

from other pens...

Celebrate sunshine to preserve society

Those of you interested in preserving our democratic society need to celebrate Sunshine Week, March 16-22.

Actually, "celebrate" is far too strong a word. "Observe with passion" is a better way to look at it, because there's not much to celebrate. The cause of open government is going backward—in Kansas and across most of the United States.

The Sunflower State, along with 37 other states, recently flunked the sunshine test by the Better Government Association, a non-partisan watchdog group that digs into problems and solutions about transparency and accountability in government. The study examined citizens' access to public information.

The ugly results show that "citizens have little or no recourse when faced with unlawful denial of access to their state's FOI laws," said Charles Davis, executive director of the National Freedom of Information Coalition.

That should be no surprise in Kansas, where there has been a recent epidemic of open government problems involving local governments and issues large and small. A few examples:

- The Kansas Attorney General's office has ruled that the Thomas County Commission twice violated the state's open meetings act by discussing a salary plan behind closed doors. In early February, Assistant Attorney General Michael Smith told commissioners they must accept a settlement agreement or face prosecution.

- Lawrence city commissioners were ordered in January to take a two-hour refresher course on compliance with the Kansas Open Meetings Act. Commissioners got into trouble when they went into a closed-door executive session to consider economic development incentives for a pharmaceutical company. After the violation became public, the company scuttled its plans to expand in Lawrence.

- The attorney general's office determined in January that five members of the Garfield City Council and the mayor violated the open meetings law by going into a secret session to discuss a broken window at the city's fire station.

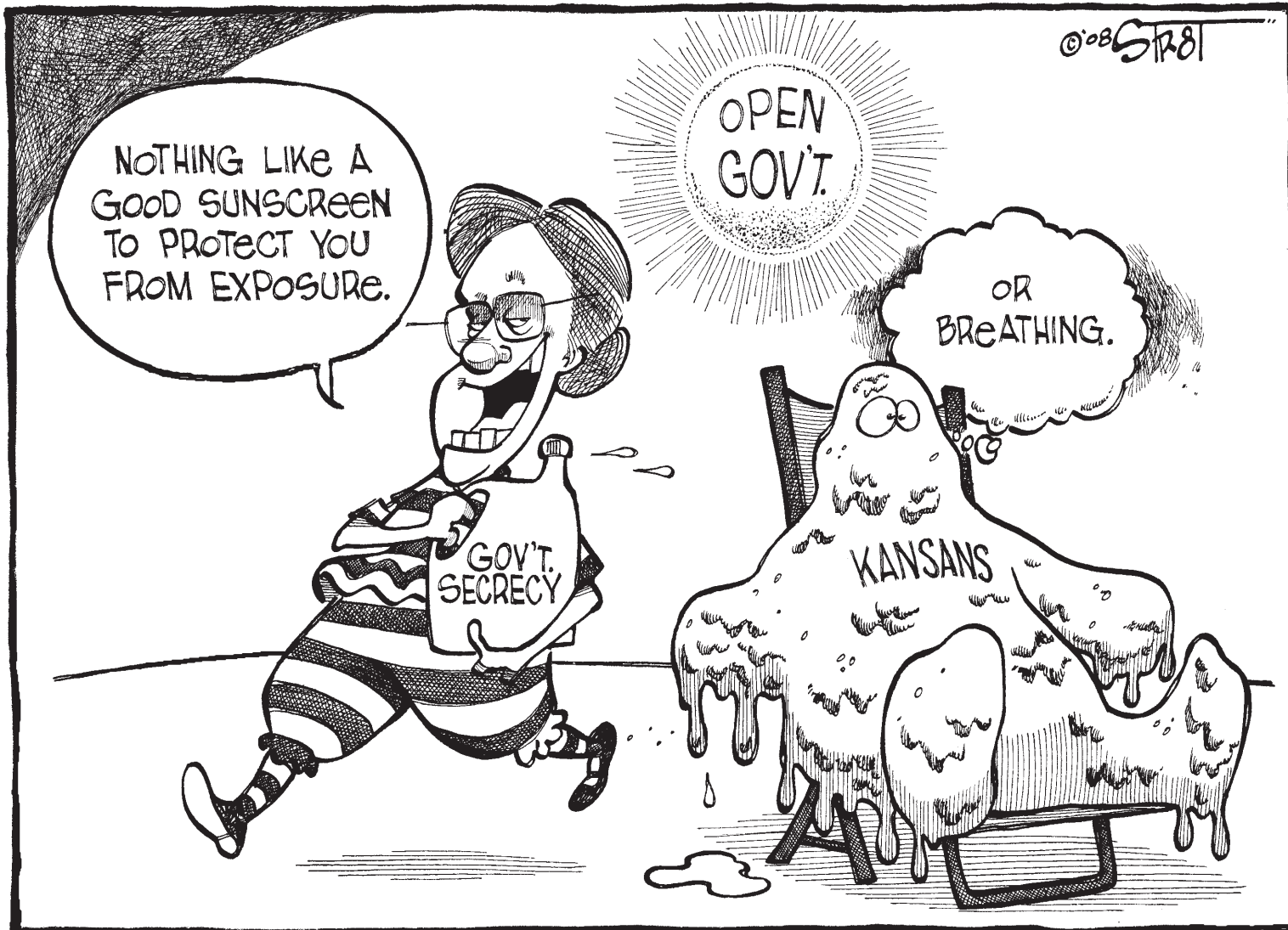
- The Topeka City Council has ignited a firestorm with its "serial meeting" end run around the open meetings law to buy a backup police helicopter. Essentially, five members of the council met one-on-one in secret phone calls. The \$850,000 copter purchase passed 5-4. Now Shawnee County District Attorney Robert Hecht has filed a lawsuit seeking to block the purchase. He says the most important issue is the council's secret run around the law.

There's plenty more bad news, but why? Why are so many local governments finding it so hard to operate meetings legally? Why is it often so difficult for members of the public to get access to public records?

Actually, it's more than important. It's essential. Without open government, you don't have a democracy. You may have something like Iraq under Saddam or Cuba under Fidel.

But you don't have a democracy.

Randy Brown, Senior Fellow at the Elliott School of Communication at Wichita State University, is executive director of the Kansas Sunshine Coalition for Open Government. To find out more about the open government issue, visit nfoic.org, sunshinecoalition.com and sunshineweek.org.



U.S. editors visit brings touch of home

By KRISTIN STEWART

U.S. Embassy, Managua

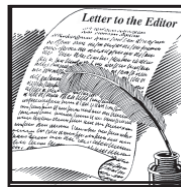
Last month, I was visited by folks from "my part" of the world.

This might not sound like such a feat, given today's interconnected world, but given that I'm a graduate of Elizabeth High School in Colorado, currently working at the U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, over 2,200 miles away, I assure you it is rare to have the pleasure of speaking with folks who actually know where Elbert County is!

This visit from two dozen U.S. citizen newspaper publishers and Denver-area business leaders to Managua, Nicaragua's capital, was arranged by the National Newspaper Association. In the group were association President Steve Haynes, publisher of The Oberlin Herald in northwest Kansas, and past President Bob Sweeney, publisher of The Villager newspapers in Colorado.

Since I spent almost every summer of my childhood on family farms in Prairie View and Long Island, Kan., just east of Oberlin, it was even more amazing to speak to someone who knew where Phillips County is!

My job as press officer in the U.S. Embassy was to arrange a briefing session for the group



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with Ambassador Paul Trivelli. As the group exchanged comments on everything from politics to the weather (which was a typically Nicaraguan, sunny, 90 degrees), I was reminded of just why I had joined the Foreign Service in 2002.

Every time people have the chance to sit down and learn about cultural differences, they end up finding similarities. I am proud to be part of promoting that greater mutual understanding between countries. Each day, I speak to Nicaraguans not just about official U.S. government policy, but about who we are as Americans/what our common values of democracy, freedom of expression and volunteerism mean to us. And when I have time, the difference between Colorado and Kansas. (No, all those "square" states in the middle are not the same.)

My parents have since moved from Elizabeth to Aurora, so obtaining a copy of a Villager newspaper is now a bit easier. When I

was growing up (a.k.a. pre-Internet), some older kid with gas money and a car that could make it (versus the old farm trucks most of us drove) had to get one on an infrequent trip to the "big city."

This was our lifeline to know what cool bands were playing when and where, even if we didn't always get permission to drive in to Denver to see them. I'm glad the NNA was able to visit and close the distance between Colorado and Nicaragua for a few days.

I hope more U.S.-based professional, trade and volunteer organizations will consider study trips to developing countries. It helps build international goodwill in a personal way, and showcases just how wonderful folks from every part of the world are.

Kristin Stewart has a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service from Georgetown University and a Master of Public Policy from the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. She speaks Spanish and French and has served in Bogota, Colombia, where she married her husband Carlos, and Mexico City where their daughter Anna was born. She is serving a three year assignment as press officer at the U.S. Embassy in Managua, Nicaragua.

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Support sound energy policies in Kansas

By ALLAN MILLER

Prairie Land Electric Co-op

Since Rod Bremby, as secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, denied an air permit for the Holcomb power plant expansion on Oct. 18, Sunflower Electric Power Corp. has endured public criticism from people who contend that Kansans should obtain their energy from sources other than coal.

As the manager of Prairie Land Electric Cooperative, which provides electric service in 18 counties in northwest and north central Kansas, I'd like to share some information with you about the impact of this project on electric rates.

First, Sunflower is a nonprofit utility that operates as the wholesale power provider for six rural electric cooperatives in central and western Kansas, including Prairie Land, based in Norton. On behalf of all six cooperatives, Sunflower owns and operates generating units fueled by coal, natural gas and wind. Sunflower's existing coal facility, a 360 megawatt plant south of Holcomb in Finney County, is the cleanest coal plant in Kansas.

The proposed expansion involves building two additional plants at the Holcomb Station. The \$3.6 billion project will provide \$750 million in financial benefits to Sunflower, covering costs that won't have to be passed on to its member cooperatives.

These financial benefits, in addition to cash payments, include lower fuel costs, reduced operating costs, and the economies of scale of a larger facility. Power from the two new units will be used by members of 67 rural cooperatives in Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico and Texas.

The project will create more than 2,400 construction jobs in southwest Kansas over six years. After completion, the new power plants would create more than 325 new jobs in Kansas.

But Why Use Coal?

Electric cooperatives are required to provide their members with reliable electricity at the lowest possible cost.

The United States has more than one-third of the world's proven coal reserves, more coal than Saudi Arabia has oil. If we want to be energy independent, coal is a reliable source of energy that can serve our nation for many generations to come. The abundance of coal



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helps keep the price affordable. Because coal is economical and reliable, for those with a cost bias, it is the fuel of choice.

Other fuels have characteristics that make them less desirable. Because natural gas is not as plentiful as coal, the law of supply and demand makes it more expensive. Consumers will see a substantial increase in energy prices if a "no-coal" policy is adopted here.

Hydroelectric generation is not a reasonable alternative in Kansas, and nuclear plants are prohibitively expensive to build.

Solar energy seems like a logical choice, but this developing technology is not yet advanced for large-scale use, and the cost is staggering. In December 2007, Power magazine estimated the production cost for the world's largest solar project in Germany was \$510 per megawatt hour.

Wind energy seems like the solution to many people. However, busload units such as large coal plants operate consistently at 90 percent capacity, while wind systems average less than 40 percent in most instances. Since the wind blows intermittently, consumers cannot rely exclusively on it.

No Coal? Higher Rates

Understanding why coal is the most cost effective requires knowledge of how electricity is measured. A kilowatt is the basic unit of electric demand, equal to 1,000 watts. A kilowatt hour is a unit of energy equal to 1,000 watt hours. For example, a 100 watt light bulb burning for 10 hours uses one kilowatt hour. Electric bills are based on the price per kilowatt hour and the number of kilowatt hours consumed.

Generation facilities measure output in megawatts, equal to 1,000 kilowatts or 1 million watts. A megawatt hour is equal to 1,000 kilowatt hours or 1 million watt hours.

In 2007, production costs for Sunflower's Holcomb Station averaged \$12.23 per MWh, and costs for Sunflower's gas-based generation plants were \$68.68 per MWh. The average home uses approximately 1,000 kWh per month, so relying on natural gas would increase members' annual electric rates by more than \$675.

Stewards of the Environment

Sunflower's member cooperatives primarily serve those who make their living off the land, a large number of large and small businesses and many residential consumers. Knowing that you, our customers, care not only about affordable electric rates but also about living in a healthy environment, we continue to seek and implement technological solutions to upgrade our generation.

Due to the significant investment in these new technologies, today's generation from coal is more efficient and results in lower carbon dioxide emissions and less coal being burned for the power produced. A comparison of 2006 emission rates from the eight Kansas coal plant facilities shows that Sunflower's has the lowest emission rate in the state for sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide and carbon dioxide. Advanced technology used on the new units at Holcomb will further reduce emission rates.

Sunflower has made significant investments in wind power. The combined capacity of Sunflower and Mid-Kansas Electric Co. has 124 megawatts of wind energy, more than 12 percent of our native load. Only Midwest Energy, our cooperative neighbor, will have a larger percentage of its load dedicated to wind energy by the end of 2008. Cooperatives are leading the way in wind development in Kansas.

You Can Help

Your Kansas legislators have passed a bill that would help provide customers in central and western Kansas with affordable and reliable electricity. The success of the Holcomb project will have a definite and immediate impact on you.

To help ensure this project is successful, I encourage you to contact legislators and let them know that people in central and western Kansas deserve the same reliable, affordable energy and economic benefits enjoyed by those elsewhere in the state.

Time is of essence, so please act today.

To find out how your legislators voted on the energy bill, go to www.kec.org and click on Support Sound Energy Policies in Kansas

If you have questions, call our office at (800) 577-3323 or stop in for a visit.

Allan Miller is general manager of Prairie Land Electric Co-operative at Norton and a board member of Sunflower Electric Power Co. of Hays, which hopes to build the Holcomb Expansion project.