

from our viewpoint...

Chip seal story far from finished

The story about the old U.S. 24 chip sealing project in Tuesday's edition of The Goodland Star-News was not the final chapter in problems with the project.

Complaints about the loose rock on the road got Commissioner Larry Enfield into investigating the whole project, and Commissioner Cynthia Strnad had questions going back to the billing received in September.

The chip seal project was handled by then Public Works Manager Curt Way, but problems with the project were not why the commissioners, including then Commissioner Chuck Thomas, fired him in September. That's another story.

All three commissioners, including Max Linin, were disappointed when Rick Peters, owner of Rocky Mountain Chipseal, did not appear at the meeting in April, instead sending attorney Aaron Atkinson, who tried to insist the county allow Rocky Mountain Chipseal to finish the remaining 10 miles of the project. The commissioners responded that the highway people who had looked at the remaining road and the project on old U.S. 24 told them that the remaining 10 miles did not need to be done this year.

Atkinson then tried to talk the commissioners into paying Rocky Mountain Chipseal about \$68,000 for "lost work" because Peters had planned on that project to start in May. After a phone consultation with Peters, Atkinson came back and said his client would take \$10,000 off the price dropping it to \$58,000 because the county had broomed the loose rock off the road several times this year to try to reduce the windshield damage.

Contemplating the problems arising from the project, the two things the commissioners felt were important was a full investigation of how the project had been allowed to proceed without proper paperwork, and how to get money to pay for fixing the road. Fixing the problem on old U.S. 24 — handling the worst places along the 32 miles — is estimated to cost about \$370,000.

In April the commissioners asked County Attorney Bonnie Selby to ask the Kansas Bureau of Investigation to do an investigation of the project. In May Selby was asked if she had contacted the KBI or written the agency a letter asking for an investigation, and she said she had not.

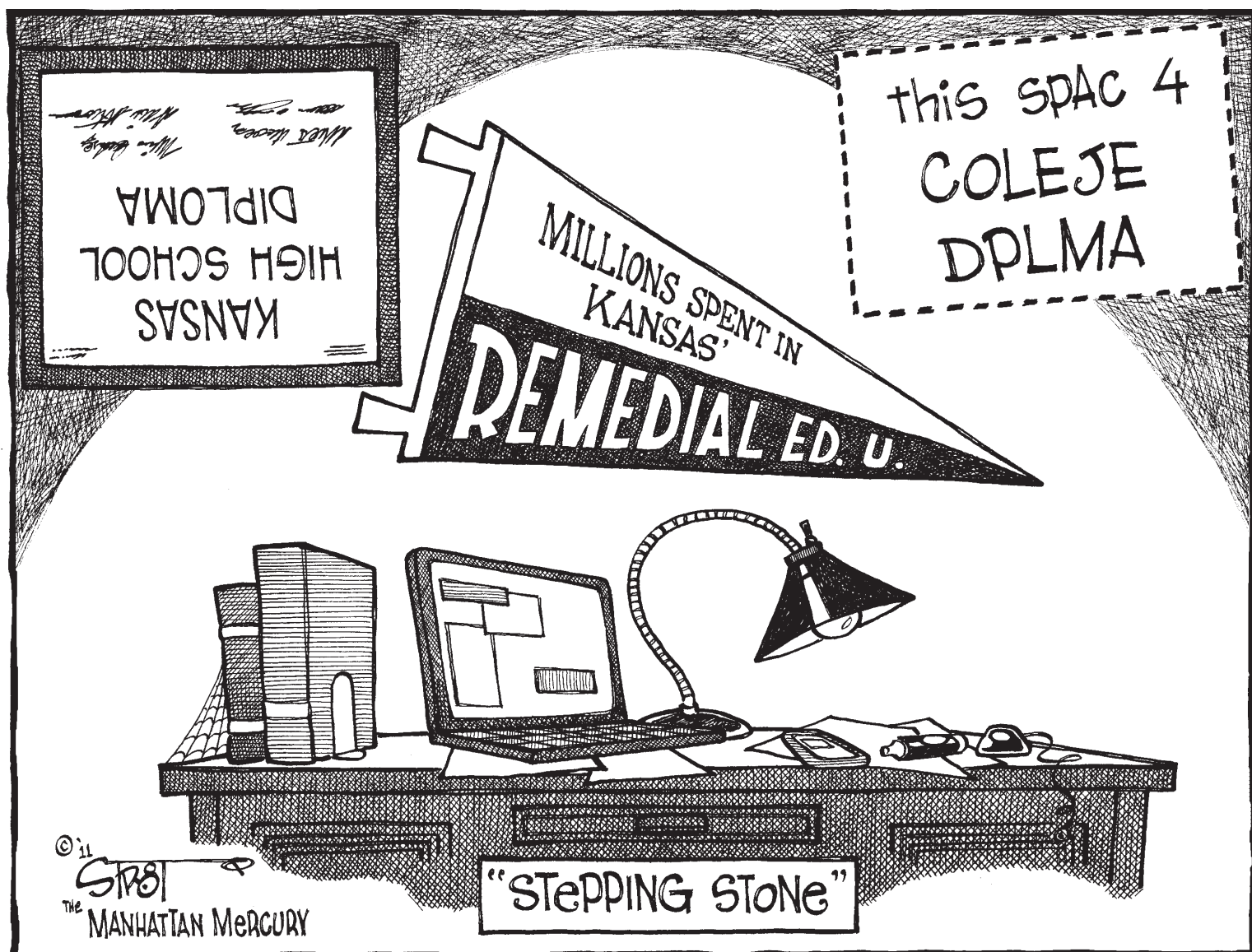
The commissioners had been in conference with two attorneys in Wichita, David Rogers and Bud Cowan of Foulston Siefkin law firm about the problems relating to the project. In May Attorney Cowan sent a letter to Attorney General Derek Schmidt requesting an investigation into the Sherman County project.

Last Monday afternoon Commissioner Strnad called to say the county had received a response from the Attorney General saying he was asking the KBI to appoint someone to proceed with an investigation of the road project.

While an investigation may or may not find any wrongdoing in how the project was done, the answers will not get the county the money to fix the road. An investigation, however, may help make a case to the county's insurance carrier to help recover money to fix the problem.

The best answer is for the county to apply to its insurance carrier for what money the county might be entitled to under the errors and omissions portion of the policy. We are sure the insurance pool will not be excited with this suggestion, but that is why the county pays the premium for such a case where an elected county official and a county employee may have allegedly made an error in handling the project and the taxpayers' money.

The project is done, but the problem continues. The county needs to find the money to fix the road and let the Attorney General and KBI investigator handle the rest. — Tom Betz



Side stepping obvious question traps

I knew this was nothing but trouble. Cynthia had just come back from the hotel's spa, where she'd had her eyebrows and lashes dyed — for the first time ever.

She'd been talking to our daughter Felicia, who's been dying her hair (started going grey at 25, like me) for years and always has her brows touched up, too. Since the natural color of Cynthia's eyebrows is invisible, she thought she'd like to try that, too.

To me, it just sounded expensive. I don't dye my hair, let alone my eyebrows, though if the girls cut it any shorter (the hair, I mean), I may have to dye it just so you'll know it's there.

Anyway, she came back from the spa all excited.

"Wow," she said. "I never knew I had so much eyebrow."

It wasn't exactly a unibrow, a la Frieda Kalo, but it was bushy.

"Uh, I thought they'd sort of shape it or something," I said. Then came the question.

"What?" she said. "Do you think they made my eyebrows look fat?"

"I can't answer that question," I said, ducking, "but those pants do make your butt look big."

Liz gasped. Cynthia elbowed me, but what was I supposed to say?

"Well, they're just fuller than I expected?"



steve
haynes

• along the sappa

I thought I'd taken the wiser course. Criticizing the new eyebrows could have been really painful. I mean, she'd just paid for them. And I wasn't going to ask how much, either.

We were in Newport, R.I., where New York's super rich of a bygone century has built gaudy, excessive summer mansions. Today, the biggest, built by several heirs of the Vanderbilt railroad fortune, are public museums, owned and maintained by the Newport Preservation Society.

They give tours, but since our hosts have connections — and relatives who live on the island — ours was conducted by the chief conservator. He told a lot of good stories.

The first thing I couldn't figure out when we toured the largest mansion, the Breakers, was why all the bath tubs had four faucets, not two.

It was no surprise that the house, built in 1895, was completely wired for electric lights, or that it had running water. No fine home built

then would be complete without the latest innovations.

Nor that the tubs were carved out of solid marble. Legend has it the staff would draw two baths for every one taken, the first just to warm the stone. No Vanderbilt every drew his or her own bath.

But four faucets?

Why, hot and cold running sea water from one pair, fresh water from the other, of course. Bathing in sea water was considered healthy back then.

Everywhere you looked, there was gold leaf, marble, antique furniture. The excesses of the Gilded Age, I'm sure, have their equivalent in the mansions of Internet billionaires today, though through our eyes, they may seem quaint.

But when Commodore Vanderbilt was building railroads, and his sons were running them, they were as cutting edge as computer chips and smart phones today. And a few who get in early — and are very lucky and work hard — make great fortunes from any innovation.

Next, it would be the Rockefellers in oil; now, it's Bill Gates in software. But I'm sure his mansions are much more environmentally responsible.

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Mary Mertz raised her hands to her face as she watched the party of 57 sit down at the long row of tables covered with white tablecloths set perfectly with china and glasses in the middle of her family's corn field. A broad smile spread across her face.

"It's a dream come true," she said. "It's what I always envisioned. Happy people in our corn field sitting down to a wonderful meal."

For Mary, this "Feast of the Fields" was something she'd always wanted to do. On the afternoon of June 5, her vision became reality. She and husband, Bob, hosted this inaugural dinner at their River Creek Farms, east of Zandale in Riley County.

While a bit on the warm side, a gentle southerly breeze tussled the tops of the corn nestled next to the Kansas River. Temperatures topped out at 90-degrees.

But no one complained. They were too busy sipping Kansas red and white wines, learning a bit about agriculture and looking forward to the upcoming culinary delights.

Betty Cunningham had driven two hours from Lenexa to dine in the country cornfield. Being a former farm girl from Hornell, N.Y., she's lived in Kansas since 1954.

"I came here to eat some really good food from the farm and that's the best," Betty said. "Being back in the country and seeing corn



Insight
this week

• john schlageck

fields and eating in one with good food and good people."

Many of the urban guests voiced their pleasure with the quiet, country setting. They laughed, visited and looked forward to the upcoming feast.

About 5:30 p.m., appetizers were served in the form of lamb and pheasant. In addition to the lamb raised on the Mertz farm, pork and other locally grown foods followed throughout the evening. Manhattan chef, Scott Benjamin, and his staff prepared the food.

Yes, it was a long-awaited opportunity to raise interest in locally produced foods and a way to engage urban people in a rural setting. Husband, Bob, was ready and more than able to provide the guests a short history of the fourth-generation farm and present a short-course in Agriculture 101.

"We wanted to tell the story of what we do in a way that would connect with those unfamiliar with farming," Mary explained. "We wanted to provide a new experience. Serving a dinner

where to write

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of local fare in a field where crops are growing seemed to be a great venue and the perfect way to bring it all together."

The natural backdrop complete with farm machinery, crops, big round bales and field art helped fill the bill. Incidentally, the field art was an irrigation pivot system directly to the north of the dinner table. Bob had purposely positioned the tall water towers at this location as a point of interest for their guests.

Throughout the evening the Mertz provided a running commentary for guests interested in learning more about their food and farming and ranching.

Many of the guests enjoyed the party so much they vowed to attend the next "Feast of the Fields." And the Mertz family relishes the idea of Mary's dream becoming a reality.

"I couldn't be more pleased with the turnout," Mary said. "So many people, so much interest in coming to something like this and their willingness to come to dinner out in a corn field. I can't think of a better setting."

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for more than 25 years. He is the managing editor of "Kansas Living," a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.

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