

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Bills would put end to sure public notice

The centuries-old concept of giving the public notice of government and court action through publication in a newspaper is under attack in the Kansas Legislature.

The push is coming from cities that see a way to save a little money and public officials who just don't like the press.

One bill (SF 164), sponsored by Sen. John Vratil, vice president of the state Senate, would allow cities to publish all their notices on their own websites.

This violates the basic principles of public notice, because a city website is not a neutral posting, because a website does not constitute a permanent record of the publication as a newspaper would, and because not everyone could get to the web page — or even know where it is.

It's better to have these notices delivered to taxpayers' homes, but some officials claim the cities will save money. The result for many small Kansas towns, however, might well be the loss of their newspaper.

This might not bother Sen. Vratil, who is from Leawood in Johnson County, and is known for his dislike of reporters and editorial writers. It might well be a blow to small Kansas towns which already have lost many of their businesses and much of their identity.

While legal notices are but a small part of many newspapers' income, they might represent the margin of survival for the smallest papers. The Legislature would be wise to avoid finding out, at least from our perspective.

The "scorched-earth" bill is not expected to pass, at least not this year, but Sen Vratil is a powerful man and he might resort to late-session trickery to get his way. Our own senator, Ralph Ostmeyer of Grinnell, is on the Local Government Committee, which will decide this bill.

Another bill, SB 245, sponsored by the League of Kansas Municipalities, avoids the Internet issue and seeks only to save cities some money on publication of long ordinances. It would require publication only of a summary of ordinances, referring citizens to the city office for details.

This may sound like a good idea, but no one knows what damage it might do to those same small newspapers. People in the towns that would be affected probably would not be too happy to learn that their city is saving some money at the cost of their town's newspaper.

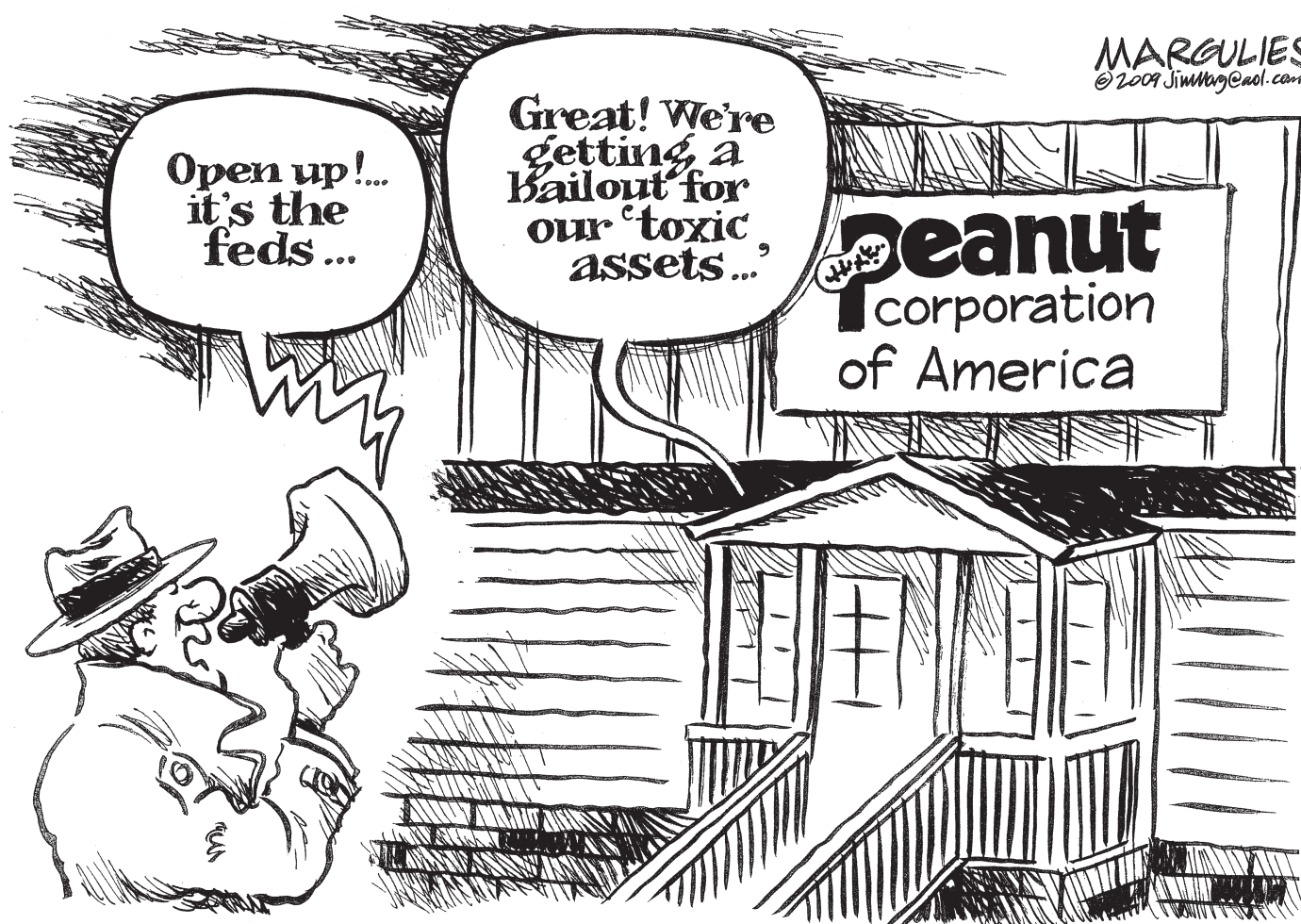
A better idea would be to require publication of a summary explaining the impact of every ordinance, along with the full text. Posting on the Internet along with newspaper publication would be a great idea.

The issue should not only be saving a little money, but making sure the taxpayers and voters know what their city is up to. Allowing the full text to be tucked away in some office to gather dust just goes against all reason. The very parts that will offend or injure taxpayers may well be buried where they will never make the summary.

And if the ordinance is not published, how will people ever know. Remember, the city itself will be writing the summary.

Voters upset by this kind of closed-government thinking ought to complain to their senator and representative. It's not right, but it's how public officials sometimes think.

— Steve Haynes



Thighs safe from cookies sent to kids

The Girl Scouts are looking for me. Yes, it's that time again. Girl Scout cookies have arrived and it's time to pay up and take those wonderful sugar- and fat-filled delicacies and try — just try — to not eat them all tonight.

Some years, the girls never find me, and I pine when the cookies get delivered and I never even get to taste a Thin Mint.

This year, however, they found me and found me and found me.

The first day of sales, a young-un caught me at the office. I bought three boxes of my favorites — Thin Mints, peanut butter something or other and a cookie with coconut, chocolate and caramel stripes.

On Saturday, the neighbor girls showed up. I bought a box from each of them. I think I got Thin Mints and peanut butter something or other. The next week, I was at a fund raiser for the senior center or museum or church or whatever, and there was a third scout with her cookie sheet.

I took a box of the chocolate and caramel stripes.



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

Since I'm never at home and rarely in the office, I knew it would be hard for the Scouts or, more likely their mothers, to find me. So I figured it up — \$3.50 per box times six boxes equals \$21. (I are a college graduate, so I can figger these things.)

So far, one box of cookies has shown up and I'm waiting for the others to descend on me.

I have plans.

I'm sending three boxes to my bachelor son in Lawrence. He's young, healthy and has a job where he's fairly active. He can eat a lot more cookies than I can.

The next three boxes go to my sons-in-law in Augusta, Ga. They both work for Morris Digitalworks, so I'm sending the cookies to the of-

fice. They can split them and, if they're really smart, they won't tell their wives. At least, I'm hoping they won't tell. If they do, I'm going to be in really big trouble with my daughters.

Daughter No. 1 will be unhappy with me because I'm sabotaging her husband's diet. Daughter No. 2 will be unhappy with me because I'm sending the cookies to her husband and not to her. Of course, she had the best chance of buying her own cookies since she works at a library and there have to be dozens of employees there with Scouts cookies to sell.

And, if my son gets open boxes of cookies, he's not liable to complain. After all, two-thirds of a box of cookies you didn't have to buy is a lot better than none — and also better than having to shell out \$3.50 a box.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkansas.com

Legislature may protect local carnivals

Both houses of the Legislature are moving to exempt small, home-owned carnivals from a law passed last year requiring operator training and annual inspection of rides.

Many of our northwest Kansas communities have home-owned carnivals. These organizations have been developed over the years out of both the need for a carnival at county fairs and community events, but mostly out of community pride.

All are run by nonprofit organizations and have a variety of small and large rides catering to our rural communities. These rides are maintained and operated by volunteers, and these communities have worked hard to keep them going from year to year.

The workforce has always been dedicated local residents donating their time in maintaining and operating these carnivals. They are proud of their excellent track records of safe and injury-free operations. Senate Substitute for House Bill 2504, passed in the 2008 session, created a hardship on these small home-owned carnivals.

Our home-owned carnivals were developed over the years because big-name carnivals could not be depended on. There was a clause in their contracts stating that if they received



Ralph Ostmeyer

• State Senator

better offers, they didn't have to honor their obligation to our rural communities. After this disappointment, the communities began investing in a carnival of their own.

These carnivals are good for our small communities, and the pride that goes into pulling these events off each year is evident. People work together and this allows people to spend money at home and keep it invested right at home.

There is no question that the volunteers have a vested interest in keeping the rides maintained and in safe operating condition. Many of our operators have 20-30 years of experience operating their rides. Our home-owned carnivals provide a safe environment and I am not aware of any accidents that would necessitate any changes in their present mode of operation.

Senate Bill 178 and HB 2504 both would basically exempt small carnivals from some of the rigorous regulations that require a burden on the volunteers, who are equally as qualified as the inspector(s) who would train them. Our home-owned carnivals have always taken every possible measure to insure safety for our communities.

The biggest obstacle will be getting the Kansas Department of Labor to understand that these carnivals will not be open more than just at county fairs and special community events. This legislation is very important to rural communities. I have witnessed the pride and hard work that goes into these annual events. It is important that we protect the rural way of life that so many family members look forward to every year.

I have heard from many of my constituents concerning this issue. The House hearing went well and we don't anticipate a problem in the Senate.

Feel free to contact me at any time. I can be reached by writing to Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol, 300 SW 10th Street, Room 262-E, Topeka, Kan. 66612 or call (785) 296-7399. My e-mail address is ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us.

Biodefense lab ignores fault lines

To the Editor:

Not many have said a thing about the Nema-ha Ridge/Humboldt Fault, the Mid-Continent Rift and the Central Kansas Uplift — all potential earthquake zones — in relation to the placement of the Manhattan biodefense laboratory project.

I think this threat should be exposed so I can sleep better knowing at least that I tried to educate others when common sense seems to be such a extinct practice. I think people should have just a little information on the fault lines and where damage could be in Kansas with the



Free Press Letter Drop

• Our readers sound off

biodefense facility proposed for Manhattan by the federal government.

Building this lab in Kansas is like building

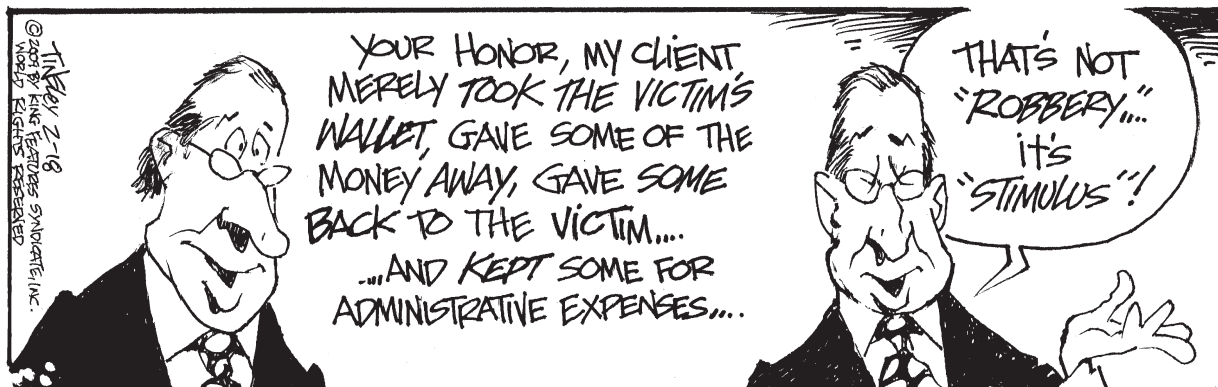
a water tower in a lagoon: It don't make much sense to the sensible. Any risk to the livestock industry in Kansas is not acceptable for any amount of "publicity, economic and financial gain." We have a billion-dollar livestock industry at risk if foot-and-mouth disease viruses were to escape for a few million in what would be petty cash.

Study this highly contagious disease; it is alarming what can and has happened over the years.

Mike Schultz, Brewster

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley



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