

# Opinion

## Free Press Viewpoint



### 'Sunshine Week' important to us all

This is Sunshine Week, dedicated to open government. It's a new national celebration, devoted to the idea that the people need to know what their public servants are doing.

In a democracy, that should be a simple concept. In Kansas, it drew support from the governor, legislative leaders, the attorney general and members of Congress. And it comes just a couple of weeks after the attorney general met privately with members of the state Board of Education to talk about evolution.



That illustrates the problem: Often, officials are afraid to discuss public business out in the open. They may seek political advantage, or they're embarrassed by the topic. Sometimes they claim they're protecting someone's privacy, or avoiding a lawsuit.

State open meetings and open record laws have exceptions to cover legitimate problems, but the reasons for secrecy often go beyond those. Officials sometimes don't understand the people's right to know, or they just don't care.

Kansas has good laws, but still officials try to dodge them when they think openness will hurt them. Sometimes, they keep secrets just because they can. Clerks often put roadblocks in the way of citizens seeking government records, though the law may say they are open.

Ignorance of this right may be its worst enemy. Often people go home without the information they need or want about their government.

In a continuing push for openness, the Kansas Press Association has formed a coalition to put open government into the state Constitution, protecting the right to know for all time and publicizing its importance.

This drew broad support in Topeka, everywhere from the governor's office to the Democratic and Republican leadership, both liberal and conservative. The coalition has been hampered by the evolution meetings, however, and the amendment hasn't moved much.

Federal law is much weaker than states'. While Congress generally meets in open session, federal agencies cling to secrecy. Citizens may spend years and thousands of dollars chasing public records.

In Washington, Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas conservative, and Sen. Patrick Leahy, a Vermont liberal, have joined forces to push a stronger Freedom of Information Act. It would restore much of what citizens have lost in recent years, though the secrecy surrounding the Patriot Act remains a problem.

Sen. Cornyn, a former state attorney general, said it well Thursday: "I can't think of an issue that's more central to who we are than open government. We are a self-governing people."

Open government is the bedrock of our democracy, he said; "It allows taxpayers to see where their money is going." Amen to that.

And happy Sunshine Week.  
— Steve Haynes  
Nor'West Newspapers



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"IT SEEMS GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES HAVE BEEN RACKING UP \$400 CELL PHONE BILLS DISCUSSING HOW TO CUT GOVERNMENT COSTS."

## It's all about openness



**Tom Dreiling**

### My Turn

I hope you all had a chance to read the boss' editorial on this page today. It deals with an issue that needs dealing with — open government. No reason whatsoever to continue to dodge the issue, as is many times the case. Guess it's just human nature to do so, but that practice isn't in the best interest of those being placed in positions to conduct the public's business. The key words here "public's business." The more we let the sun shine in on these proceedings the better. And what better time than Sunshine Week this week to draw attention to that need? Open the doors, open the windows, rip off the roofs — do whatever is necessary to assure that open government prevails. For fear of repetition I will now step aside and invite you to read today's editorial (if you haven't already done so). Wrist bands are being given to councilmen and commissioners to proclaim their support

Thursday provides a unique opportunity for the community to listen to one of its own talk about a topic that affects us all. And who better to address this opportunity than the director of the organization making it all possible? With that all said, I now turn this part of my column over to Cathy Gordon at Colby Community College.

*To All Readers of the Colby Free Press:*  
I would like to take this opportunity to invite everyone to the Dr. Mark Hansen lecture, "The 2004 presidential election: where we are, how we got there, and what it means," sponsored by the Max Pickerill Lecture Series at Colby Community College.

In his presentation Thursday evening Dr. Hansen, Chair of the Social Sciences Division and Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, will provide insight into the current political climate and why recent presidential elections have been so close. He will explore some of the key issues that have become hot button topics and how both parties have tried to use

them for political gain. But the real cutting question of the night will be where do we go from here?

Mark Hansen is a graduate of Colby High School and his parents (many of you know), John and Joyce Hansen still live in Colby. He went on to study at the University of Kansas and received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1987.

He has authored numerous articles and two political science books, *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America* (1993) with Steven Rosenstone and *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981* (1991).

Dr. Hansen is one of our country's leading scholars on elections and the election process. He was appointed as the coordinator of the Task Force on the Federal Election System for the National Commission on Election Reform, which was co-chaired by former Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter after the close election in 2000.

I hope you will all come out to the Cultural Arts Center on the Colby Community College campus at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday. The college is hosting a reception for Dr. Hansen and his family immediately following the lecture.

*Cathy Gordon, Director  
Max Pickerill Lecture Series  
Colby Community College  
(Letter #14)*

Reporters interviewing a 104-year-old woman asked, "And what do you think is the best thing

about being 104?" She simply replied, "No peer pressure."

How about this one? An elderly woman from New York decided to prepare her will. She told her lawyer she had two final requests. First, she wanted to be cremated, and second, she wanted her ashes scattered over Wal-Mart.

"Wal-Mart!" The lawyer exclaimed, "Why Wal-Mart?"

"Then I'll be sure my daughters visit me twice a week."

Don't you sometimes get just a bit tired of hearing the old phrase, "We gotta take care of the kids and the grandkids" as we plot and plan the future of this great nation. It's always the "kids and the grandkids."

Got news for you: they'll make their way through life just like we are doing. I think we spend way too much time and effort trying to do what we think will benefit our children and grandchildren. That's tomorrow, we are today and today is what counts. Let our children and our grandchildren pick up where we leave off.

After all I think we picked up where those before us left off. Right? So, what's the big deal? And who is to say whatever we do today will leave a better tomorrow for our children and grandchildren?

We aren't going to be around to know, just like those before us aren't around to see if that was their case.

Whatever the case, it's time to close shop and wish you a...

...Good Evening!  
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*Tom Dreiling is publisher of the Colby Free Press. His column appears Wednesdays and Fridays. Email td@nwkansan.com.*

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## School funding main topic

### School Funding

The past three weeks were spent touring the 40th Senate District with six different House of Representative members. The main topic of interest was about funding of our schools and making sure we approved a multi-year funding plan. Both plans address at-risk, bilingual, and special education funding which were areas of concern listed by the Kansas Supreme Court. This past week Senate leadership appointed a special committee to identify sources of revenue to fund the second and third years. I realize that either funding package only helps cut losses to most districts. I'm hearing of new interests of gambling to help fund schools. This would be a mistake.

### Consolidation

The Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee began hearings on a bill regarding city and county consolidation and another aimed specifically at consolidation of Topeka and Shawnee County. SB 262, The Efficiency in Local Government Act, would allow the county commissioners and governing body of a city to create a reorganization study committee to prepare a plan to address reorganization of the city and county.

HB 2083 would establish a five-member Consolidation Commission for Topeka and Shawnee county. The bill calls for a vote of approval from those living inside the city of Topeka and those individuals living outside the city limits. The bill calls for the Governor, President and Minority Leader of the Senate, Speaker and Minority Leader of the House to each appoint a member to the commission. This bill reminds me of the



**Ralph Ostmeyer**

### Senate Snapshot

consolidation efforts of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, when the Governor appointed the five members of the Consolidation Committee. There is an effort to combine both bills into one bill and then pass out of committee. I don't have a lot of problems with HB 2083, but SB 262 needs some work before I would support it.

### Senate and the Military

The Senate dedicated a day of debate to bills involving the armed forces. After little debate the Senate passed a bill to provide a \$250,000 death benefit to members of the Kansas National Guard killed while in a combat zone. Another bill would enable an individual who has been activated for military service to return to the health insurance that person had prior to activation. Another bill would prevent a payday loan lender from garnishing the wages of a member of the military. In addition, the Senate passed a bill that would exempt from motor vehicle tax certain full-time military residents absent from the state because of military orders.

### Department of Wildlife and Parks

Senate Bill 87 is lurking below the line. The measure would provide funding to the Kansas

Department of Wildlife and Parks as well as local parks. The bill, as amended by committee, would add a \$4.00 annual outdoor recreation registration fee to be paid at the time of motor vehicle registration or renewal. The wildlife and parks department would receive 80 percent of the fee; 20 percent would go to the Local Government Outdoor Recreation Grant Program Fund. The measure would generate \$8.7 million for state and local parks. Part of current funding for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks is generated through user fees collected at state parks entrances. Passing this measure removes entrance fees for vehicles with Kansas tags. The original bill set a \$5.00 fee and allowed for a refund. The amended bill reduced the fee to \$4.00 and removed the refund option.

### Microbreweries and Farm Wineries

The Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee conducted hearings on a bill that would allow microbreweries to apply for a packaging and warehouse license.

In addition, the committee conducted hearings on a bill that would allow Kansas farm wineries to offer off-site samples, increase the number of outlets, and increase the production cap from 50,000 to 250,000 gallons.

Please feel free to contact me at anytime. I can be reached by writing to Senator Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol, 300 SW 10th Street, Room 128-S, Topeka, Kansas, 66612, or call (785) 296-7399. My e-mail address is ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us. Please let me know if you would like to be on my mailing list.

## Doonesbury

• Gary Trudeau



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