

Consolidation remains hot issue

A major issue again this year in Topeka is local government consolidation, but progress seems unlikely. The consolidation idea has been gaining ground in recent years because it seems like a "good idea." The way it works in Kansas today, though, it's almost impossible.

One county, Riley, has a consolidated city-county police department under an appointed chief. That required an act of the Legislature. A handful have consolidated law enforcement under the elected sheriff, which can be done with a city-county contract.

Only one county has consolidated city and county government, Wyandotte, though a couple of small towns continue to function within the overall combined county.

That, too, required an act of the Legislature.

And that's the biggest obstacle to consolidation. If we're going to have any meaningful joining, the state needs to set clear, simple rules for local governments to follow, then let the cities and counties have at it. That process works well for school districts. Running a bill for each attempt bogs down the whole process and stifles creative solutions.

Kansas Farm Bureau stands in the way of a solution right now, having vowed that any consolidation bill must include separate votes in cities and rural areas. A plan with that provision was shot down by rural voters in Shawnee County last fall. Consolidation ain't going to happen under those rules.

Part of the problem is that cities and counties are different creatures. Cities run utilities like sewer, water and electric systems. They patch potholes in paved streets and chase dogs.

Counties grade roads and spray noxious weeds. They kill prairie dogs and supervise archaic township governments. They run elections and help the state sell license tags and drivers' licenses.

Some functions, like law enforcement and administration, do overlap, but rural people fear a consolidated government would be a "super city" that ignores the minority out in the hinterlands. They fear that police patrols, road maintenance and other efforts would concentrate in town, leaving them on their own.

Most of all, they think they would be forgotten in a majority rule system. Hence the Farm Bureau stance. And they may be right.

Oddly enough, that hasn't happened with the traditional county system, where city voters usually outnumber the rural block, but perception is everything. County commissioners are seen as responding mostly to rural voters, while a combined board might not.

Political jealousies enter this debate as well, since consolidation schemes might do away with county elected officers in favor of a manager system or appointed department heads. Anything's possible.

Our view is that the majority ought to rule, but gently. It's unlikely we'll have any consolidation with a split vote, so the Legislature ought to craft a compromise that protects rural people from taking on city debt or paying for city services they don't get.

The decision ought to be made on a one-man, one-vote basis, as is required under the federal Constitution. And the law ought to allow the utmost flexibility in crafting a new kind of local government without a lot of interference from Topeka.

One last word of warning: Don't expect consolidation to save money. It won't. Things might run better, but they seldom get less expensive.

That said, let the consolidation begin. — Steve Haynes

WRITE:

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THE NORTON TELEGRAM

ISSN 1063-701X

215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, KS 67654

Published each Tuesday and Friday by Haynes Publishing Co., 215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, Kan. 67654. Periodicals mail postage paid at Norton, Kan. 67654.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Norton Telegram, 215 S. Kansas, Norton, Kan. 67654. Official newspaper of Norton and Norton County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, and the Nebraska Press Association

Nor'West Newspapers

Dick and Mary Beth Boyd
Publishers, 1970-2002

Incorporating the Norton County Champion
Marion R. Krehbiel, editor



Birthday candles getting a workout

January is a big birthday month in our family. Alexandria, our nearby granddaughter, celebrated her 11th year Saturday.

She shares that day with her great-grandmother, Margie, whom she never got to know.

Alex's mom, Jennifer, also has a January birthday, but I value my life too much to tell you how old she will be.

Anyway, Jennifer took Alex and a few of her girlfriends for a weekend excursion to a "slightly larger" city a few hours away. One of the motels in that town has an indoor water park.

Judging from the squeals of laughter and general mayhem I heard on my end of the line during a phone conversation with Jennifer, I'm guessing they had a really good time.

Alex is at that stage known as a "tweenager." She's right on the edge of being a teen, but still a little girl in lots of ways. We're already seeing signs of the

Out Back Carolyn Plotts



beauty she's going to become.

—ob—
This crazy weather we're having is a mixed blessing. Summer-like weather in the middle of January is great for outdoor activities and the heating bill. Unfortunately, trees are starting to bud, and we all know there's still lots of winter left.

We're just waiting for the other shoe to drop. When it does, those little buds are gonna get stomped on.

The word among local farmers is always the same, "We need some moisture." Snow is predicted, so I hope the farmers get what they want, and then it

warms right back up.

—ob—
My next-to-the-youngest brother, Dick, had hip replacement surgery last week.

He's home from the hospital now, and according to his family, doing just fine. Jim's dad had a knee replaced a few months ago at the same hospital. These surgeries are so commonplace that soon we'll all be going in for our 100,000 mile tune-up and overhaul.

What once could only be imagined is now routine procedure.

—ob—
Football fever is running rampant at our house. Jim's team is still winning, and as long as they do, emotions will be pretty high.

We have an agreement, though. As long as he doesn't yell too loud, and lets me take a nap, I promise to rouse up long enough to watch the end of the game with him.

Television: an electronic box of stuff

The other evening I thought I would take a peek at the cable news channels, just to see what they were up to. I don't always watch the cable television news channels, I sometimes relax to "Everybody Loves Raymond" or reruns of "The Golden Girls" or test my wits against those playing on those game shows for money, like "Wheel of Fortune" or "Jeopardy." Sometimes it's a sit-down with Smoky Hills Public Television, or The History Channel, or The Learning Channel, and I also like to watch HGTV's home makeovers, and even a western movie now and then.

I do look in on EWTN, the Catholic channel as that is the religion of my choice. I find some good programming there and use it as a study and research tool.

ESPN, of course, gets lots of viewing as I am, I guess, a sports crazy.

But something tugged at my coattails on this particular evening. Something was telling me I needed to watch CNN or the FOX line-up. So I did — both. Hannity and Colmes was on FOX. Hannity has an ego as wide as the goal posts through which the football is supposed to sail, and Colmes is really a shallow challenger to his co-host. Fifteen minutes into that program and I was ready for CNN. Well, low and behold, there was the old fireball himself, Larry King on Larry King Live and I sometimes dispute the third word in that show's title. Boy, that was a yawning fifteen.

I guess I like cable television because of the variety it offers. If Sean (Hannity)

My 2¢ Worth Tom Dreiling



and Alan (Colmes) are a bit much to stomach, or King (Larry) is too slow to react, there are dozens of other channels that surely will fit the bill.

I sort of like Bill O'Reilly, although at times I think he treats his guests with less than professional grace. But those who go on camera with him certainly know the pitfalls. He is always prepared and guests better be as well prepared otherwise the ride could be bumpy. He's an interesting hour. I don't always agree with him, but his hour certainly goes by fast!

I like Anderson Cooper, CNN's 9 p.m. (Central Time) news anchor. I like the tempo, the topics, his presentation.

There are some newer shows on the tube and I haven't been able to catch up with them. But street talk has it that some of them are very definitely not for the young crowd. If variety is the spice of life, then when you're my age television provides the spice.

—td—

And just what do you think, from the perspective of outsiders, Norton is best known for? When friends at Hays learned that I would be moving to Norton, with-

out hesitation they all said, "Oh, that's the city up there by Sebelius Reservoir!" I said yes and also reminded them that Norton was also home of the football Blue Jays that dismantled the Monarchs of TWP thread-by-thread this past season. They would rather have talked about Sebelius Reservoir.

—td—

Just in case you didn't know, Vincent van Gogh had a little, bouncy nephew, named Poe Gogh. They said he was built like a stick. (Thanks to a Norton e-mailer for that one.)

—td—

I wake up each morning — workweek morning — to the sound of music coming from Norton's KQNK-Fm 106.7. Gosh, I hate that! Not the station, but the fact that when I hear the music I know it's time to get up. It seems like you barely climb into bed and it's time to climb back out. KQNK keeps me abreast of the weather at that time of the morning and also some news that I can carry into the day. Not a bad way to wake up.

—td—

The guy forgot his wife's birthday. She was angry. Very angry. She told him that he had better have something in the driveway by noon the next day that goes from zero to 200 in six seconds...or else!

At precisely noon the next day, the wife noticed a small package in the driveway. She ran out and quickly opened it. It contained a bathroom scale.

I think his funeral is Thursday.

—td—

Have a good evening!

Something on your mind? Share it with a letter to the editor. E-mail tom@d@nwkansas.com