

Opinion

Free Press Viewpoint



State can't forget U.S. Highway 36

By Steve Haynes
 The U.S. Highway 36 Association is coming down to the wire on its plan to have a corridor study done on the economic impact of widening and improving the road from St. Joseph to St. Francis. The group hopes to raise \$50,000 to finance the study, similar to one done a couple of years ago by a group pushing improvements on U.S. 50. They expect to show a positive return to Kansas and to the 13 counties along the route. The association has asked counties along the highway, from Doniphan to Cheyenne, to ante up \$2,000 each for the study and hopes to get a grant for the rest. So far, though, only Decatur County and a couple others have actually put up any money. Directors plan to revisit the rest this month as commissioners draw up their new budgets. It is critical to get the study moving for several reasons. One, the state already has begun studying a new transportation plan to replace the one that expires in 2010. While the Department of Transportation expects a gap between programs, as happened last time, it won't be long. The plan will be in place within a couple of years.

And any improvements to U.S. 36 need to be in the plan. Besides, costs are rising and there's no certainty that, if the study doesn't begin next year, the counties or the association can afford it. The U.S. 50 study showed the benefits of improving that route with four lanes west of Hutchinson. It concluded that economic growth would cease without a better highway. Along the northern tier of Kansas, most counties have no idea what "economic growth" is. Populations and economies are stagnant or declining. Schools have to merge or close as enrollment dwindles. Backers see a great opportunity along the road, though. Illinois has improved about half its mileage to a freeway, known as Interstate 72. Across Missouri, the road now is a four-lane expressway with only a 52-mile gap at the east end. And four counties there voted to tax themselves to help the state widen the road, with all the work now under contract. Missouri officials expect to take the four-lane road done by 2009, a year ahead of schedule. Projections show significant truck traffic on the four-lane road within 10 years as drivers seek to bypass the hopelessly snarled highways around St. Louis. Much of that traffic will have to go south through Kansas City, though, unless Kansas takes up the standard and starts building a better road on U.S. 36. A wider highway could serve as a bypass for both I-70 through Kansas City and I-80 through Omaha, backers believe, drawing traffic and business to a part of rural Kansas that could use both. If the study is done, and if taxpayers and public officials all across the 13 counties get behind the effort. It's a big job, one that requires the support of everyone along the road, but no other economic development initiative offers as much potential return to northern Kansas. We hope the rest of the counties get on board, and soon. — *Steve Haynes*

Editor's Note: Steve Haynes, president of Nor'West Newspapers including the Colby Free Press also is president of the U.S. Highway 36 Association.

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

COLBY FREE PRESS
 155 W. Fifth (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
 Colby, Kan. 67701
 State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout Excellence, Column Writing, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography.
 Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.
John Van Nostrand - Publisher
jvannostrand@nwkans.com
NEWS
Patty Decker - Editor
pdecker@nwkans.com
Tisha Cox - General Assignment
tcoc@nwkans.com
Jan Katz Ackerman, Area Reporter
ackermanjk@ruraltel.net
ADVERTISING
Crystal Rucker - Advertising Sales/Director
crystalr@nwkans.com
Kristi Powell - Advertising Sales
kpowell@nwkans.com
Emily Wederski - Advertising Sales
ewederski@nwkans.com
BUSINESS OFFICE
Jeanette Applegate - Bookkeeping, Ad Building
japplegate@nwkans.com
Everett Robert - Circulation, Classifieds
erobert@nwkans.com
Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkans.com
NOR'WEST PRESS
Jim Westfall - General Manager
 Richard Westfahl, Lana Westfahl, Judy McKnight, Jim Jackson, DeLisa Allen, David Erickson, Betty Morris, and Dana Huthansel

THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the day observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Haynes Publishing Co., 155 W. Fifth, Colby, Kan., 67701.
 PERIODICALS POSTAGE is paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to The Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth, Colby, Kan., 67701.
 THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news credited to it or not otherwise herein. Member Kansas Press Association, Inland Press Association and National Newspaper Association.
SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby by carrier: 4 months \$40, 8 months \$56, 12 months \$74. By mail with in Colby and the nine-county region of Thomas, Sheridan, Decatur, Rawlins, Cheyenne, Sherman, Wallace, Logan and Gove counties: 4 months \$53, 8 months \$65, 12 months \$82. Other Kansas counties: 4 months \$60, 8 months \$70, 12 months \$85. All other states, \$85, 12 months.



Sheridan County's health care future

I wish I had a crystal ball to tell me a few things about the Aug. 14 mail ballot election in Sheridan County.

The election is set so some 1,500 registered voters, like me, can decide whether or not to give the hospital, nursing home and clinic an additional \$225,000 a year for improvements and equipment. I'm already dolling out part of a \$325,000 pie.

The problem is property valuations on which taxation is based have not been set yet so I don't know how big the next pie needs to be.

County Clerk Paula Bielser told me initial figures show the county has lost about \$2 million dollars in oil and gas lease values. That means taxpayers will need to pick more "fruit" for next year's pie.

I do know based on initial calculations from county officials, if the measure passes a \$50,000 homeowner will have to cough up \$40 more in tax dollars. And farmers would have to dig into their wallets for another \$30 dollars for each quarter of dryland.

County Appraiser David Stithem told me there are too many variables to tell how much taxes would go up on irrigated land. He said it all depends on the size of the plot of land, the size of the irrigation system and the size of the well. Whew, I don't want his job.

Trustees believe they need the additional \$225,000 to maintain and upgrade the complex. County commissioners Keith Kennedy, Ron Schamberger and Doyle Kauk approved a mail ballot election. But the election may catch voters off guard if they don't do their homework.



Jan Katz Ackerman

• From Where I stand

As a voter, a crystal ball might let me know if my taxes go up will it be enough to keep a hospital, medical clinic and nursing home in town? A crystal ball might show me if the measure does not pass how long Sheridan County will have medical services as they are known today.

I want to know whether it's cost effective to buy equipment and do improvements to the now 50-plus year old complex. How long would it take to recoup the costs? Will paying more tax dollars keep these services for the long haul or is it throwing money down the drain?

Already standing at 8.164 mills, the county could jack the rate another 1.836 mills to the authorized 10 mill currently on the books. If the measure passes on Aug. 14, Sheridan County will have 18 mills on the books for a hospital, medical clinic and nursing home. Wow, that's a lot of mills. But how much is a mill worth if one needs a ride to the nearest hospital during a heart attack or after an accident?

I don't know anyone who during a heart attack has asked the attending emergency medical technician or doctor, "How many mills am I paying for that defibril-

lator?" When is the last time you went to the doctor and before picking up the phone to make the appointment thought, "How much will my tax dollars increase if I go and see if this lump is cancer?"

If taxpayers don't do their homework and talk to county commissioners, trustees of Sheridan County Health Complex, the county clerk, county appraiser and anyone else that's smarter than me about tax dollars they might come up short next time they are ill.

I'm doing my research, and while I'll never tell whether I plan to vote 'yea' or 'nay,' it's important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater by sitting idle.

I do not want to end up living in a county that does not have a hospital. But on the other hand, I want accountability for how my tax dollars are being spent.

I'm hearing a lot of gripes and complaining about the local health care facility, and while I listen to those speaking, I always urge research, research, and more research. If the measure to provide the complex its current \$325,000 plus another \$225,000 does not pass, I'm afraid Sheridan County will end up with a glorified band-aid box or no box at all.

And while I've never been toted anywhere in an ambulance, I do know it's a long way to Colby or Hill City. And it's even longer during a blizzard.

Now where's that crystal ball?
 — *Jan Katz Ackerman is a reporter for the Colby Free Press*

Can you hear rural America now?

By Thomas D. Rowley
 You've seen the ads. The guy with the cell phone repeating ad nauseam "Can you hear me now?"

Well, it's time for rural America to ask that question of our elected representatives. "Can you hear us now?"

For decades, the answer to that question has ranged from a tepid "not really" to a resounding "no." Understandably.

In the past, rural interests—diverse as they are—have spoken with disjointed, and at times competing, voices. They have also been dominated by agriculture with a capital A—not the small family farms that most of us care about and yet which receive little help, but the big commodity growers that grab the lion's share of federal farm assistance. Fortunately change is afoot.

For starters, big agriculture's domination is waning. Thanks to the current round of international trade discussions and ongoing media coverage, we now know just how broken U.S. agricultural policy is. It violates our international agreements. It jeopardizes trade in other sectors. It fails many who need assistance in favor of those who don't. (I think former NBA star Scottie Pippen can get by without his U.S. Department of Agriculture check; don't you?)

However, loosening Big Ag's grip on all things rural will not, by itself, result in better policies or more money for rural America. If you think nature abhors a vacuum, watch Washington. Groups are lining up left and right, salivating at the thought of funds being freed up when Congress rewrites the Farm Bill this fall. (Even though most of the funds will likely go toward

deficit reduction.) Therefore, it's crucial for Americans who want rural communities to prosper to all sing from the same page. Enter the Campaign for a Renewed Rural Development.

Unveiled at an April press conference, the campaign brings together 28 national organizations to, as campaign sparkplug and National Association of Counties President Colleen Landkamer put it, "raise one united rural voice..." Specifically the campaign (ruralcampaign.org) seeks a Farm Bill that reverses the long trend of declining federal dollars to rural communities.

It calls for a bill that invests in the basics needed to survive and thrive in today's world—infrastructure; entrepreneurship; health care and broadband Internet. To get it, the campaign is mobilizing the networks of its 28 member organizations. They represent both urban and rural interests; state and local officials; community and economic development practitioners; health care professionals; educational institutions; energy cooperatives; entrepreneurs; sustainable agriculture producers and others.

Members of Congress on hand for the event offered their support. "Your cause is my cause," said Senator Tom Harkin. "You have my pledge that I intend to do everything in my power as Ag Chairman to get a new farm bill with the strongest possible boost to rural development."

Senator and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton called for "real progress" in rural development and talked about the rural investment bill she authored. Such words are nice; but money is better.

Referring to the last Farm Bill when much of the rural title was never funded, Landkamer said, "We're hoping this time that it's not just put in, but that it's appropriated."

That of course, raises the big ugly question: where will the money come from? A question the campaign wisely dodges to avoid the inevitable fights it creates. If it suggests getting money from the commodity title, Big Ag erupts. Never mind House Ag Committee member John Barrow's astute observation that,

"If we don't invest in educational opportunities, in health care initiatives for rural communities, we're going to be starving the rural communities that literally grow the farmers that grow our food."

If it hints at adjusting community development block grant formulas, which favor urban areas, the cities bolt. So for now, the campaign focuses on the importance of investment and leaves the money question for another time, another place. Unify first; find the money later.

As Landkamer said, "We're all in this together. Understanding that, working together and speaking with one voice makes all the difference in the world."

Congress, can you hear us now? If you can, then, to borrow another rural phrase, "git-r-done."

— *Thomas D. Rowley is a Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) fellow. The Rural Policy Research Institute provides objective analysis and facilitates public dialogue concerning the impacts of public policy on rural people and places. www.rupri.org. Distributed by minutemanmedia.org.*

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

