

Opinion

Another Viewpoint



Let the sun shine

This is a week of Thanksgiving. No, it's not November. It's March 11-17. That is when we give thanks that we live in a society where the people are presumed to be wise enough to govern themselves. It's Sunshine Week, a time to remember that the government is us — and we have not only the right but the obligation to know what we are doing.

As president of an organization of thriving community newspapers, I have the opportunity to speak with journalists and their readers from Boston to Arizona and from states as red as my home state of Texas and as blue as New Jersey, where my friends, the Parker family, are deeply committed to covering local government.

It is rewarding to know that my newspaper friends and their readers deeply believe in open government. Sunshine on government is the Vitamin D for democracy. It makes us whole and healthy. When we know what is going on, we are better able to make wise judgments on those few things that need to be confidential for a time in order let our public servants function.

Tom Brokaw, NBC News anchor, said this about Sunshine Week: "If we present ourselves to the world as patrons of democracy, then we must be vigilant stewards at home of the oxygen that it requires — access to what our government is doing and the right to speak freely about it. The Greatest Generation fought valiantly to preserve and protect those freedoms. It is up to us to ensure during Sunshine Week and all year that their sacrifices were not for naught."

I am proud that community newspapers provide their share of oxygen. Our immediate past president, Jerry Reppert, publisher of the *Gazette-Democrat* in Anna, Ill., for example, sued for copies of employment contracts for top officials of a state university, reasoning that citizens supporting higher education had a right to know how money was spent.

The County Courier in Enosburg, Vt., in an editorial in advance of Sunshine Week, made the point both visually and with words by "redacting," or blacking out, portions of the text.

"There's always room for more sunshine in our lives," he wrote. "When it comes to government, we just have to be willing to stand up in the darkness and demand it."

Newspapers in Kansas helped to test local governments' responses to requests for public records, and found a reasonably good response except from sheriffs. Two years later, it tried again and found remarkable progress: only four of 33 offices failed to comply with the law.

The Altoona Mirror in Pennsylvania asked for information at 40 agencies. A reporter was surprised by confrontations and threats he met while trying to examine the public's business. Newspapers there have banded together in "Brighter Pennsylvania," a program designed to help officials better understand open government laws.

And just recently our friends at a small daily paper in Missouri, pursuing information at city hall, reported that the mayor said, "The way you come to City Hall will determine whether you are worked with or not."

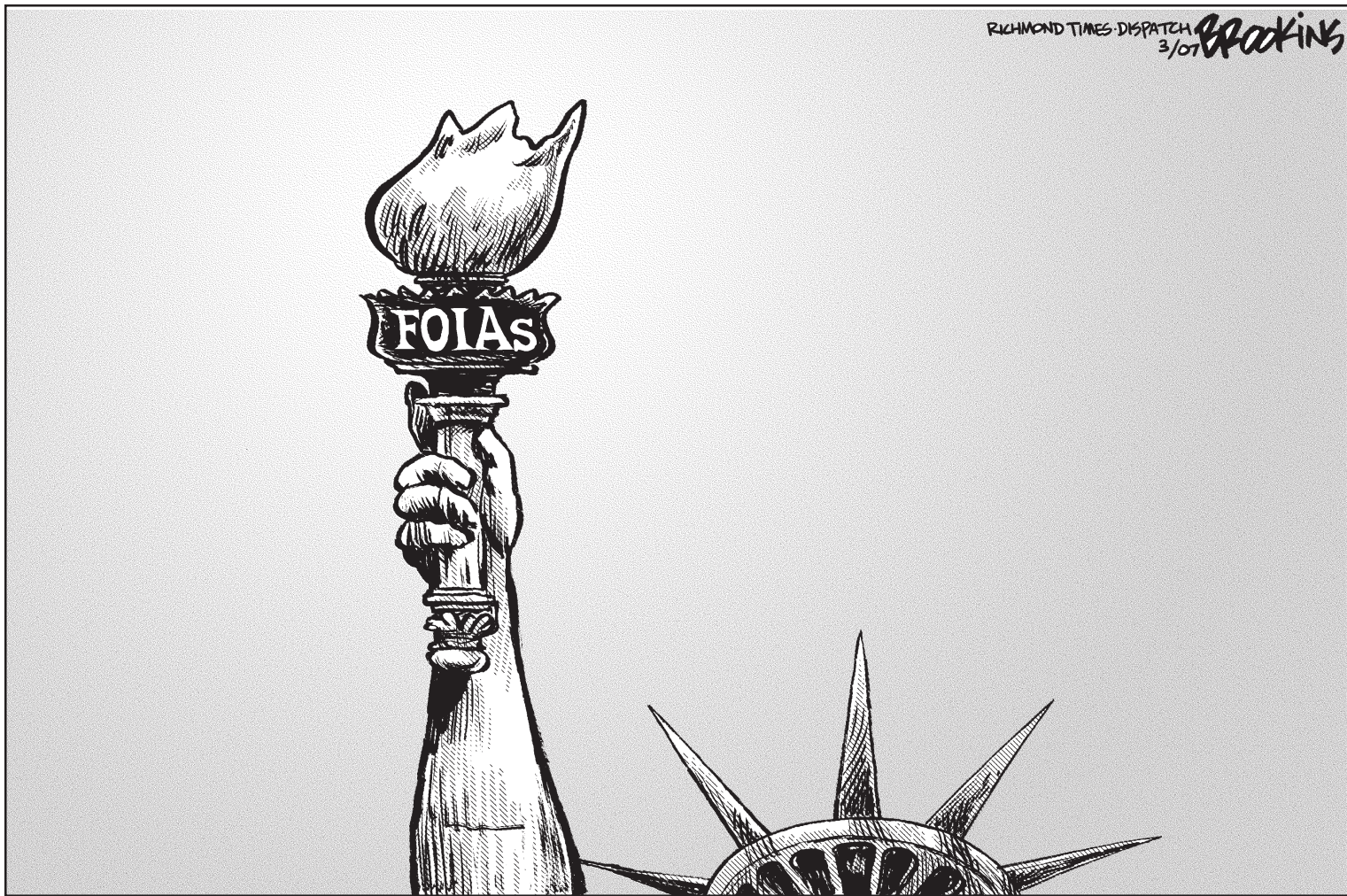
Somehow, I have the feeling that isn't what our Founding Fathers (and Mothers) had in mind. I imagine some of our Founding Mothers might have washed that mayor's mouth out with soap.

That reminds me that community groups like the League of Women Voters participated in Sunshine Week last year, as well as groups as diverse as university journalists, local attorneys and even a fire department in Los Angeles.

I have two messages for newspapers and their readers. One is: remind public servants that we trust them the most when we know the most about what they are doing.

The other is: read the newspaper. It's the best way to enjoy the sunshine. Jerry Tidwell of Granbury, Texas, is president of the National Newspaper Association and publisher of *The Hood County News*.

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 jvannostrand@nwkansas.com or pdecker@nwkansas.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect the *Free Press*.



Passing the test

I want more control in how my tax dollars are spent.

OK, maybe that's a bit of a self-centered statement, but it's true. Unlike the \$2,000 toilet seats we've heard about on TV, a friend of mine has come up with an idea about how to control how our tax dollars are spent.

Like most the folks I hang around with, I have a job. I work and my boss sends me a paycheck. But before I get my paycheck, my boss sends some of my money to the government, which in turn spends it as it sees fit. And many of the folks I hang around with have to pass a random urine test to get their paycheck.

But there's the set of folks who get a paycheck without having to lift a finger. Their paycheck is in the form of tax dollars the rest of us sent to the government. And they don't have to pass a urine test to get the money. That just does not make sense. Shouldn't everyone who gets part of our tax dollars have to pass a urine test to get the money? I'm talking those folks who receive a welfare check, but don't lift a hand to contribute to society other than to go the mail box for that check.

Don't misunderstand me, I have no problem helping people get back on their feet, but I do have a problem helping someone sit on their back side.

Can you imagine how much money the state would save if people had to pass a urine test to get a public assistance check?

That was my friend's idea, but here's my idea. I think anyone handling our tax dollars should be required to pass a random urine test.



Jan Katz Ackerman

• From Where I stand

Yep, from the governor of the great state of Kansas right down to the local public servants. Sure, it would cost us some tax dollars, but I'd sleep better at night knowing our leaders are as clean as a whistle on the inside. If law enforcement officers have to submit to random urine tests, shouldn't our leaders too?

Doesn't it make sense that anyone spending our tax money should be at the same mental and physical peak as those out there on the streets defending us?

Along the same line of thought, many individuals have to qualify in certain areas of their jobs to keep their jobs. Every year, law enforcement officers have to prove to the city or county they work for that they can shoot a gun as well as they did the year before. They also have to pass physical exams and take continuing education classes.

I think our leaders should have to do the same. They should be able to pass basic accounting, public speaking, and even more important take tests to evaluate their common sense.

Stop laughing. I'm serious. Don't you think

taxpayers should require their leaders to prove they know what they are doing? After all, they are spending our hard-earned money.

For instance, I've attended meetings where public leaders didn't know the difference between any of the financial statements. Now that's scary. Sure, the budget may say there's oodles of money to throw around, but if the cash register is empty — yikes!

Anyway, I'm all for a new set of standards for our political leaders, including random urine and common sense tests. And like I've said before, the first step of knowing that our leaders are doing their job to the best of their ability is to attend meetings, not call them at home or stop them on the street.

Remember, we elect or appointed board members, that's plural. A board member can not do anything on his or her own, but the board as a whole can take action.

The proper time and place to bring concerns to the attention of a public body is at a board meeting, not the phone, street or coffee shop. Concerns addressed in front of the entire board all at one time puts all the members on the same playing field of listening to the constituent.

Sure, it's tempting to bend the ear of a board member, but the best way to get the board's attention is to be on the agenda and be officially recognized.

That, and going to the polls, is the democratic way of doing things.

— Jan Katz Ackerman is a reporter for the Colby Free Press.

Your turn

Raising property taxes won't help

Gary Davis Menlo
I don't pay property taxes in Thomas County anymore, and I don't have a dog in this hunt, so I was going to keep quiet.

I thought Lloyd Theimer would jump all over this. However, Arlen Leiker's letter was too much. I don't know Arlen. I'm sure he's a good guy. I know I like UPS.

Arlen bemoans the population out flow and the lack of growth. Arlen talks about a prospective business checking out Colby and Thomas County on the internet as regards locating here. One thing that prospective business would see is that the property taxes and sales taxes are already high here. They might just think that McCook would be a better location. And, now, you're going to raise the taxes even

higher. If you want economic development and growth, you need low taxes — not higher taxes.

If you're a retired person, are you going to stay in Kansas and pay state income tax? Or, are you going to move to a state that doesn't have an income tax. Are you going to stay in Colby and Thomas County and pay high property and sales taxes? Or, are you going to move to a city and county with low taxes? You might want to move to Hoxie in Sheridan County.

All I hear is that the Activity/Wellness Center is going to be a real money maker. For whom? Local business? Fine, let local business pay for it. How does it benefit all those dryland and irrigated acres that are going to get taxed? Not one penny. And, if it's such a money maker, why can't it pay for itself?

Colby Community College has a nationally renown wrestling program. And, they've gone 20 years without lockers? I'm pretty sure that someone should be held accountable for that sorry situation.

The promoters of this project should have done a better job promoting it in the paper. There should have been all kinds of pictures and news articles explaining the project. What is a lease/purchase agreement? You're going to spend 20 million dollars, and you're not going to own it? You're going to lease it? From whom?

I really don't know if the activity/wellness center is a good idea or not. But, don't tell me that raising property taxes is the way to promote economic development and growth.

About those letters . . .

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