

Consolidation hurts rural communities in more ways than one

The story is alarming, but entirely predictable. And, although today it's happening in Oberlin. Tomorrow it will be Norton's turn.

No one was signing up for the Oberlin Jaycees' Angel Tree, which puts people in touch with kids who might otherwise not get much for Christmas. These "angels" buy them gifts and the Jaycees make sure they get delivered.

In the past, the Jaycees said, they'd leave word at the county office of the state welfare agency, the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. The workers there would get word out to people whose kids might qualify for the tree.

Last year at this time, the Jaycees reported 53 kids on the tree. This year, it's barely a dozen so far.

This year, there is no welfare office in Oberlin. It closed a couple of months ago.

The state centralized the work at a regional office in Colby. Apparently, no one there knows or cares about local charity efforts in Oberlin. At least, though the Jaycees contacted state workers, they apparently didn't tell many families about the Angel Tree.

One reason may be lack of contact day in and day out with the agency's clients, who are now forced to call "800" telephone numbers answered God-knows-where for help. State workers have been clustered in regional offices where supervisors can keep an eye on them.

When Gov. Kathleen Sebelius was here last summer, she seemed surprised that people were not happy with the change. She pointed out that the state will have more "points of contact," or places where workers can meet clients at scheduled times.

What the state won't have is anyone who lives or works in or cares about Oberlin, Atwood, St. Francis, or soon, Goodland and Norton.

Welfare workers will be moving into expensive new buildings leased in Colby and Phillipsburg, where they will have less contact with clients and communities.

The latest reports are that 35 new jobs will wind up in Phillipsburg alone, jobs that used to be spread out around northwest Kansas and elsewhere.

Is this plan working?

The Angel Tree says no.

What we're seeing is the opening round of a battle to centralize not just state, but county and federal services in rural areas. Lucky towns like Phillipsburg will become "super county seats," with regional state and federal offices, and eventually, Topeka will try to get counties to follow suit and merge in clusters around these towns.

It's not anyone's wild imagination. It's already happening. Extension districts are merging. Other offices will follow soon, unless rural people take a stand.

Do we want to drive 50-60 miles just to get license tags? Or call some "800" number that may be answered in Indiana, or India, to get answers about state government?

There's one consolation, though.

The architect of the welfare consolidation, former Secretary Janet Schalansky, disappeared from state government last month. After telling people for months that she'd stick out the governor's first term, she took a quick and hastily announced retirement.

A holdover from the administration of Republican Bill Graves, Schalansky may have fallen from favor at the Statehouse.

The consolidation scheme arose before Gov. Sebelius, but she has done nothing. Instead of taking jobs out of rural counties, the state ought to be putting some in, and not just in Colby. Instead of building new central offices, it could have spread them around the area and gotten the same, or more, impact.

And its employees would know about the Angel Tree and a dozen other projects around rural Kansas that won't ever be noticed in Colby or Phillipsburg.

— Steve Haynes



There are better ways to avoid cooking

I've discovered a way to get out of cooking Thanksgiving dinner. Do not try this at home. This should only be attempted by a professional.

First, arrive at one of your grown children's home with an overabundance of luggage. You know, make them think you're moving in.

Second, try to pull the chain on the ceiling fan in your assigned bedroom without asking for help. When you fall off the bed onto the floor, don't tell anyone, either. This prolongs the inevitable until you really have to tell them what happened.

Third, use your back pain as an excuse to get out of cooking.

That's what happened to me this Thanksgiving, but I don't suggest you try it.

I fell Saturday night at Kara's, but the pain didn't catch up with me until Tuesday morning. It was downhill after that. No position was comfortable. Getting up

Out Back Carolyn Plotts



and down was almost impossible. Muscle spasms would take my breath away — and walking wasn't much fun, either. But, like most things, time heals all wounds, and I am on the mend.

Everybody learned something from this experience, though. The girls, Jennifer, Kara and Halley, learned they can get a big dinner on the table if they have to. We were expecting 13 people for dinner. They had to.

They divided up the responsibilities, and everything turned out beautifully. They made pies, salads, vegetables and

baked rolls. We had turkey, ham and dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy and deviled eggs. It was a real family effort. The little girls, Alexandria and Taylor, set the table and did a fine job, too. It was a beautiful meal. And a beautiful day.

The trip home was an event in itself. They made a bed for me in the back of Jennifer's big, comfy sport utility. Getting in and out was the only problem. I developed a low crawl style that enabled me to navigate entry and exit. Not too pretty, but it worked.

We made it home just ahead of the storm, so I haven't even felt very guilty about staying in and sleeping round the clock. I see a doctor this afternoon and I imagine he will say the same thing the doctor in Texas said: "Stay off your feet, rotate ice and heat packs, keep your knees higher than your hip, and don't do anything stupid like that again."

Okay, Doc, I get the message.

It's been a busy week in Congress

Congress Passes Final Funding Legislation for 2005

Last week, in its final action of the session, Congress finalized funding legislation for 2005. On Saturday, Congress passed the final appropriations bill that included money for dozens of departments, ranging from transportation to education.

The final legislation froze the line on non-defense discretionary spending. The legislation contained expanded benefits for veterans and their families, state and local law enforcement, No Child Left Behind and programs to support farmers, ranchers and rural America.

I will continue working, on your behalf, to ensure that Congress continues working to hold the line on spending while paying for things that do a better job of keeping our families safe and our health care costs affordable.

House and Senate Continue Work on Intelligence Reform

The House and Senate continued discussions last week on recommendations that were made by the 911 Commission to reform the intelligence community.

Unfortunately, after lengthy negotiations, lawmakers were unable to come to an agreement.

I am disappointed that Congress has been unable to act on such an important issue. It is past time for reform in the intelligence community, and I am hopeful that negotiators will be able to hammer out their differences in time to pass the comprehensive legislation before the end of the year.

I will continue working to see that this happens.

Providing Additional Education for Americans with Disabilities

Last week, Congress approved and sent to the President the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

This legislation improves special education for both students and schools. It

Capitol Views

Rep. Jerry Moran



reforms special education funding, ensures school safety and reasonable discipline, gives schools more flexibility, reduces burdensome regulations and costly litigation, minimizes the paperwork burden and expands choices, giving parents more control over their children's education.

I have long been a supporter of full funding for this and special education, but the government has failed at the necessary levels.

I will continue to work with Kansas' students, parents and educators as these changes are enacted.

Improving Veterans Health Care Services

Health care, including veterans' health care, has been one of my top priorities during my time in Congress. Last week, I was pleased to support House passage of legislation that will improve veteran's health care services and benefits.

The legislation extends a National

Guard or reserve member's employer-based health insurance from 18 months to 24 months once they are called up to active duty; allows surviving spouses, with at least one child under 18, additional compensation when their loved one is killed in the line of duty; increases the maximum veterans home loan guarantee and increases assistance available under the Montgomery GI Bill for apprenticeships and on-the-job training.

This legislation is long overdue for our service men and women, veterans and their families. I appreciate their sacrifices.

Contact Me: It is an honor to serve you in Washington. Please let me know how I can be of service. You can email me through my web page at: <<http://www.house.gov/morank01/hearingfromyou.htm>><http://www.house.gov/morank01/hearingfromyou.htm>

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