

### Consumer regulators, are they helping us?

The hands of telecommunications companies seem to be not watchdogs, but in fact, running with the wolf pack.

Don't believe it? Take a good look at your next telephone bill. On a typical landline bill in Kansas, for instance, you'll find that as much as a quarter of the bill goes not to pay for service, but to pay taxes and special fees which may or may not benefit the guy who uses the line.

The lion's share of this money, about \$5.30 per line, goes to something called the "Federal Subscriber Line Charge," which is not a tax, but a charge paid directly to the telephone service provider, AT&T in this case. This fee is not regulated by the states, as are basic charges, but the Federal Communications Commission caps it at \$6.50 per line.

While it may look official, it's just a way for the phone company to inflate the bill to pay for "costs." It's a scam, in other words, and some consumer web sites report the companies will sometimes waive the charge when someone complains enough.

Next-biggest fee on the list is the Kansas Universal Service Fee, about \$4 a line, which is supposed to help pay for better service in "rural" areas. A Federal Universal Service Fee is similar, but less than half as much, \$1.75 per line. These are established by state and federal law.

We've never figured out what good these fees do those of us out here, who live in rural territory and might be happier with lower phone bills. One multi-million-dollar project which got a federal loan involves a cooperative telephone company building a new phone system in Hays and other area towns, places that already have good phone and Internet service.

Competition is good, yes, but should users of an existing phone service be taxed to pay for it? Couldn't the phone companies just get a bank loan?

We say Congress and the states should eliminate these charges.

Then there is the Special E911 Tax, a state levy which collects money used to "modernize" county and city dispatch operations. While these are vital, we wonder if the tax isn't a little high at 75 cents per line. When legislators questioned this, and tried to reduce the fee last year, county commissioners screamed bloody murder. There was no one there to represent telephone users, however, and guess which side won?

If you live in town, you may pay a "Special Municipal Charge," basically a city tax or franchise fee. This comes to 75 cents a line on our bill, but cities have taxed phone bills for years.

"Ordinary" taxes, state and federal, amount to roughly \$3.60, and the \$10 in "Surcharges and Other Fees" makes that seem cheap.

In some ways, your cellular bill is worse. The surcharges are lower, but cellular companies charge made-up fees that pad their bills beyond the monthly charges they advertise.

Our carrier assesses a "regulatory cost recovery fee" and a "telecom connectivity fee," totaling \$1.15 per line. If you read the fine print, these supposedly represent real costs of doing business, but "(these) are not a government mandated tax or surcharge."

In other words, they're just part of what you pay to use your cell phone each month. A \$10 add-on line really costs \$11.15 plus taxes and required fees. And that amounts to deceptive advertising.

Otherwise, cell users pay lower fees than land lines - the 911 tax is only 50 cents per line though cell phones make most of the 911 calls today, and state and local taxes run about 8 percent. Universal service charges are 4 to 5 percent for the state and the federal funds, again with no perceived real benefit to rural cell phone users.

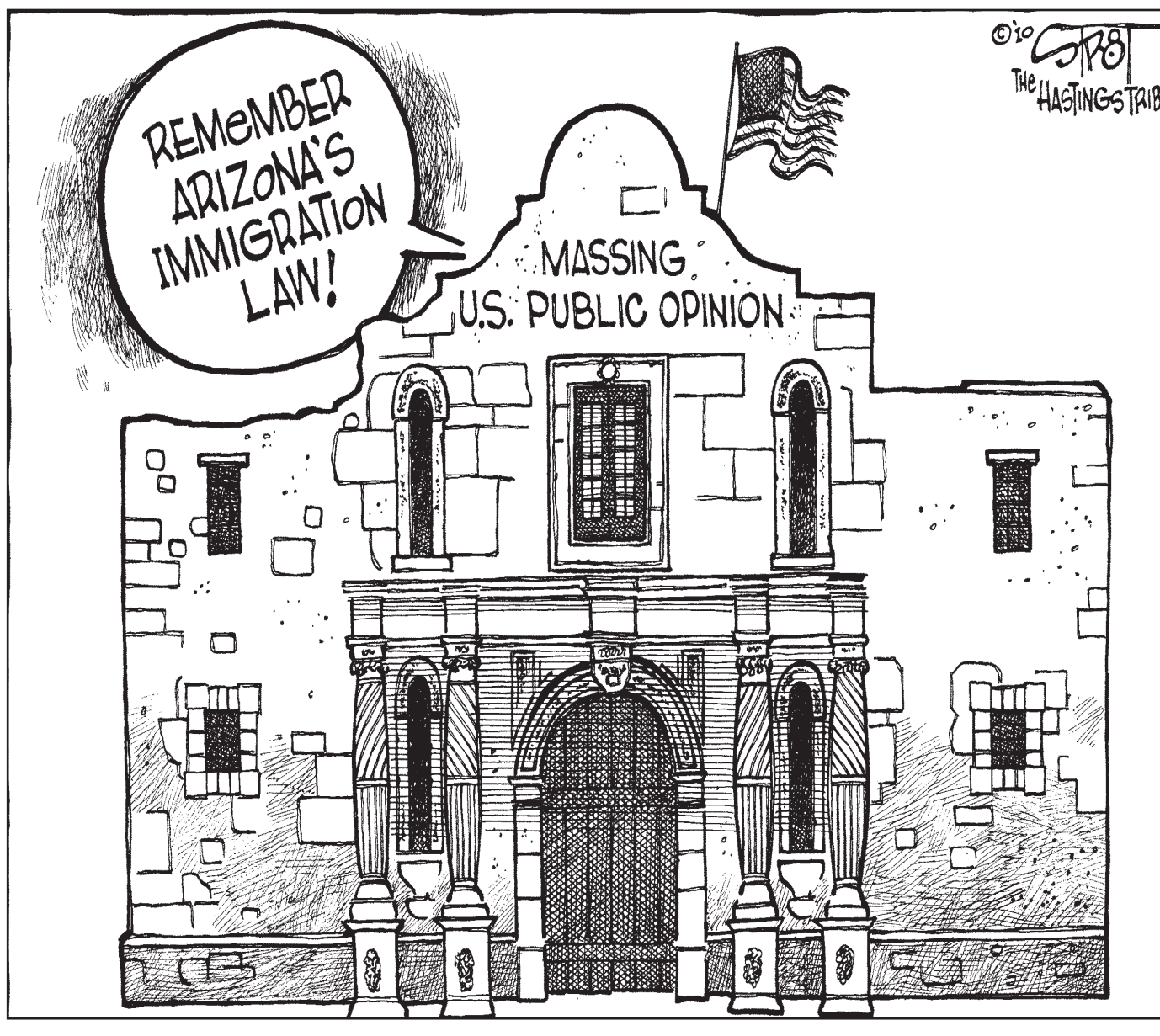
What to do?

Demand that your legislators reduce the 911 tax. Pressure Congress and the state to eliminate the "rural service" fees or show that they're really doing something for us. Same for the "subscriber line charge."

And write the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission and ask that all phone companies be required to advertise, in big type, the real price, with and without taxes, of their service.

Phone service would be a lot cheaper - at least easier to understand - if, instead of going along, government put a stop to this folderol. Consumers deserve as much.

- Steve Haynes



### Anhydrous ammonia, helpful but deadly

After the white vapor cloud cleared, the man picked himself off the ground. The blast had knocked him 20 feet back from where he originally stood.

His blue denim shirt had been crystallized on his chest. A pack of Winston cigarettes suffered the same fate. The letters "WINSTON" were burned into his chest.

Fortunately, he was wearing gloves and goggles. His eyes were spared, and the flesh burns were confined to his arms. Lucky?

Absolutely. This man applying anhydrous escaped with his life and his health. He would have a second chance to handle this fertilizer - this time with care.

While anhydrous ammonia remains one of the most affordable farm fertilizers, the properties of this chemical make it one of the most potentially dangerous plant inputs used in agriculture.

In an attempt to hammer home this message, farm safety pioneer Lynn Buerki demonstrated the proper application of anhydrous ammonia to emergency medical personnel on his Sedgwick County farm earlier this summer.

The overriding message when handling anhydrous ammonia could be condensed into four words - caution: handle with care.

Anhydrous means without water. This means this chemical will seek out moisture, and most of the human body is made up of water.

The liquid or gas that contacts the body tissue - especially the eyes, skin and respiratory tract will cause dehydration, cell

#### Insight John Schlageck

destruction and severe chemical burns.

When applying anhydrous in the field, some of the key accident situations include:

- \*Filling the tank more than 85 percent.
- \*Leaky valves and deteriorated or out-of-date hoses.
- \*Handling hoses by valve handles.
- \*Not using protective equipment - gloves, goggles and long sleeved clothing.
- \*Not bleeding anhydrous from the hose before connecting or disconnecting.
- \*Lack of water to flush burns caused in case of an accident.
- \*Tipping over an applicator tank by pulling at an excessive speed. Never pull a tank more than 25 miles-per-hour. It wasn't designed for high-speed travel.

No one should ever handle anhydrous ammonia without proper-fitting goggles and rubber gloves with the cuffs turned back so anhydrous doesn't run down your sleeve when you raise your arms. Heavy duty, long sleeved shirts are also recommended for anyone handling anhydrous.

Regular glasses do not provide adequate protection. The vapor will simply swirl around the lens and seek out the eye. Never wear contact lenses when working with anhydrous ammonia.

When it comes to first aid for anhydrous ammonia, the only suitable recourse is water, water and more water. Water must be available for flushing the eyes and skin in case of exposure.

Should ammonia touch the skin or eyes, tissue damage occurs rapidly. Carry a 5-gallon bucket in every vehicle used for anhydrous ammonia. Anyone handling anhydrous should carry an 8-ounce squeeze bottle of water in his/her shirt pocket for rapid emergency flushing.


Time is everything. Flush water onto the exposed skin areas or eyes immediately. Flush for at least 15 minutes.

After the victim has been flushed thoroughly, remove contaminated clothing carefully. Thaw clothing frozen to the skin by running water over it before removal. Never apply oils, salves or other treatment. Use water only for the first 24 hours and go to a physician immediately.

When handled safely, anhydrous ammonia remains one of the most economical sources of nitrogen available for crops. With low commodity prices, farmers need such a product to keep production inputs in check.

Remember, don't get in a hurry. Focus on the task at hand. Don't worry about how much work you have to do. Think. Use common sense and don't forget the above tips.

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.



**THUMBS UP!**

Thumbs Up: To the Prayer and Action group for their joyous and generous gift of time and talent in beautifying the homes and yards of so many in the Norton and surrounding area for three weeks. Brought in by Bernice Becker

**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

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

**STAFF**

Dana Paxton.....general manager  
advertising director/  
email: dpaxton@nwkansas.com

Dick Boyd.....Blue Jays sports

Harriett Gill.....society editor

Sherry Hickman.....bookkeeping/circulation

Vicki Henderson.....computer production



**Kansas Press Association**

### The best birthday surprise I ever received

I love surprises. If it's close to Christmas and I find a bag under the bed or in the closet, you can trust I won't peek. I don't want to ruin the surprise.

That's why, with my birthday fast approaching, I didn't say anything when Jim began taking suspicious phone calls, the kind where he would get up and leave the room. One was from my youngest daughter, Kara.

Jim and I were in the truck when his cell phone rang. He was driving and asked me to answer. It was Kara. She sputtered and claimed she must have dialed Jim by mistake. We talked but, she didn't have much to say.

Later, he got another call. I sensed it was Kara again, and that they were talking about me.

The real kicker came when, four days before my birthday, Jim said, "Hey, let's pretend we're having company and clean the house from top to bottom." Followed by the dead give-away, "And I'll help."

That's when I knew someone was going to be coming for my birthday.

Now, don't get me wrong. Jim is a big help to me around the house. He's not so good at loading the dishwasher, but he doesn't hesitate to throw in a load of laundry, clean the toilet or run the sweeper.

#### Out Back Carolyn Plotts



But for him to say, "Let's pretend" and "I'll help" in the same sentence was over the top.

Assuming no one would show up until the weekend, I didn't get too excited about things. I'm more of a "putterer" anymore. I work a little on this, take a break, work a little on that, take another break. I was in the middle of a long break Thursday evening when the phone rang. It was my oldest daughter Halley, asking if my present had been delivered.

"No," I answered. "I didn't even pick up the mail today."

"It didn't come through the mail," she said.

"Well, maybe they just set it inside the house," I said. "Let me check the kitchen door. Nope, not here. Not inside the front door. Not inside the dining room door. (We have lots of doors) Wait. Let me look on the front porch."

When I opened the door, there stood my 11-year old granddaughter, Taylor.

"Hi, Grandma," she said. I started screaming and hugging Taylor all at the same time. Then, I realized I still had Halley on the phone. I started to say, "You're never going to believe this, but Taylor is here, right now."

Then, I looked up, and Halley and Kara both stepped out from behind the bushes.

What a surprise. After that, I didn't even worry about the cobwebs in the corners or the soap scum on the tub. My girls were here and we had three whole days ahead of us.

"Is there any project we can help with while we're here?" they said.

To which I had an instant reply: "Yes, I want some pictures hung."

They said, "We won't leave until it's done."

They kept their promise. Even if it was the last thing they did Monday morning before getting in their car and heading back to Texas.

We talked, we ate. We talked and ate more. We shopped the antique stores and went to the fair.

So, yes, I love a surprise. And, the surprise of a visit from someone you love is the best surprise of all.