

from our viewpoint...

Judicial study signal for more rural cuts

A study of the state's judicial system announced this month by Lawton R. Nuss, chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court, is the kind that never bodes well for rural Kansas, especially western Kansas.

Chief Nuss said the 24-member "Blue Ribbon Panel," made up of judges, lawyers, legislators, court workers and a few citizens, will look for ways to improve the way courts serve Kansas. What he really means is ways to handle the growing caseload without any more state money.

Kansas courts have increased fees to keep up with their budget, but still had to enforce unpaid furloughs last year to make ends meet, closing court offices for days at a time. With the state budget already facing a \$550 million shortfall next year, there's little prospect of getting more from the Legislature this year.

The panel will use figures from a "weighted" caseload study initiated by the courts last summer to come up with its recommendations, the chief said. Whatever those are, and the group has not yet begun its work, we might expect cuts in court services, judge positions and coverage for our area.

The chief justice said the panel "is authorized to consider such issues as the number of court locations needed to provide Kansans access to justice, the services to be provided in each court location, hours of operation, appropriate use of technology, cost containment or reductions and flexibility in the use of human resources."

Since court unification in the 1970s did away with county courts, with an elected county judge in each county, Kansas by law has maintained at least one judge in each county. Some counties have a district judge, others a district magistrate judge who may or may not be a lawyer.

Judges are elected in rural areas, but appointed in most urban counties. They serve 31 judicial districts across the state, with from one to 26 district judges.

When courts look to cut costs elsewhere and focus on the growing caseload in urban counties, one of the answers often suggested is to cut back on services, employees and judicial positions in rural counties. So far, that has not happened, but it's clear the new commission could take another look at the "one judge, one county" promise.

Rural Kansas does not make for efficiency. With 105 counties, the state has a widely dispersed local government system. Yet the state expects, even requires, more of counties each year.

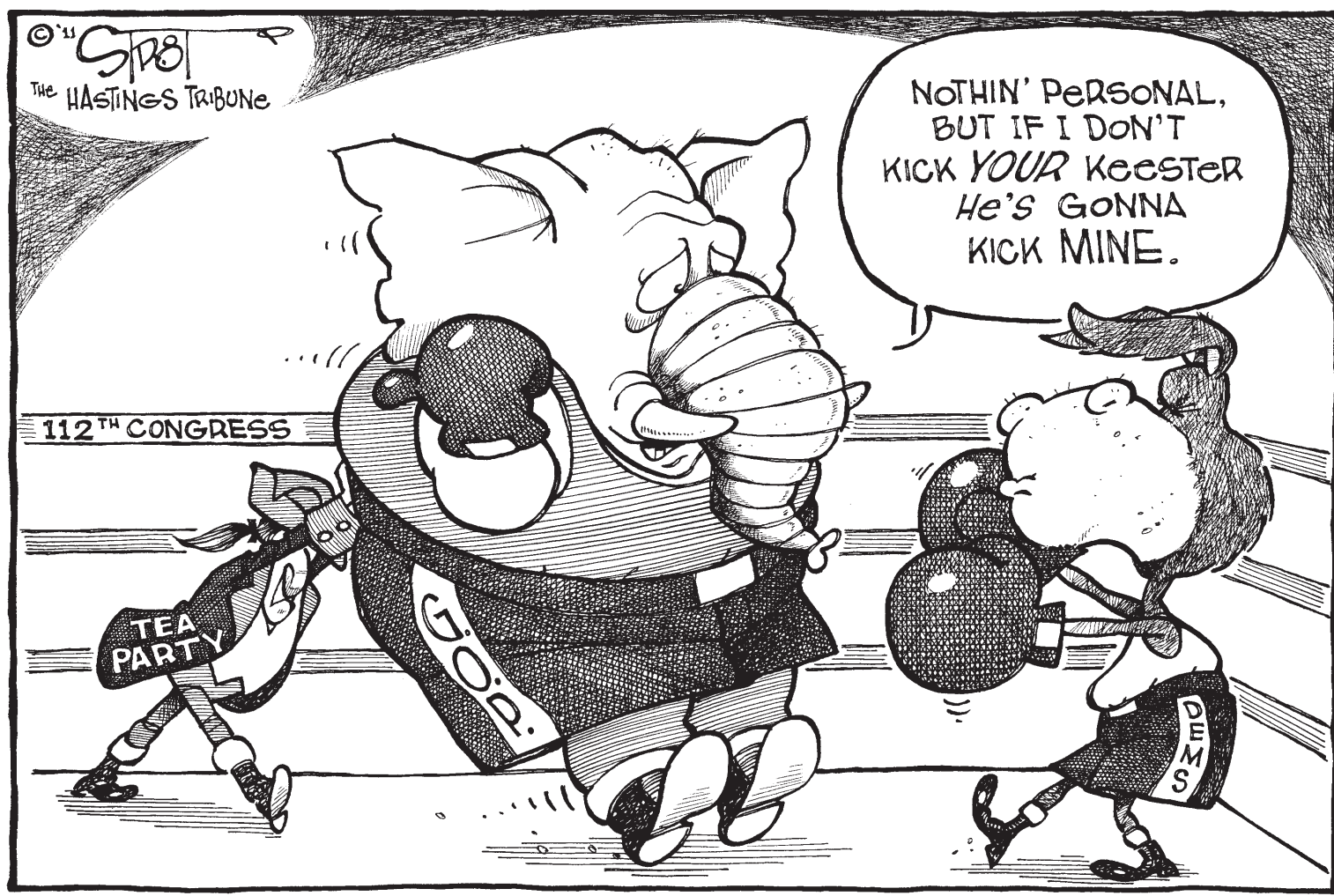
If there's pressure to cut court services in rural areas and shift resources to the cities, we'd like to know how people in rural Kansas will continue to receive the kind of service they are used to, and deserve.

Will defendants be hauled across two or three counties to see a judge? Will people have to drive half a day to see judicial records? Will filing court documents become an all-day trip for some?

Who knows? Judicial slots allocated to small counties are coveted by the cities. There's no money to grow the system, so something has to give.

All of rural Kansas needs to watch the progress of this effort by the courts. The panel includes several rural residents, some from western Kansas, but pressure will be great to shift resources to the cities.

We will have to fight for our courts and services. — Steve Haynes



Good schools are what the doctor ordered

As a lifelong resident of Goodland I am pleased to take this opportunity to offer my thoughts and support of the upcoming school bond issue our community will be voting on in April of this year.

I am a 1963 graduate of Goodland High School, which at the time was called Sherman Community High School. My wife, Jacque, and I returned to Goodland after I completed college at Ft. Hays State University in 1968 and we have lived here ever since.

We have raised five children all of whom I'm proud to say are graduates of GHS so Jacque and I do indeed have a vested interest in the local school system and our community.

People ask, "But your children are grown so why do you support this proposal?" The answer is simple: it's the right thing to do! Along with my wife and I others helped pay for the schools our children attended and quite frankly we are willing to do so for today's students. It's a part of the commitment we feel to our community and giving back to what has been given to us over the years by Goodland.

Unless the people of Northwest Kansas are willing to invest in their communities we stand very little chance of survival. Whether its streets, water systems, or schools we must continue to re-build our community's infrastructure for the future.

As an old adage goes, "failing to plan is plan-

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ning to fail." If we don't plan for our future, quite frankly, we'll not have one in Western Kansas.

My support is tied to my occupation as the director of Human Resources for Goodland Regional Medical Center. I completed my 41st year of service to the medical center in 2010 and the majority of my career has been in the area of human resources. In other words, it's my job to recruit and hopefully then retain the health care professionals who work at Goodland Regional Medical Center.

It has been my pleasure to have played a direct role in the majority of the hires at GRMC and I take great satisfaction in the quality level of service they provide daily in helping meet the medical needs of the people of Goodland and the surrounding area.

One of the first questions I get from many prospective recruits is, "What are the schools like in Goodland?" I always answer we have "good schools staffed by quality teachers who genuinely care about the educational well-being of their students." However, in looking around the community they do notice North

Elementary currently sits empty and Grant Junior High School, which was old when I went to school, still looks that same way today!

Because we have fewer students than we have had in years past it makes no sense to have five attendance centers when we can convert to two (K-6 grade at North), and consolidate the junior high school with the high school. Such a change would bring the very best of our educators into two attendance centers on behalf our students, help consolidate teaching resources, and ease the transition of students from elementary school, to junior high school, to high school they now must endure.

This is the kind of educational system we need in order to continue to attract the best and brightest not only to our educational system, but to our medical community as well. As human resources director I not only have to sell new recruits on the medical center, but on our community as well.

Your support of this bond issue is going to be critical to the future of Goodland in many ways. From a medical perspective, it is going to be vital in our continued efforts to provide a consistently high level of healthcare delivery by enabling us to recruit the best possible candidates to care for the medical needs of our residents!

Dale Shields
Goodland

Sherman County blood drive on Tuesday

To the Editor:
Every year, the citizens of Sherman County and the city of Goodland pull together to donate blood for the hospitals in Kansas and the pan handle of Oklahoma.

Many volunteers step forward to work the drives and to ask their neighbors to donate blood. These are the true heroes of the blood supply. There are too many volunteers to mention individually, but the Methodist Church, Elks Lodge, Goodland High School, Goodland Regional Medical Center and the Northwest Kansas Technical College were a great help this year and deserve a special shout out.

Sherman County total donations for the year of 2010 were 648.

Along with the community drive for Good-



from our readers

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land, there are blood drives held at the technical college and the hospital. The total is truly a wonderful gift to the community of Kansas which uses a little over 450 donations every day!

There are coordinator volunteers for each drive who work diligently to make sure everyone knows about the drives. If you would like to help with the blood drive on Tuesday, Jan. 25, at the Methodist Church, 12th and

Sherman, please contact Jeannie Pyles at (785) 890-2031.

To Donate Blood call 1-800 RED CROSS or go to www.redcrossblood.org to make an appointment. All blood types are needed to ensure the Red Cross maintains an adequate blood supply.

A blood donor card or driver's license or two other forms of identification are required at check-in. Donors must be in general good health, weigh at least 110 pounds and be at least 17 years old (16 in Kansas with completed Parental Consent Form available online). Visit redcrossblood.org to learn more.

Dawn Gabel, Donor Recruitment
Central Plains American Red Cross
Hays

Growing cost of obtaining records

Have you ever met a politician who didn't believe in open government?

We used to talk about the importance of shining light on our institutions of government, making sure that what they were doing was above-board, out in the open and not in smoke-filled rooms.

My, how times have changed. The "smoke-filled room" is a thing of the past, thanks to legislation, or in some cases, simple good taste.

And the new catchword replacing "sunshine" is "transparency."

It's difficult to get through an entire day without an officeholder blurting the word out at least half a dozen times.

Of course, "transparency" is often in the eye of the beholder.

For instance, in Topeka, the *Capital Journal* is fighting its police chief and county sheriff to get to records of a recent incident in which a police officer and an off-duty sheriff's deputy had a confrontation. It's been days since the incident, but mum's the word.

Transparency apparently is only a good thing if it involves ordinary citizens, not those who are hired to enforce the law.

It's not the first time the *Topeka Capital Journal* has had to get tough with its local government to find out what it should have been sharing with the public.

At the Kansas Press Association, we're witnessing a growing attitude of arrogance on the



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• commentary

part of a number of our elected officials. They, and only they, know best what information the public should consume, and they're making it tougher and tougher to get at the kind of information that in past years was routinely made public.

We have newspapers fighting for access to the packets elected officials are perusing during meetings, and they're running into significant roadblocks.

In one community, local officials have threatened to yank the official legal status of a newspaper because it published details of the salary increases for two employees while everyone else was asked to go without this year.

One issue becoming quite serious is the cost of obtaining public records.

Not a week passes at KPA or at Mike Merriam's law office a reporter doesn't call with a question about the fees being charged by local government offices for routine records of city, county and school district business.

Often, the charges levied are way out of line; certainly they are all over the board.

Now, some newspapers can afford to pay for the cost of copying a record, but it's becoming

more common for the cost of a public employee's time to be factored into the equation.

Sometimes, such an additional charge is justified, especially when the records are hard to locate or might be stored at a different location.

But we're finding more and more these fees appear to be aimed at making sure the reporter, or private citizen, thinks twice before pursuing the request.

In an attorney general's opinion several years ago, the figure of 25 cents per page was listed as a reasonable charge.

Today, most records are electronic in nature, so the cost of copying has dropped dramatically.

Even so, for the private citizen who has limited funds, these added charges can be the difference between getting needed records and heading home without them.

We think our public officials have somehow forgotten the records they are charging the public to copy were paid for by the public in the first place.

The kinds of horror stories we're hearing from our members indicate to me the charges are sometimes designed to discourage citizens from seeking records.

When the cost of obtaining a record becomes too expensive, the record may as well be closed.

Doug Naestaett is executive director of the Kansas Press Association.

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