piece of western Thomas County around Brewster. It was created by a vote of the people, and under state law, the maximum property tax levy is 5 mills, which would be a bit less than \$200,000 a year based on the present valuation in the district. The levy this year is about 4.5 mills.

Options the fire board and commissioners are looking at include finding a way to join or contract for some services with the city, using other county money and attaching additional duties to help pay for the full-time fire position or to consider asking the people in the fire district to raise their own taxes.

No decision has been made, but the commissioners and fire board are hoping to sit down with city commissioners this month.

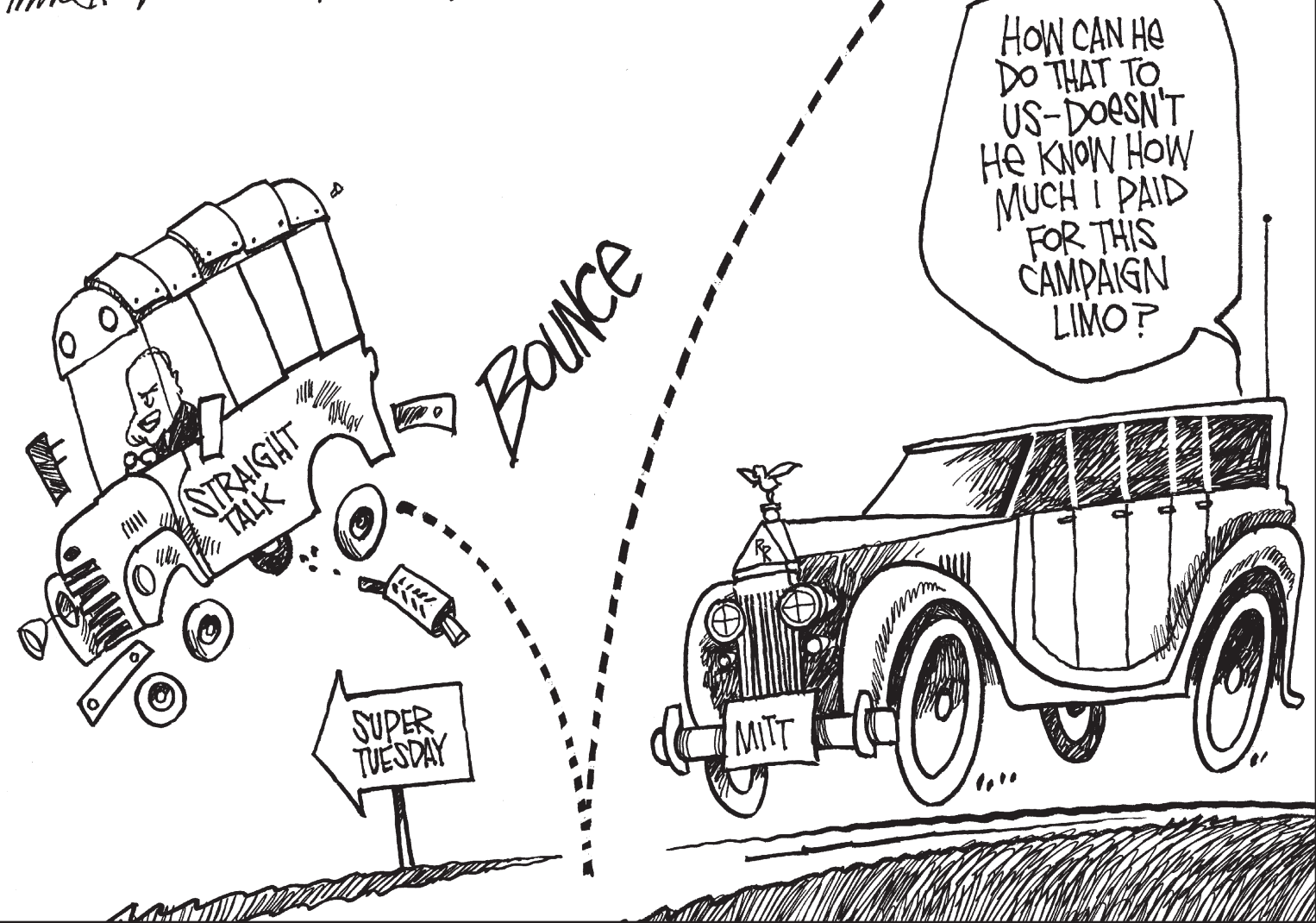
The rural fire chiefs say they need help with paperwork, and there probably is enough other work to keep a full-time chief busy. The best solution may not be a fire chief, though. There may be other ways to improve the efficiency of the departments and keep the outlying stations of Kanorado and Brewster as well equipped as possible.

In today's world, with paperwork dealing with things like bioterrorism, national security and emergency management, a full-time person or more is needed to keep up with the regulations, plans and grant applications. A combination of those duties with fire protection might be another way to handle the needs, but those duties should not be such a large piece as to lose sight of the fire service needs.

The county has a good group of volunteer firemen in all three stations, and they deserve our best support for what they do.

By taking the time to do it right and look at all the options, the volunteer firemen and people of Sherman County will be better protected. — Tom Betz

Mike Keefe THE DENVER POST 02/03/08 www.caglecartoons.com



Nicaraguan story couldn't happen today

One of my favorite stories about Nicaragua probably couldn't happen today.

A friend, a mining geologist, was with a State Department team looking for enough ore to start a steel industry in the 1970s.

The dictator Anastasia Somoza, who ruled Nicaragua in the style of his iron-fisted father, wanted a steel mill. Every country wanted a steel mill in those days, and either the U.S. or the Soviet Union would provide the equipment and expertise.

But there was no ore, and the team had to go tell the volatile strongman.

"I could have you all taken out and shot," Somoza rumbled.

"Yes, general, you could," my friend recalled saying, "but that wouldn't put any iron in the mountain, would it?"

Somoza fled the country in 1979, the last of his family to plunder Nicaragua, but a decade of civil war, leftist dictatorship and continual unrest followed. The pall from those days hangs over Nicaragua today.

Tell a friend in the U.S. you're going to Nicaragua, and they'll likely say something like, "Won't you be shot? Isn't it dangerous?"

But as nearly everyone you meet will tell you, today, Nicaragua is among the two or three safest countries in all of the Americas. No one gets shot there today. Murder and robbery are rare, and political violence is a thing of the past. You can walk down the main streets and be panhandled less than you would in Denver.

The legacy of dictatorship, civil war and strife lives on long beyond the reality, though,



steve haynes

• along the sappa

and while tourism is growing, visitors from the U.S. are a minority. (Most tourists come from other central American countries to take advantage of low prices in Nicaragua.)

Democracy, while it seems to be growing, is at a young and fragile stage. It could stumble, it could be snuffed out by a careless gesture. But leaders here say they think it is strong enough to survive.

In just 16 years of honest elections, Nicaragua has had but four presidents. The first, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro is a national heroine. Though her husband, a fiery editor and owner of Managua's largest newspaper, had been gunned down in a political killing 30 years ago, she ran against the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega and won, paving the way for more free elections down the road.

Her successor, Armando Alemán, was convicted of corruption after he left office and put under house arrest for 20 years, but he still leads a large faction of the center-right Liberal party.

Democracy recovered under Enrique Bolaños, but seemed threatened last year when Ortega ran and, with help from Alemán, won with just 36 percent of the vote. Eduardo Montealegre, the U.S.-educated (Brown and

MIT) economist who was the leading Liberal candidate, had just 28 percent.

Montealegre, meeting with American editors for breakfast, said he thought Ortega's return was necessary to prove Nicaraguan democracy. If the country's institutions can survive a change of power to the leftist Ortega, a former dictator, and back, he said, then they will be strong enough to continue.

"It's something that had to come," he said.

For his own part, Montealegre said the opposition has to come together to win. In 2006 it was split, with three candidates facing Ortega. Under a deal between Alemán and the Sandinistas, the law was changed to allow a candidate to be elected with less than a majority, something Ortega knew he'd never win.

Montealegre said he hopes to be the Liberal candidate for mayor of Managua this fall, if all the parties can come together and Alemán's price is not too high. That would put him in a position to take the presidency in the next election, assuming Ortega can't get Congress to change the constitution and allow him to run again. No one thinks that will happen.

Nicaraguans are almost apologetic about the youthful state of their system, but in truth, other countries have had to pass the same tests. Mexico and Taiwan had their first peaceful changes of power in the last decade. The U.S. itself had to fight a civil war to settle the central question about its constitution, and that was more than 80 years after the founding.

Nicaragua is yet a young democracy, with many trials ahead.

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Clearing up information about telemedicine

To the Editor:

I just read your news article which appeared in *The Goodland Star-News* (Friday, Jan. 11) regarding Congressman Jerry Moran's recent visit to Goodland. I would like to take a few minutes to correct misinformation that a local hospital administrator shared with Rep. Moran and those in attendance regarding how Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas feels about telemedicine.

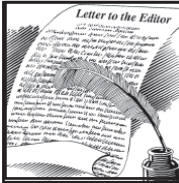
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas has been providing coverage for telemedicine since 1993, and was the pioneer in providing this service for Kansans. While I can't say for certain that Blue Cross is the only insurance carrier currently operating in the state to provide coverage for telemedicine, we do know that the coverage is not widespread among our competitors.

For 15 years we have recognized that access to telemedicine is important for our rural members as it facilitates consultations with specialists in urban medical centers, saving our members lengthy travel to urban communities in eastern Kansas or other states. Many of these consultations, simply billed as an office visit or consultation for which we pay our normal maximum allowable payment, allow a Blue Cross member's doctor to determine if he or she can continue to treat the patient locally or if an urgent transfer to a tertiary medical center is indicated. Any medical specialty can use the telemedicine technology but I understand it is most popular in cardiology, dermatology, mental health and radiology.

What the hospital administrator might have been alluding to is that Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas has not supported proposed legislation that would require insurers to pay an origination fee to the hospital. We do not see the rationale for a hospital to bill us for originating the telemedicine process when we are already paying the hospital for services that our member is receiving. In many cases the use of telemedicine allows rural hospitals to maintain their revenue stream by keeping

from our readers

• to the editor



patients in their facilities rather than having them transferred to other facilities in urban areas.

In closing, allow me to reiterate that Blue

Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas does, in fact, recognize the importance of telemedicine for our rural members and is pleased to include coverage for this service in all our benefit plans.

Graham Bailey
Vice President, corporate communications and public relations
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas
Topeka

