

Targeting prisons shows how state feels about us

While the prison in Norton, with its nearly 270 state jobs, appears to have dodged the bullet for now, the fact that it was targeted for closing says a lot about how officials in Topeka think about rural Kansas.

It's not a pretty sight. Secretary of Corrections Roger Werholtz told employees he might have to close prisons in Norton, Winfield and Stockton to close the gap created by a proposed 3.9 percent budget cut.

That's two of four prison facilities in western Kansas and three of four in rural towns. No mention was made of cutting facilities in eastern, urban areas.

Losers would be rural counties where the state has converted old hospitals into prisons, as in Norton and Winfield, and built the honor camp at Stockton.

There are several ways you can look at the situation. Rural prisons suffer from their very distance from the bulk of their "customers," most of whom come from the state's cities. It can be expensive to haul them out and back, to administer far-flung enterprises, to deal with dispersed employees.

The Norton and Winfield prisons occupy recycled state hospital campuses, and the older buildings may drive up costs, but probably no more than at historic prisons in Lansing and Hutchinson.

The loss of 300 state jobs would be a drop in the bucket to Wichita or Kansas City, a bee sting for Salina, but a devastating blow to rural Norton, where jobs already are scarce.

You could argue that rural Kansas already

has more state jobs than it deserves, in proportion to population. Most taxpayers today, after all, live in urban Kansas, not in rural areas.

But one thing Kansas should do — for the sake of rural and urban counties alike — is try to help repopulate our rural counties. We need to do this both because it will help save the rural way of life in our state, and because rural Kansas can more easily absorb growth than our already-burgeoning urban counties can.

A healthy rural economy helps urban taxpayers as well as rural folk, because a healthy economy out here means rural Kansas can pull its share of the load. We're not looking for subsidies; just a chance to live and work where the sky is blue, the land fertile and the people friendly.

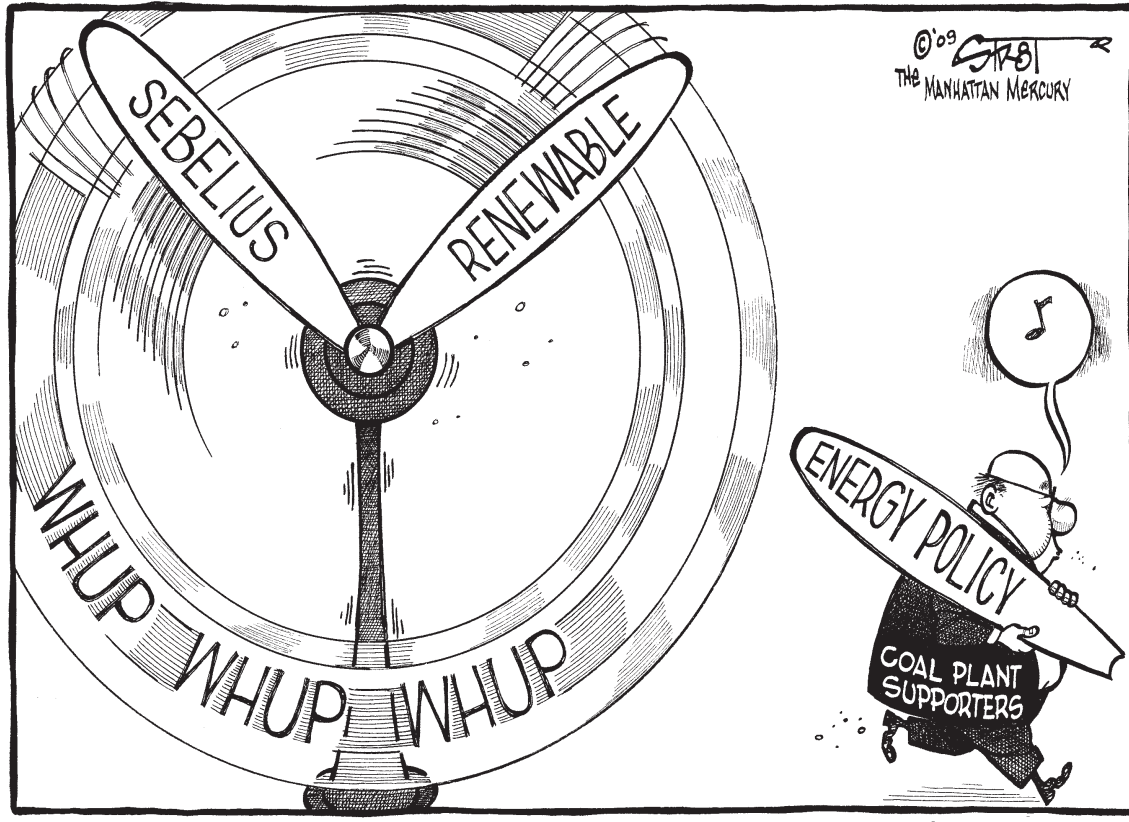
The late Sen. Stan Clark started a movement to move state jobs out into rural towns rather than adding more and more office buildings in Topeka. He had the right idea. Disperse state workers, and there'll be no need for expensive improvements in the capital city.

His cause has been picked up by his successor, Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, who proposed rural offices in place of a new state office building. It's a good idea, but for now, we'd settle for the state leaving us with the jobs we have now.

We need them, and Topeka, Wichita and Hutchinson will hardly notice the difference.

We'll talk about bigger steps when the economy looks better and the state could afford to renovate old schools and other buildings out here.

— Steve Haynes



Merger needs a close look

At a time when budget committees want to achieve greater operating efficiencies and reduce costs to government, one obvious thing to do is consolidating departments.

The Post Audit Committee has recommended the combining of the Animal Health Department and Soil Conservation Commission into the state Board of Agriculture. Post Audit believes there would be a savings of \$710,000, or 13 percent of the combined 2009 operating costs of both agencies. \$630,000 of the savings is the result of restructuring staff positions and \$80,000 comes from reducing rental costs.

The combined spending of the Board of Agriculture, Animal and Health Department, and Conservation Commission is around \$44 million. Restructuring of these agencies has been considered several times since the mid 1990s with no action. Kansas is one of the six rural farm states that doesn't place or combine animal health and conservation grants into the state Board of Agriculture.

Post Audit has proposed a bill to combine these services and I am sure there will be much debate on this issue. Initially, I tend to agree with Agriculture Chairman Taddiken that "if it isn't broke, then don't fix it." I have always supported local control and want to make sure that the State of Kansas doesn't destroy that. I appreciate the many calls and letters on this issue.

I want to study both sides of this consolidation issue so that I can be comfortable with and able to support my decision. The savings presented throughout this report are based on assumptions and estimates, and should be viewed with that in mind. I had the honor of serving on a Conservation Board and know and understand the process. My concern is that this consolidation plan would decrease local control of these agencies, and we may likely regret that in the near future.

STATEHOUSE VISTORS

I was pleased to have visitors from Goodland High School to our Statehouse during this first segment of the 2009 Session. These two students have achieved prominent positions with the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America. Brennen Clouse is the national president and Shelbi Hall is the Kansas First Vice President. This national organization has 220,000 members in 7,000 chapters.

CUTS DRAW IRE

I have been inundated with calls and e-mails concerning proposed budget cuts to schools and prisons, and consolidation of local government. I want my constituents to know that I value your input on



Letter from Topeka

By Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer
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these issues. However, time does not allow me to always return each and every contact.

I ask that you realize that I am considering your input on these issues, and that I pledge to keep my focus to do what is best for western Kansas. More than ever we need to carefully weigh our decisions and protect our rural way of life.

To recap some of the major issues addressed this week:

Substitute Senate Bill 23 — Appropriations for FY 2009: On Wednesday, Jan. 28, the Senate met to debate Substitute for SB 23, the rescission bill for the 2009 fiscal year. The bill, as initially passed out of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, adjusted spending by \$300 million and included across-the-board reductions of 3.4 percent, leaving a balance of \$115.5 million in the state general fund for FY 2009 and \$209.9 million for FY 2010.

During the floor debate, the bill was amended to decrease spending by \$334.8 million. Included in the amendment was an across-the-board reduction of 1.5 percent for all areas of state government, with a \$11 per pupil reduction in school funding. For the current year, reductions in base state aid total \$33 per student. The amendment results in a \$151.4 million ending balance in the state general fund for FY 2009.

The Senate passed SB 23 by a vote of 25 to 14.

Senate Bill 30- State Surplus Property: This bill would allow state legislators or their staff to buy off-lease state computers. Those not sold will be offered to public libraries for purchase. Any remaining computers not acquired by legislators, their staff or libraries would then be sold at state surplus. This provision has been included in appropriations bills in previous years. The bill also allows state law enforcement officers to purchase their personal firearm at market cost if they resign for other employment opportunities or retire. This offer is not applicable to law enforcement officers who leave under less than desirable circumstances. SB 30 has no fiscal note and passed 40 to 0.

Senate Bill 34- Open Records: The measure is a review of the exceptions to the Kansas Open Records Act. In recent history, the legislature has reviewed the excep-

tions in an effort to eliminate those deemed unnecessary. Of the 30 exceptions listed in the bill, 16 have long been included in the Kansas Open Records Act and 14 were added during the 2008 session as part of SB 702. No new exceptions to the act are included in SB 34. The Senate approved the bill 40 to 0.

Senate Bill 44- False Submission of Claims: Under SB 44, any individual who attempts to make a false claim to the state would be held liable for three times the amount of actual damages, a \$1,000 to \$11,000 civil penalty for each action, and court costs and attorney fees associated with the litigation. The bill is the result of federal legislation that encouraged states to use civil tools when pursuing cases of fraud. The bill passed 40 to 0.

Senate Bill 45- Kansas Power of Attorney Act: This bill amends the Kansas Power of Attorney Act in three ways. First, those who are physically unable to sign a document naming a power of attorney but who are competent and conscious can designate an individual to sign the document on their behalf in the presence of a notary public. Second, those acting with a power of attorney are required to keep a record of disbursements, receipts and other transactions conducted and are prohibited from combining assets and funds of the individual who they represent with their own.

Third, procedures are authorized for those who voluntarily resign from the role of power of attorney. SB 45 was approved 40 to 0.

Transportation Update: The Senate Transportation Committee heard the recommendations of the Interim Transportation Committee on Tuesday, Jan. 27. The committee encouraged the House and Senate Transportation committees to develop a new comprehensive transportation plan that requires equity between urban and rural needs when approving new transportation projects. Other recommendations include using "practical design" for projects that do not meet federal standards.

The governor's T-Link Task Force met this week to finalize its report and Secretary of Transportation Deb Miller is expected to provide a review of the report next week.

Feline shows off catch of day

My daughter was shouting in my ear. I had a little trouble demodulating the message, but I eventually figured it out.

"He did it again!" she screamed. Oh, I thought. Husband? Dog? Boss?

I was afraid to ask, almost. But when I got her to slow down, I did.

"He did it again, Daddy."

Who? "Louie!"

That's her favorite cat, the one who purrs in her lap when she reads at night and sleeps by her pillow. Usually.

"Did what?" I asked. "Oh. My." Again?

Seems Louie had caught a mouse. Just a little one. And brought it into the bedroom to show his favorite human, proud cat that he was.

"He meowed to wake me up," she said. "It must have been 3 a.m. When I tried to ignore him, he must have let it go."

"I could feel something with little feet running around on the covers."

Then, she did what any woman in her right mind would do. She screamed.

Bad move. Louie lost the mouse, it ran under something, Louie jumped off to chase it. By this time Nik, her husband, was up. Poor guy, what choice did he have?

He suggested catching the mouse, which Louie was hunting. Felicia, wisely, I think, vetoed that plan. She banished Louie from the bedroom



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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and shut the door for the night. Then they went back to bed.

"That mouse wasn't coming back up on the bed on its own," she said.

In the morning, they let Louie in and he found the mouse. He played with it for a while, but Felicia said it was just a baby, and after a few minutes, she felt sorry for it.

After a brief chase, they managed to catch it with a dustpan and Nik got the job of taking it down the block.

Seems they have a no-kill, catch-and-release policy for vermin, a little soft-hearted for my tastes, but it's their house.

And people out here wonder why city folk want them to stop killing prairie dogs and coyotes?

Anyway, a day or two later, Louie caught one of the adult members of Clan Mouse. He, too, got to go for a short walk.

But Felicia says she's rethinking her close relationship with her favorite feline. She says Louie may be banned from the bedroom.

I found this hard to believe, because she's really fond of that cat, but her logic is impeccable. This

is the second time she's brought a mouse to bed. The result was similar to the first time.

And Felicia figures it'll just happen again. She's threatening to banish him for all time.

Me, I'll believe this when I see it. She has the cat habit bad. (In fact, he was back in less than a week, I learned later.)

Me, I think this whole scene sounds pretty entertaining. I'd like to be there to see the next show — and watch proud Louie bat the poor mouse about.

But the kids would get more sleep without all that entertainment.

From the Bible

I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.

He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.

Psalms 40:1-2

THE OBERLIN HERALD

Serving Oberlin and Decatur County since 1879

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170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749-2243

Phone: (785) 475-2206 Fax (785) 475-2800

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Published each Wednesday by Haynes Publishing Co., 170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749. Periodicals 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, \$33 (tax included) in Decatur, Norton, Rawlins, Sheridan, Thomas and Red Willow counties; \$38 (tax included) elsewhere in Kansas; \$42 elsewhere in the U.S. Foreign subscriptions, \$50-\$250 (in US dollars only) 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.

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Musical angel saves the day

Since Jim shot himself in the index finger of his left hand with an air nailer, he has not been able to play guitar. That finger will not bend, so he couldn't touch the strings to play chords. He made light of it, but I knew it pained him to not be able to play.

I never expected an angel to look like our friend Larry Henderson, but I guess God has a sense of humor.

Sunday, we were eating at a local restaurant when Larry stopped by our table. As always with Larry, the conversation eventually came around to music. An accomplished musician, Larry sympathized with Jim. But, in a matter-of-fact voice he said, "Well, Jim. Why don't you just tune it to the Key of E, and then you can bar chord?"

You could almost see the light go in Jim's mind.

"Of course!" Jim said. "Why didn't I think of that?"

I had no idea what they were talking about. I love music, but I can barely play the radio. However, I could tell this revelation was big.



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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Jim could hardly wait to get home. He rushed in the door, grabbed the guitar that had been gathering dust in the corner, and began plucking the strings. A few adjustments and it was tuned to the right key. Then he began to play. And sing. Then he began to cry.

I called Larry and thanked him for giving my husband the greatest gift possible. Then we began calling the kids so Jim could play and sing for them over the phone.

This was all going on during the Super Bowl. During commercials, Jim would hit the "mute" button and play a song. We sang every song we ever knew, and then he went to the computer and found lyrics. I finally

drifted off to sleep as he sat on the edge of the bed, still playing.

Music is such a gift. It really does soothe the savage beast.

— ob —

Why is it I received my first seed catalog of the year mere days before Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow? He says six more weeks of winter while I'm beginning to eye the tomato bed.

I've been told the Farmer's Almanac predicts a huge spring blizzard. I've seen snow on Mother's Day and Easter, so nothing should surprise me.

We can't hurry Mother Nature, but I know there are other gardeners out there itching to dig in the dirt.