

Opinion



Free Press
Viewpoint

Write-in campaign is result of oversight

We are just a bit puzzled at the write-in campaign underway on behalf of I.B. "Sonny" Rundell for the Kansas State Board of Education District 5.

We are puzzled because Sonny, the 14-year incumbent, was soundly beaten in the August primary by Connie Morris of St. Francis, 17,047-11,598 in head-to-head competition.

Here in Thomas County, Morris won over Rundell in a landslide, 809-265.

Is a write-in on behalf of the ousted incumbent going to change anything at the Nov. 5 polls? Probably not.

But there is always a thread of hope.

Maybe there's a lesson to be learned here: Don't ever take voters for granted. Maybe that's what Mr. Rundell did because of his longevity on the state board. Maybe he should have gotten out among the voters to insure that his place on the state board was secure. He apparently didn't.

And we also wonder about the large number of letters we have received urging voters to write his name on the Nov. 5 ballot. Those letter writers should have been out there knocking on doors during the primary. We have received dozens of letters from all over District 5, but it is our policy to favor local and immediate area letters. Many of the letters we received came off of copy machines and it was next to impossible to ascertain the validity of the signatures attached. That's a big reason why, overall, we stick to local, immediate area letters.

Voters can be a strange lot. And they certainly demonstrated that on Aug. 6, as many of us thought Rundell was a shoo-in for reelection. But the August results clearly showed the voters wanted a change. And also that maybe Mr. Rundell's thinking no longer represented the thinking of the majority of District 5 people.

Who knows for sure.

We will all get another chance to speak our piece on Nov. 5 — by simply marking our ballot for Morris or writing in Sonny Rundell's name — and remembering to fill in the oval after it.

This Morris-Rundell matter is another good reason to exercise your right — the right to vote. And as Joan Albers said in her letter yesterday, "See you at the polls on Nov. 5." — *Tom (TD) Dreiling, Publisher*

Comments to any opinions expressed on this page are encouraged. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. 5th St., Colby, Kan., 67701. Or e-mail td@nwkansas.com.

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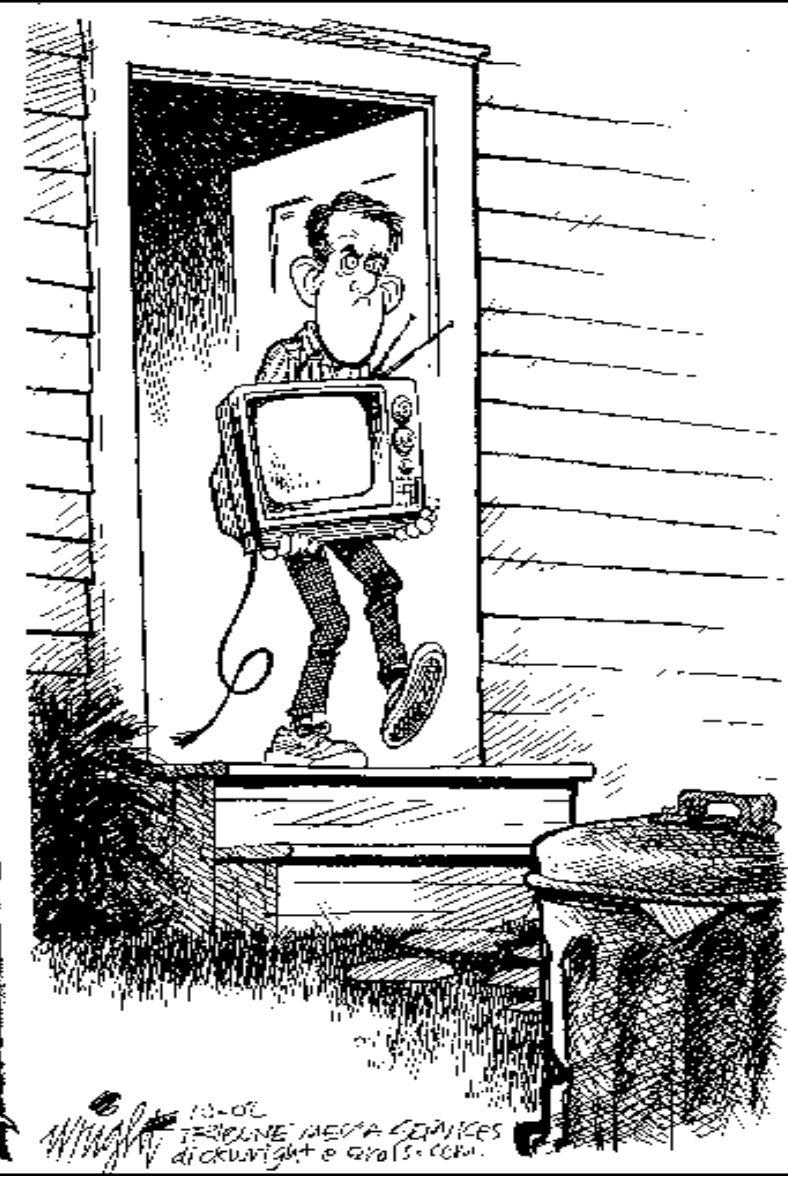
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Community Betterment

After more than a year of formation, development, and preparation, the Thomas County Community Foundation has crossed an important threshold. We have just completed our very first grant cycle, giving out \$22,000 in funds to various charitable causes throughout the county. It is gratifying to know that many people will be touched by the grants we have awarded. Check the Oct. 28 edition of the Free Press for the complete listing of recipients (page 2). I think you will be amazed at how much will be accomplished with these funds.

The 'Kids Can Do!' program alone will involve 197 children, 11 teachers and 3 schools. Aside from achieving the goal of involving those children in identifying and addressing community needs, countless people will be touched by the projects the children carry out. All of that for an expenditure of \$1,800! Amazing! This program and funding for \$8,200 in other grants, came from the Kansas Health Foundation bonus for reaching our 2001 Challenge Grant goal; a goal achieved because more than 220 families, businesses and other entities joined together to meet a unique community opportunity.

In addition to the classes participating in the 'Kids Can Do!' program, 27 organizations received fund-

ing from either the remaining Kansas Health Foundation funds or the City of Colby Special Law Enforcement Fund at the Thomas County Community Foundation.

The Kansas Health Foundation fund was designated to impact children and youth in Thomas County. In some instances, the projects funded will almost exclusively impact youth. However, as we all know, if a community is a good place for youth, it is probably a good place for all of us! Many of the grants will have a much wider reach than only our children. When children and youth are served, their families, neighbors and the entire community benefit.

Touching lives and making our community a better place to live is a basic function of all non-profit

groups. Non-profits typically either work to overcome a specific, critical problem in the community, or they offer programs that enrich our lives and offer positive alternatives that may head off future problems. The Thomas County Community Foundation mission is, "Forever Betterment — To endow funds to improve the quality of life for ALL citizens of Thomas County." We tried to reach a broad segment of our county's population with the grant funds we had available. We would like to have funded every application, but that simply wasn't possible.

As will always be the case, difficult choices had to be made. I commend the Thomas County Community Foundation Grants Committee and Board of Directors for striving to make conscientious and fair decisions.

If you are interested in establishing a fund or contributing toward a fund that will continue to give to our community every year, please let me know. There are a number of types of funds that can be established. We can tailor one to meet your charitable goals. My office is in the Thomas County Office Complex at 350 South Range, Suite 14. You can also reach me at: 465-9152 or tccfoundation@kans.com.

They're still dodging budget questions

The state gives away nearly three-quarters of the general tax dollars it raises — to school districts, other local governments and needy individuals.

That fact limits the opportunities for pulling the state out of its financial crisis by making its agencies more efficient, no matter how often Republican Tim Shallenburger and Democrat Kathleen Sebelius say they can avoid both a tax increase and painful cuts in aid to public schools or other areas of the budget.

As gubernatorial candidates, they insist they can't be too specific about their proposals for dealing with the state's budget problems, as if showing a can-do attitude will be enough.

But reality looms. On Nov. 5, Election Day, state officials and university economists will make the revenue forecasts that one of them and legislators will have to use in putting together a budget. Then, any efficiencies in government will be welcome, but they probably won't be enough for the new governor to avoid choosing between cuts in programs and increasing taxes.

The numbers are clear enough.

The official forecast is that the state will collect about \$4.5 billion in tax revenues during its current fiscal year, which began July 1. That's more than enough to sustain its \$4.42 billion budget.

But no one believes that estimate will hold, because revenues in fiscal 2002, which ended June 30, were \$212 million short of expectations.

Officials expect that same shortfall to recur in fiscal 2003, cutting revenues to \$4.3 billion and leaving a \$103 million deficit unless spending is reduced.

The Legislative Research Department has suggested that spending would have to decrease again in fiscal 2004 to avoid another deficit. Based on its figures, the most conservative estimate of how much the current budget would have to decline by the end of fiscal 2004 is \$164 million.

Shallenburger has promised not to increase taxes, and Sebelius has come close to doing so though she hasn't made an absolute pledge. Both have promised not to cut aid to public schools; both argue that mak-

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ing government more efficient offers a way for such a scenario to work.

Another look at the state budget is instructive.

The budget approved by legislators and signed into law by Gov. Bill Graves for fiscal 2003 appropriated about \$1.22 billion for state agency operations.

Aid to local governments, including school districts, was more than twice as much, at \$2.55 billion. Other assistance payments and grants outside government — like social services — amounted to \$655 million.

A governor who wanted to touch only agency operations would have to cut at least 13 percent of everything spent in that category.

Sebelius has promised a top-to-bottom review of state government to find efficiencies and has suggested she will work to find untapped federal funds and go after tax and welfare cheats.

She has not been specific about where potential savings are and has promised to protect both aid to public schools and higher education spending.

Shallenburger has said he would trim everything but aid to public schools, arguing that an average cut of 7.5 percent would do the job.

To pull it off, though, he would have to touch social-service benefits and aid to local governments as well as state bureaucracies, or make deeper cuts in those bureaucracies.

For example, more than 80 cents of every dollar the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services spends goes to direct assistance; less than 20 cents goes to field staff and central administration.

Shallenburger argued during the last debate that the state can build all of the projects promised under its \$13.5 billion, 10-year highway program and still find savings by making the Department of Transportation more efficient.

KDOT's administration accounts for only 4 percent of the program's total cost.

The program sets aside \$7 billion for major improvements, a figure that does include some administrative expenses because, as KDOT spokesman Marty Matthews noted, "Somebody has to design them, and somebody has to inspect them."

Shallenburger also has suggested that the state could eliminate its motor pool to save money.

A 1997 state audit suggested any savings would be small. The audit noted that while the state owned 7,700 vehicles during fiscal 1997, 1,500 were owned by the central motor pool, only 250 of which were used for individual employees' trips rather than being permanently assigned to one agency.

The state could save money, the audit suggested, by having all agencies own their own vehicles rather than use a pool, but that would amount to only about \$554,000 in fiscal 1997 figures.

Leasing vehicles would be more expensive, the audit said. Costs also would rise if employees drove their own cars and were reimbursed for mileage, it said. None of the figures accounted for less travel, of course, something Shallenburger could try to impose as governor.

The state probably can find some such efficiencies; it's difficult to imagine any \$4.4 billion enterprise with 40,000-plus employees that cannot. Even in good budget times, searching for waste pleases taxpayers.

But the state's budget problems are so big that it's likely to take every efficiency the new governor can find — and then tough choices about cutting programs or raising revenue, or both.

Political Writer John Hanna has covered state government and politics since 1987.

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