

from our viewpoint...

Open Meetings Act is there for the voters

A couple of recent happenings illustrate pitfalls public officials face when they deal with the Kansas Open Meetings Act.

Both occurred in another county, but they illustrate a couple of important points.

One involved an appointment to an open seat on the City Council. From a political or a practical viewpoint, nothing went right. We saw no intent to violate the law, but its spirit was trampled.

The mayor breezed through the newspaper office, saying there was a special council meeting that night, but the topic "was a secret." Huh?

Turns out, the city manager had hired a councilman to fill a vacancy as public works director, supervising one of the city's biggest departments. The councilman appeared to be qualified, the appointment appeared to be legal, but his resignation took not just the public, but most of the council, by surprise.

Few knew there was an opening on the council, and no one had a chance to show interest in the seat. Several council members expressed their displeasure. The mayor, after consulting with a few people, had gone to a former councilman he admired and asked him to return. The appointment was approved after some animosity at the council meeting.

The agenda for the meeting reached the newspaper the afternoon before, so there was little or no notice to the public, and no real chance for public comment.

Was there a violation of the law? Perhaps. The city manager said she'd sent the agenda out in time, but the e-mail address for the paper contained a mistake. The notice bounced back.

More importantly, though, is that the voters and anyone who might have been interested in the council seat were completely bypassed, violating the spirit and intent of the law, if not the letter.

Better that the mayor had announced the resignation and vacancy and asked for applications, then waited two weeks to make the appointment. He would have seen all the potential candidates. He might have chosen the same person, and no one said his choice was poor. But everyone would have had their say.

It's no joking matter, though, because if there is a violation of the Open Meetings Act, any decisions made can be declared void and those responsible, including council members, may be fined \$500 each.

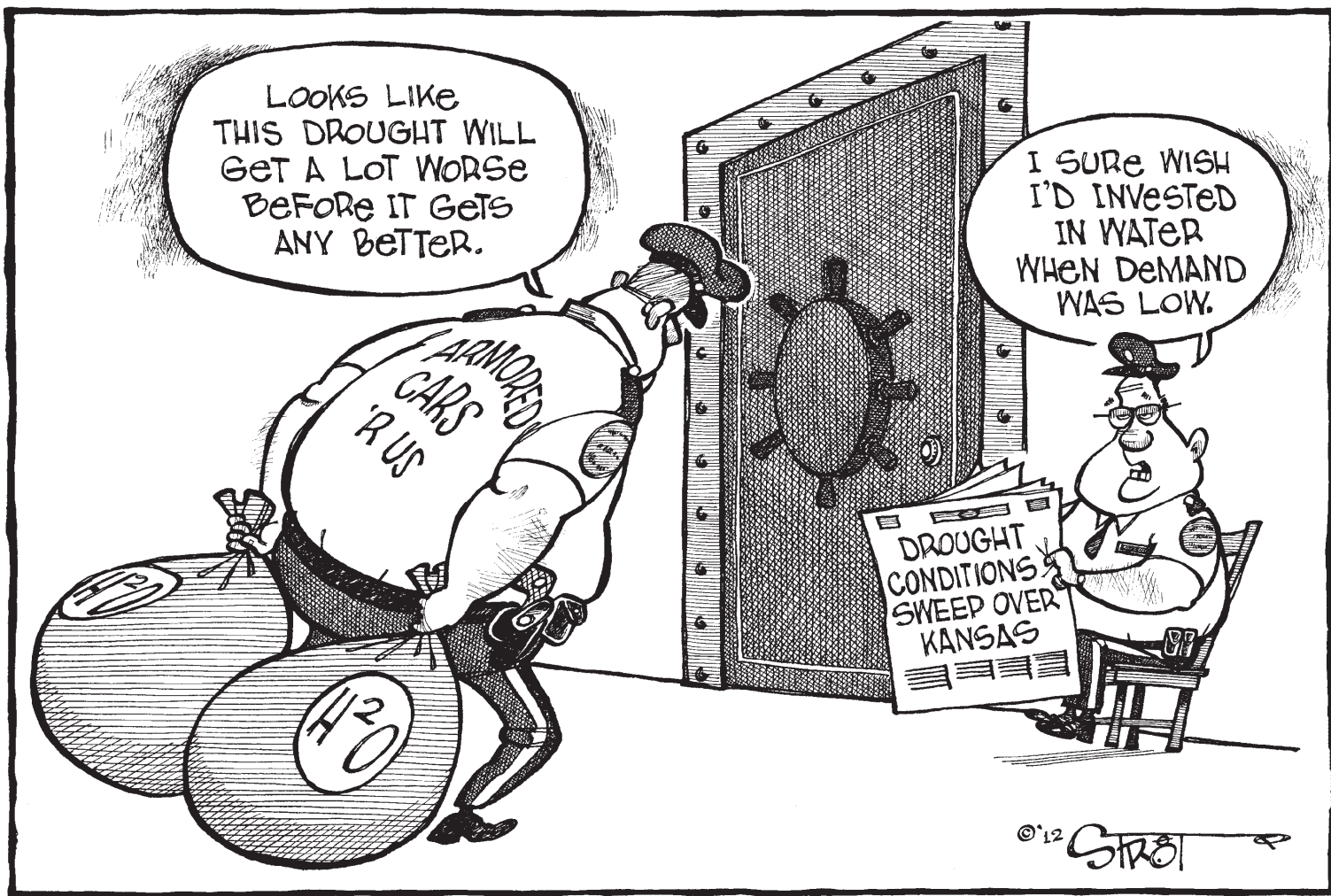
In another instance, commissioners in the same county attended a meeting put on by the Economic Development board. They took part in discussions, but did not meet as a board themselves. Someone complained.

Was there a violation of the law? We think not. The mere presence of a majority of the commission does not make the meeting a commission meeting. The meeting was called and announced to the public as an Economic Development meeting. Adequate notice was given. The commissioners were there to take part, but not to do county business. They made their decision later, at a regular county meeting.

Nonetheless, the county clerk took care to announce a county commission meeting when, a week later, all three commissioners planned to attend a social event put on by another entity.

A good idea? Probably not. It's one thing to announce that all three will be at the same place, but to call that a special meeting might actually be a bad thing. It technically would allow the commissioners to discuss and vote on county business over cocktails. Not a good plan.

Everyone, public officials and taxpayers alike, should remember that the Open Meetings Act is a practical law with practical goals. The idea is to let the public watch how and learn why decisions are made. The spirit of the law is open government, not government by secrecy or surprise. — Steve Haynes



Van Gogh brought back to vibrant color

For the past week I have been spending quite a bit of time early in the mornings watching Canadian artist Cameron Cross as he works to repair and repaint the giant Van Gogh sunflower painting.

The giant 24-by-32-foot replica of a Vincent Van Gogh sunflower painting by Cross continues to get noticed. People pull off Interstate 70 to look at the giant painting and to take photos of the 80-foot easel near the intersection of Chery Ave. and Business U.S. 24.

Cross has been in contact with people in Goodland for more than a year talking about the need to clean, repair and repaint the wooden canvas he had painted on the floor of the Sherman County Ag Building at the fairgrounds.

The painting was erected on June 19, 2001, through a special project at a total cost of about \$150,000. Sunflower USA, a non-profit corporation received an attraction grant from the State of Kansas to help with the project.

This is one of three large Van Gogh sunflower paintings in the world. It is the only one in the United States. The first was erected in Altoona, Canada and another was erected Emerald City, Australia.

Cross, Canadian painter, has been in Goodland for the past couple of weeks. The painting was literally cut down on July 11, and plans are to weld it back on the easel on Monday, July 23. Bryant Nemechek, owner of Nemechek welding was in charge of cutting the painting loose, and plans to weld it back in place. He said the process of putting it back on the easel should be easier than the process he had to go through getting all the welds to break loose.

Cross has been working on the painting in the early mornings and late evenings to get it ready to be relaunched. He said he has had several people stop and come over to see what he is doing. He said one family was interested in the painting, and the children were looking for a special Van Gogh stamp.

The children were looking for a letterbox as part of a program where kids have a notebook and collect stamps from selected sites around the country and some other countries.

Looking online I found clues for the Van Gogh letterbox going through www.letterbox.org. The letterbox apparently was established near the painting in 2006, and a number of



tom betz

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people have found the stamp - a head of Vincent van Gogh - and re-hidden the letterbox for the next hunters.

Another family from Lawrence stopped a few days before the painting was cut down, and the son was looking for a geo-cache marker hidden in the viewing area near the painting.

Cross said on Tuesday he was running out of paint, and Ron Harding who had worked with him during the original painting process brought him a tub he had left over 11 years ago. Cross said he was surprised to find paint cans in the tub, and even more surprised to find the paint was usable 11 years later. He said he has been using some of that paint.

Cleaning the painting with water and some elbow grease did help Cross said, and it revealed a few areas that had cracked and needed to be repaired. Cross cut pieces of fiberglass to put in the holes and layered it where needed to create a new surface.

He said he was surprised how well the surface had held up, but was surprised at the number of screw holes that had the resin pop off. One of his first steps was to clean out all the screw holes and patch them. He then sanded them down and began the repainting with the blue sky background.

In the past few days he has been working on the vase and the base of the painting. He had about 80 percent of the basic painting completed by Wednesday. He said he is trying to be a bit bolder in the repainting.

"When I did it 11 years ago I was in my perfection period," he said. "I tried to be as true to Van Gogh's colors as possible. When he did his paintings he used five basic colors and mixed the rest. Most of his colors are more of a muted mix."

"I feel the painting could use a bit more color this time, and am being more bold in my strokes."

Cross was here in the fall to see the painting in person, and worked with Goodland High School students to design an "Art in the Park"

painting to be erected on a small easel later this summer.

The Van Gogh has been featured in national magazines, on a state list of top 8 sites in Kansas, on a special show on the Smoky Hills Public Television and has brought many people to town to see the unique piece of giant art.

The painting is across the street from Pioneer Park, which was completed several years ago, and some landscaping has been done around the base of the painting. In 2004 The Goodland Rotary erected a floodlight in front of the painting to allow it to be lighted at night as part of their Rotary Centennial Project. The light makes the painting stand out and is visible from I-70. The Rotary volunteers have erected brick sidewalks and viewing benches plus a visitors logbook.

Sunflowers USA donated the painting and viewing area to the city last year, and the Resource Development Committee headed by Annette Fairbanks and the Beautification Committee have been working to add trees to the landscape. A project being worked on now is to have an electronic kiosk at the viewing area to have details about the painting as well as information and promotional materials on Goodland.

The painting has been featured on television, and was part of a comedy series based in Kansas in 2004. The big painting is based on Van Gogh's painting of three sunflowers in a pot. It was one of a series of seven sunflower paintings done by Van Gogh while he was in Holland.

I got sunburned the morning it was cut down, and expect to be a bit better prepared for the process on Monday to put the painting back on the easel.

The city plans to have some anti-pigeon spikes to add on top to reduce the natural fertilizer the birds have contributed over the past 11 years.

Cross said he plans to put a clear coat on top to help keep the painting protected, and allow for an occasional washing.

Check out the progress on The Goodland Star-News website and Facebook page. Another place to check out is The Big Easel page on Facebook. — Tom Betz

PowerPoint makes us stupid

I told my students to take out their pencils and paper and "draw with me" as I sketched an outline of basic insect anatomy on the board. Barely a hand moved. This was unusual because this was an upper division class in insect identification at a Chinese university. And Chinese students are by habit very obedient.

One small problem was that many had not brought notebooks with paper to class.

The larger problem was that many had become PowerPoint-addicted. They were accustomed to their teachers projecting fully-complete and complex illustrations. They were conditioned to passively observe and memorize. They did not know how to build up concepts themselves.

"You learn in your arm as you draw the structures," I say half jokingly. But there is a teaching truth: blackboards, white marker boards, and overhead projectors are clearly superior when it comes to building concepts.

With a quiz every day, nearly every student was bringing notebook paper and pencils by the third class.

"PowerPoint makes us stupid" is a quote from Marine Gen. James Mattis, the U.S. Joint Forces commander in 2010. The military's fiasco with PowerPoint came to a head and made the front page of the *New York Times* on April 27, 2010. War presentations had become so complex they were incomprehensible. *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Bumiller reported General McChrystal as saying "When



education frontlines

• John Schrock

we understand that slide, we'll have won the war."

Additionally, "Brig. Gen. H.R. McMaster, who banned PowerPoint presentations when he led the successful effort to secure the northern Iraqi City of Tal Afar in 2005, followed up at the same conference by likening PowerPoint to an internal threat."

The view of those military commanders was that the "rigid lists of bullet points" are a problem because PowerPoint "stifles discussion, critical thinking and thoughtful decision-making."

"Death by PowerPoint" is not just a military phrase. It accurately describes this major snooze-generator in high schools and universities. Freshly-minted professors often enter their first classrooms proudly armed with a detailed PowerPoint outline packed with illustrations taken from the Internet. And they stick to their projected scripts regardless of their students' questions and misunderstandings.

We formerly derided the aging professor who read from class notes that had yielded over decades, unchanged from his first class. Today, some young professors use technology

to make the same mistake, sometimes reading their PowerPoint slides verbatim (yawn).

And to achieve boredom and lack of learning in the first degree, some young professors even print off class handouts that have mini-pictures of their full PowerPoint sequence, thus "freeing" the student from the onerous task of taking notes — and actually learning something.

One (now retired) colleague who would never use PowerPoint, closed her office door two hours before each class and wrote out her class outline afresh, modifying it for the unique upcoming class and updating both the science and the examples she would use. Teaching is communication. Different students require different communication. But PowerPoint standardizes the message, forcing the student and the soldier down one path. These scripted presentations substitute for carefully-studied and polished presentations, curtail eloquence, and dumb down the message. Again, according to the *Times* report, the military actually refers to the PowerPoint bullets as "dumb dumb bullets."

Every semester that I enroll students, I have several advisees ask, "Is there a section that doesn't use PowerPoint?" If the students know it is inferior, if the generals know it has problems, then it is time school administrators let professional teachers get back to using the media that they know works.

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