

Proposed amendment will let people know what's going on

Legislative leaders from all three sides of the aisle, the attorney general and governor have joined Kansas newspapers pushing for a new constitutional right — the right of voters and citizens to know what their government is doing.

Open government sounds as simple as it does obvious. In a democracy, don't the people always have a right to know what their officials are up to?

Sadly, many officials don't agree. Once elected, they think they should know things that "the people" shouldn't hear or see.

Kansas has an Open Meetings and Open Records laws, but they are violated daily, sometimes right in our own county, by officials who either don't know or don't care about or don't understand the public's rights.

And while the laws have been toughened some, it's difficult and expensive to enforce them. One newspaper spent more than \$13,000 in legal fees to get the state's list of dangerous railroad crossings. The Department of Transportation lost the suit — why it wanted to keep the information a secret is beyond us — but spent thousands more in tax money to keep its files closed.

Many times, citizen requests are met with a stonewall by public officials who just don't understand the laws. Most people just can't afford to sue.

Other times, officials meet behind closed doors and discuss things they know are not legal. Since no one hears what they say, who can challenge the secrecy?

The legislative push includes a constitutional amendment which will let voters decide the issue.

It would create an Office of Public Integrity under the attorney general to enforce the public's rights, and change one exemption to the records law to be certain that all compensation of public employees, and not just cash pay, is open to the public. (A lawsuit last year cleared up that exemption, at a cost of more than \$75,000, but the University of Kansas chose not to appeal, so the state Supreme Court did not get to make a definitive ruling.)

The program, created by the Kansas Press Association, would expand the definition of a public agency to include private firms that contract to run state programs, an increasingly popular dodge.

All this may sound great, but there will be opposition. Many officials feel the public really doesn't need to know what government is up to.

Some will support the amendment and the accompanying bills publicly, but drag their feet in hopes that the effort will go away.

There is little in state, county, city or school files that should not be open to public inspection. Current exemptions to the laws would remain to protect those few things, such as personnel and student records, that should be closed.

But it will take a lot of work and strong support from taxpayers and voters to get a two-thirds vote in both houses of the state Legislature. An affirmative vote by the people in 2006 is more certain, because Kansans understand that they're entitled to this information.

This plan, enshrining a basic right in the Constitution and creating an agency to enforce it, deserves our support. It's important to our freedom to know what government does.

Here's hoping that the Legislature gets with the program.

— Steve Haynes

WRITE:

The Norton Telegram encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of public interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise.

We do not publish form letters or letters about topics which do not pertain to our area. Thank-yous should be submitted to the Want Ad desk.

Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses which do not pertain to a public issue.

THE NORTON TELEGRAM

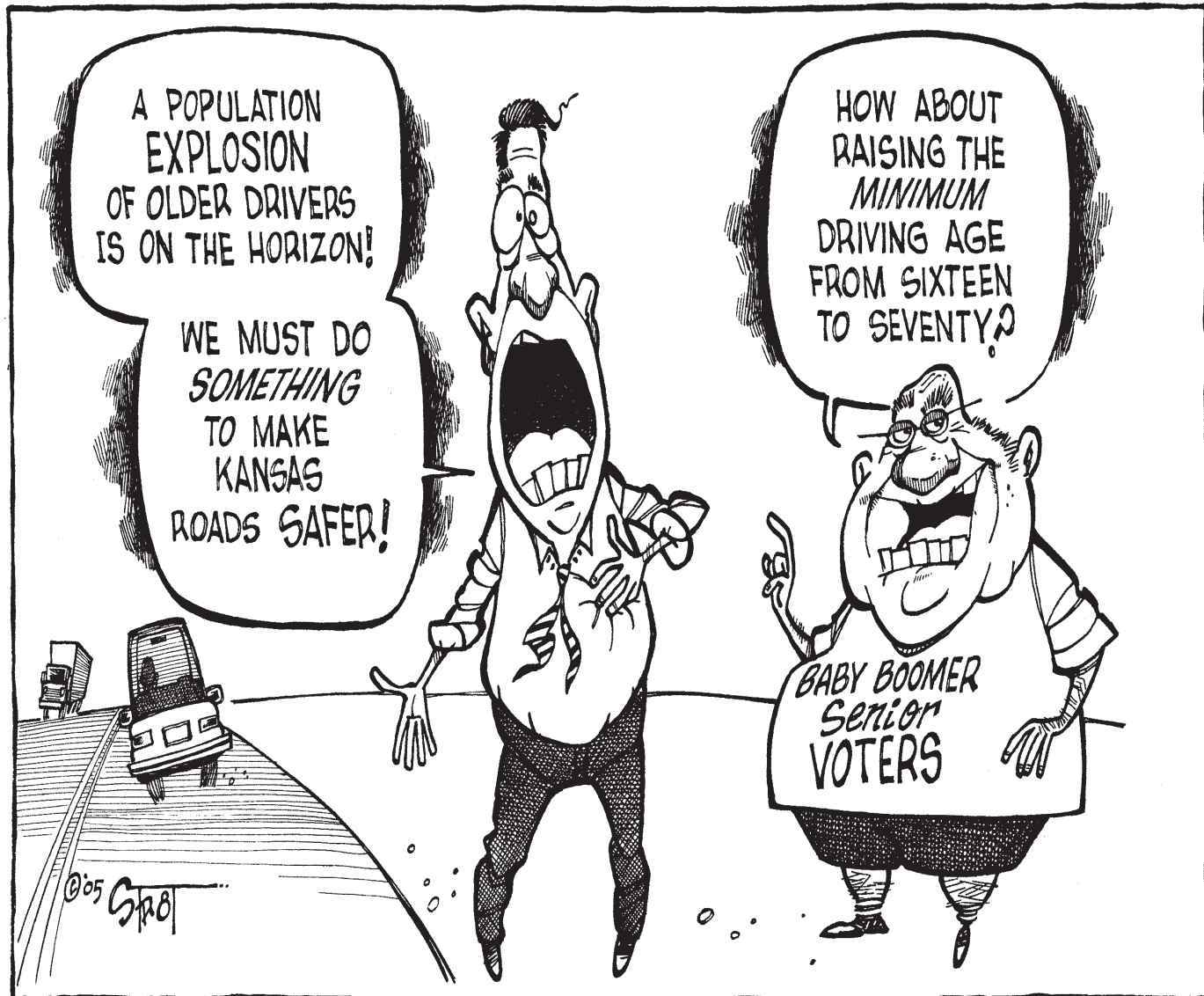
Office hours:
8 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri.
Phone: (785) 877-3361
Fax: (785) 877-3732
E-mail: telegram@nwkansas.com

STAFF

Cynthia Haynes editor and publisher
Veronica Monier staff reporter
Dick Boyd Blue Jay sports
Carolyn Plotts society editor
Sherry Hickman circulation
Carol Erlenbusch advertising rep.
Eric Weeden advertising rep.
Vicki Henderson computer production
Susie Marble computer production
Sonya Montgomery bookkeeping

Nor'West Newspapers

Dick and Mary Beth Boyd
Publishers, 1970-2002
Incorporating the Norton County Champion
Marion R. Krehbiel, editor



Weekend weather typical for Kansas

That's another one for the history books. SuperBowl Whatever is over.

Before the kickoff, Jim asked me what team I was cheering for. I gave him some lame answer about cheering for the underdog, but also reasoned there might be something to this "dynasty" thing.

It wasn't until the final minutes of the fourth quarter that I officially pledged my allegiance. I didn't want to commit too early. Besides, he had to keep reminding me who the teams were.

During the game, we had ourselves a "carpet picnic," except we didn't actually sit on the floor. We've discovered it's too hard to get back up. We laid out our little spread on the TV tray between our recliners. We had cheese, chips, crackers, salsa and salami. I even drank a carbonated soft drink. I mention that only because I haven't had one since before Thanksgiving. No special reason, except I think I feel

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



better for not drinking soda pop.

And maybe a little because I hear my mother's voice somewhere in my subconscious saying, "You wouldn't be broke if you didn't drink all that pop." She was convinced that the country's financial problems could be solved if everyone would quit drinking soda. Who knows, she may have been right. Take the cost of two cans of pop a day (I'm using a low figure of 50 cents a can), multiply that by 365, times 72 years for an average life span and what do you get? My word!

That's over \$26,000. She was right!

—ob—

This part of the country got hit pretty hard over the weekend. And it was so typically Kansas. Saturday was shirt-sleeve weather; Sunday we were in a blizzard. The windshield wipers on the car couldn't keep up. Ice would build up and I would have to reach out the window, catch the blade on the upsweep, and give it a "thunk" against the glass in an attempt to dislodge the ice. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

Seems like the perfect time to head back to Mexico. A week from now, we'll be in Juarez building a house. It may not be sunny, but I am trusting it will be warmer than here.

—ob—

The reason a dog has so many friends is that he wags his tail instead of his tongue. I don't know who said that, but it's good advice.

Where'd the good commercials go?

Our family has had a series of triumphs in misplanning. It started with my husband getting unhappy with our television provider.

We have one of those little dishes on the side of the house and the folks that make the programs go from the satellite into the dish raised the fees.

To lower the cost, Steve dropped CBS and FOX, among others. This didn't bother either of us, since we never watched those channels.

Actually, about the only thing we "watch" is a couple of music channels. These show you a white box on a black screen. The title of the song, artist and album scrolls along across the box.

Occasionally, I'll watch an old movie while folding clothes and two to three times a year we'll order a pay-per-view feature.

I have no idea when Steve dropped part of the service. The first I heard of it was a complaint from our son at Christmas. He was home and glued to the tube but couldn't get a sports program he wanted to watch on CBS.

His father explained what had happened and suggested that the Christmas

Open Season

Cynthia Haynes



lights needed to be put up, at which time our son became very engrossed in something on another channel.

The subject was dropped until Saturday when we were discussing watching the Super Bowl, which was shown exclusively on FOX.

We didn't really want to watch the game, but we were looking forward to the commercials.

We ended up watching neither.

Instead we looked up the Internet site our daughter and son-in-law had spent the last month building.

Felicia and Nik were planning to go on vacation to Mexico with us the last week of January until they realized that the Super Bowl was being held in Jacksonville, Fla., where the company they work for

owns the newspaper.

They had already been told they needed to set up a super web site for the big game. So instead of lying in the sun in Mexico, the kids sat hunched over computer screens in Jacksonville.

Another triumph to planning, although it really wasn't their fault that the Super Bowl was when or where it was.

The third triumph was in Mexico. Youngest daughter was able to make the trip and had a great time. She also tried to burn the place down.

She was making sticky rice by putting the rice in a plastic colander on top of a pot of boiling water. The rice was almost done when I decided to go to the clubhouse for lunch. Daughter decided that was a great idea.

An hour later, we arrived back to a smoke-filled villa. The plastic colander was melted into the pot, which had gone dry. The windows were all open and the ceiling fans turned on. It still took most of two hours to get the smoke out of the place, and it smelled faintly of burned plastic for two days thereafter.

Planning, they say, makes all the difference.

Congressman accepting applications

Congressman Jerry Moran is accepting applications for summer 2005 Congressional internships in his Washington, D.C., Hays and Hutchinson offices. Intern responsibilities include assisting him and his staff with legislative and administrative projects.

The goal is to give young adults the opportunity to participate in public service. Applications are due by Friday, March 11. Summer internships are flexible but generally run in two sessions, May 31 to July 1 and from July 5 to Aug. 12.

To apply, students should submit the application, along with a cover letter, resume, college transcripts and three letters

Capitol Views

Rep. Jerry Moran



of reference. The cover letter should explain their interest and the goals they hope to reach in the program.

Application forms and details can be obtained online at: www.house.gov/moranks01/internweb. In order to ensure timely receipt of the application, students

are asked to fax their applications to (202) 225-5124. Or, they may send them to Congressman Moran's Hutchinson office, Attn: Intern Coordinator, Box 1128, Hutchinson, Kan. 67504.

"My own interest in public service started with a Congressional internship in Washington in 1974," Mr. Moran said. "My hope is that students are able to gain skills and learn more about our government, which they can take back and utilize in their communities."

For more information, contact Congressman Moran at (202) 225-2715 or visit his web page at www.house.gov/moranks01.