

Bill would keep lobbyists from getting tax money

A bill filed this year with the Kansas Senate raises some interesting questions about how your tax money is spent.

The bill would restrict local governments from spending taxpayers' money on lobbyists. As you'd expect, lobbyists for local governments have come out against the measure.

Imagine that. Backers claim cities, counties and school boards sometimes spend tax money to push causes that their voters don't like and wouldn't back.

One example they give is a bill to limit government's power to take private land for redevelopment, a controversy which is raging across the nation. A lot of voters want to restrict "eminent domain" powers, they say, but cities and their lobbyists aren't supporting the cause.

The bill isn't aimed at cities' power to condemn land for roads or power lines, but at the ability, which has grown in recent years, to take land and turn it over to private developers for a "higher use."

"They're not real helpful," Sen Tim Huelskamp, chairman of the Local Government committee, was quoted as saying after a hearing on the bill. "On one hand, there's a high percentage of people wanting eminent domain reform, and on the other hand, lobbyists are up here saying something else."

It's not fair, backers say, for government to take tax money from people and spend it on something they oppose.

Don Moler, executive director of the League of Kansas Municipalities, and a lobbyist for the group, sees it differently. He says cities and counties need to have a voice in Topeka.

"Without public interest lobbyists, who represent local governments and their citizens," he said, "the field would be left completely open to monied private interests who employ numbers lobbyists to advance their private agendas."

While that's partly true, it's not the whole story. Citizens can and do affect the process by lobbying their representatives themselves. Anyone can call, talk to a legislator, get on the witness list for a bill.

Some days, there's nothing more noble about government lobbyists than there is about big-oil representatives. Both are capable of arguing against the public good.

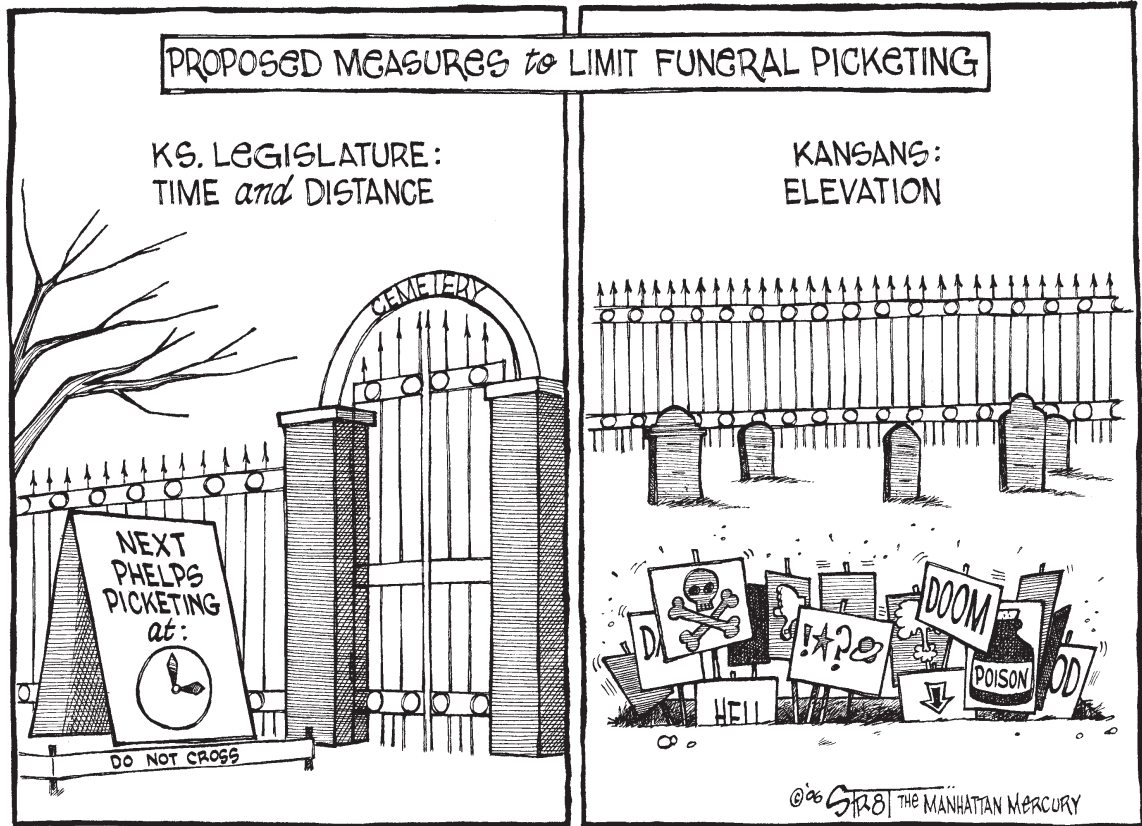
The bill wouldn't affect associations like the municipal league, anyway, says its sponsor, Sen. Kay O'Connor of Olathe. That's too bad, because the league, the Association of Counties and the school boards have some of the most powerful lobbies in the state.

All run on public money donated by member governments, but they seldom ask ordinary people how they should vote.

O'Connor says she mainly wants to keep local governments from lobbying for more money, but that's only part of the problem. There's a host of issues where government lobbyists often take positions counter to good government. Issues of secrecy and public information, tax changes, government powers — all sometimes pit cities and counties against their citizens.

It's unlikely that real reform will come anytime soon. The only defense we have — and it's not always easy or cheap — is to keep an eye on the people in Topeka ourselves. And cry foul when they get out of line.

— Steve Haynes



Her old cat gone, not forgotten

Old habits die hard. Our cat, Max, has been dead a week now, but just this morning I started to ask Jim if he had given the cat his shot. It was a ritual we went through every day. Me asking Jim. Jim saying he had.

Jim said last night he awoke, thinking Max had jumped onto his lap. We sure miss the old boy.

—ob— However, make no mistake. We are NOT seeking a new pet. Please, don't anyone think they would be doing us a favor by bringing us a new kitty/puppy/parakeet/hamster and/or goldfish. We are out of the pet business. At least for awhile.

I cannot tell you how many pets I have had in my lifetime: Dogs, cats, horses, gerbils and exotic fish. Jim is the same.

He even had a pet prairie dog once, and a pet raccoon. But, we have agreed — no more pets.

At least not until our lives settle down. We go so much that it wouldn't be right to get an animal, then not have any time for it. Whenever we went to Mexico or traveled to see our kids, we had to have someone care for Max.

Our friend Barbara loved Max as much as we did, but caring for him meant two trips a day to our house



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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for his shots, and that's asking a lot from anyone.

At our age (I hate that phrase), we figure we have about 15 to 20 more years to be effectual in Mexico. Then, when we can't go any longer, we'll get a pet and stay home.

We already know what kind of a pet it will be, too. Our daughter, Kara, has a little dog named Winston that Jim and I both love. He is a Lhasa Apso, and looks like a dust mop with a tail on one end and a little pink tongue on the other. But, what a personality dog. He never tires of playing fetch, he doesn't bark, he doesn't shed, and he loves to sleep on your lap. The perfect pet for our old age.

—ob— My sister, Kathryn, still lives in New York City. She called this morning to say they were snowed in. More than two feet of snow fell on

the city over the weekend. She said commuter trains were still stuck with thousands of people on board.

Wish we had a little bit of their snow here. I imagine they wish we did, too.

—ob— Income tax time is approaching. Someone sent me an e-mail with a new "EZ Tax Form." It only has two lines to fill in. The top line asks, "How much money did you make last year?"

The bottom line says, "Send it in."

From the Bible

Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O Lord: let thy lovingkindness and thy truth continually preserve me. Psalm 40: 11

Salsa is going to be hard to get

I guess I am going to have to find the next batch of chips and salsa by myself.

That was Jack's job. He always knew where the best Mexican food was, usually some out-of-the way dive in Bartley or McCook.

It wasn't much fun unless we had to drive for half an hour to get to lunch. That gave us time to talk.

It also drove our wives crazy.

I think they thought we were goofing off. Maybe we were.

We didn't go to lunch that often.

Not nearly often enough, now that I think about it. We'd drive and talk, take the back roads through Danbury or Beaver City. We'd talk about the town, people, politics, the public good, and sometimes, things men talk about when their wives are not around. We never did take them to lunch.

Jack Metcalf loved Mexican food, and especially he loved salsa. He'd drive all day to get a good bowl of sauce. He talked the gal who cooked at the little cafe in Bartley to selling him her salsa by the jar. He prized that.

Jack loved a lot of things: He loved life, he loved his grandkids, he loved Oberlin and its people. He loved his wife Karen.

He had made a little money now and then. He had the Pepsi plant in



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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Oberlin, then went into the insurance business and later into real estate. He was proud of the work he'd done.

His family was among the earliest settlers here and some of the most prominent. They controlled the old Farmers National Bank for years, and Jack was more than a little sad when they finally sold their interest.

After he sold the real estate office a few years ago and retired, he focused his time on all those he loved. I guess I was glad to get a little of it.

Jack was proud of his accomplishments, proud of his family, proud of his sobriety, most proud of that. He had 30 years of love with Karen and tried to lead a respectable life, but that meant he was past 40 when he settled down.

I don't know that he was exactly proud of the years before that, but he



sometimes smiled when he talked about those days. Oh, there were some stories.

He wouldn't have gone back to that life for anything, and he was always ready to lend a hand to anyone who had decided to leave the wayward path.

We had a date for Mexican food. It had been way too long.

We were going to go to Norton on a Friday night, and take our wives. That was something new. We had to wait until after wrestling season, though. He couldn't miss a grandson's match.

We never got there. Jack checked out while I was out of the country, and I never got the chance to say goodbye.

I think that makes him lucky. I think that means he left me holding the bag, too, since I'm pretty sure I bought lunch last time.

He'd have gotten a kick out of that.



Cynthia hit the dusty trail on a four wheeler.

— Photo by Nik Wilets

Trip both fascinating, terrifying

Over hill, over dale,
As we hit the dusty trail,
As those four wheelers,
Go rolling along.

All right already, so I cheat. But it was four-wheelers that we were rolling along on, not caissons — which is something you put a cannon on, I think.

We were headed for vacation in the dusty desert of the Mexican Baja and I suggested that we rent four wheelers and ride into the desert on an escorted tour.

You would have thought I was suggesting going swimming with sharks, playing with rattlesnakes or getting another cat.

Steve flat out refused to have anything to do with such a scheme.

He said that he had no intention of going off into the desert with a dozen other people and eating dust for several hours. He'd seen those crazy tourists taking off with helmets, goggles and bandannas — they looked like they were going to rob someone.

Well, he was right, so I dropped the subject until my son-in-law saw an ad for a four-wheeler trail ride and said he'd like to go. After the third mention of it, I asked my daughter if they were taking the tour.

She said that he could go if he wanted to, but she was with her father on this one. "No, no and never in this lifetime," was the gist of her answer.

So one afternoon, son-in-law Nik



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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and I headed for the dusty desert. We were the only ones on the tour that day, so we had very little dust to eat. The gasoline fumes were the worst smell, and neither of us wore our bandannas very much.

Our guide showed us how to ride the machines. They were four speeds and you shifted with your foot. The brakes were on the handlebars, as was the gas "pedal." I realized about that time that I had learned to ride a motorcycle in high school and had quit riding when I got married 34 years ago. I hoped the old skills would return.

I soon learned that riding a four-wheeler is not the same as riding a motorcycle. I kept trying to put my foot out when I went around corners.

It did no good whatsoever. I was halfway between fascinated and terrified. Going downhill, I told myself to remember my mountain driving skills — put the vehicle in second and don't ride the brake.

I grabbed both brakes and rode them for dear life. We rode from the base camp

along dirt trails to the ocean. There, we rested for a while and then our guide said something neither of us caught and disappeared.

He was just gone. There we were on the shore alone. We drove up and down looking for him. We drove over the dunes and up some of the trails that we thought might lead back to the base camp. The trails, however, wound back around to the dunes.

Eventually we spotted other riders. They told us that we were supposed to have some free time to ride on the dunes.

Well, we'd had our free time and we'd ridden. We just hadn't had a clue that that was what we were supposed to be doing.

The trip back was more relaxing. I was getting the hang of this. It was still a dusty, dirty trip and I don't want to do it again.

Nik, however, is already talking about next year. I wonder who he'll sucker into going with him?

THE OBERLIN HERALD

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Published each Wednesday by Haynes Publishing Co., 170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749. Periodicals mail postage paid at Oberlin, Kan. 67749.

Steve and Cynthia Haynes, publishers
Official newspaper of Oberlin, Jennings, Norcat, Dresden and Decatur County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, Colorado Press Association, Nebraska Press Association and Inland Press Association.

Subscriptions: One year, \$30 (tax included) in Decatur, Norton, Rawlins, Sheridan, Thomas and Red Willow counties; \$34 (tax included) elsewhere in Kansas; \$37 elsewhere in the U.S. Foreign subscriptions, \$20 extra per year (except APO/FPO). POSTMASTER: Send change of address to 170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749-2243.

Office hours: 8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri. (Also open most Saturdays when someone is in.)

