

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Compromise may save rural counties

The Kansas Legislature is moving toward a compromise which could ease the way for cities and counties to consolidate, both or rural and urban areas.

The key to this is a decision by the Kansas Farm Bureau to back off a longtime stance against any such bill. One provision of this year's version would allow local residents to decide critical issues about a consolidation plan, including the requirement for a "dual majority" in any vote.

Farm Bureau for years has insisted on a dual majority in any consolidation plan. This usually kills the plan, because it's tough to get a separate majority in city and rural sections.

And so, the consolidation movement has been stalled. A couple have taken place, in tiny Greeley County and urban Wyandotte, but both required a special act of the Legislature.

It's not hard to see why Farm Bureau might want to back off now, however. A proposal this year to consolidate Kansas' 105 counties into 13 megacounties would threaten the very fabric of our rural life.

Filed by Sen. Chris Steineger of Kansas City, Kansas, the bill proposed a state commission to write an actual consolidation plan, but lists possible combinations for 13 supercounties. Fifteen counties in northwest Kansas would be merged into one, for instance. Three nearby counties would disappear into Sedgwick, dominated by Wichita.

Some Kansas conservatives have jumped on this bandwagon, lured perhaps by outrageous claims that the forced consolidation would save the state upwards of \$750 million.

First, it's unlikely that savings would be anywhere near that. Consolidations usually have as many employees and as much expense as before. It's just a way to centralize power.

Second, it's not likely that forming huge counties will make things more efficient, as some have claimed. If size equated with efficiency in government, then the federal government would be the most efficient and county government the least.

And everyone knows how true that is.

What this proposal is about is disenfranchising thousands of people in rural and suburban areas who would no longer have access to their county government. Commissioners seen in the Main Street coffee shop would be replaced by faceless council members living dozens, maybe hundreds of miles away.

Courthouses would be closed to save money and services doled out over the Internet or by mail in a soulless "Wal-Mart" approach to government.

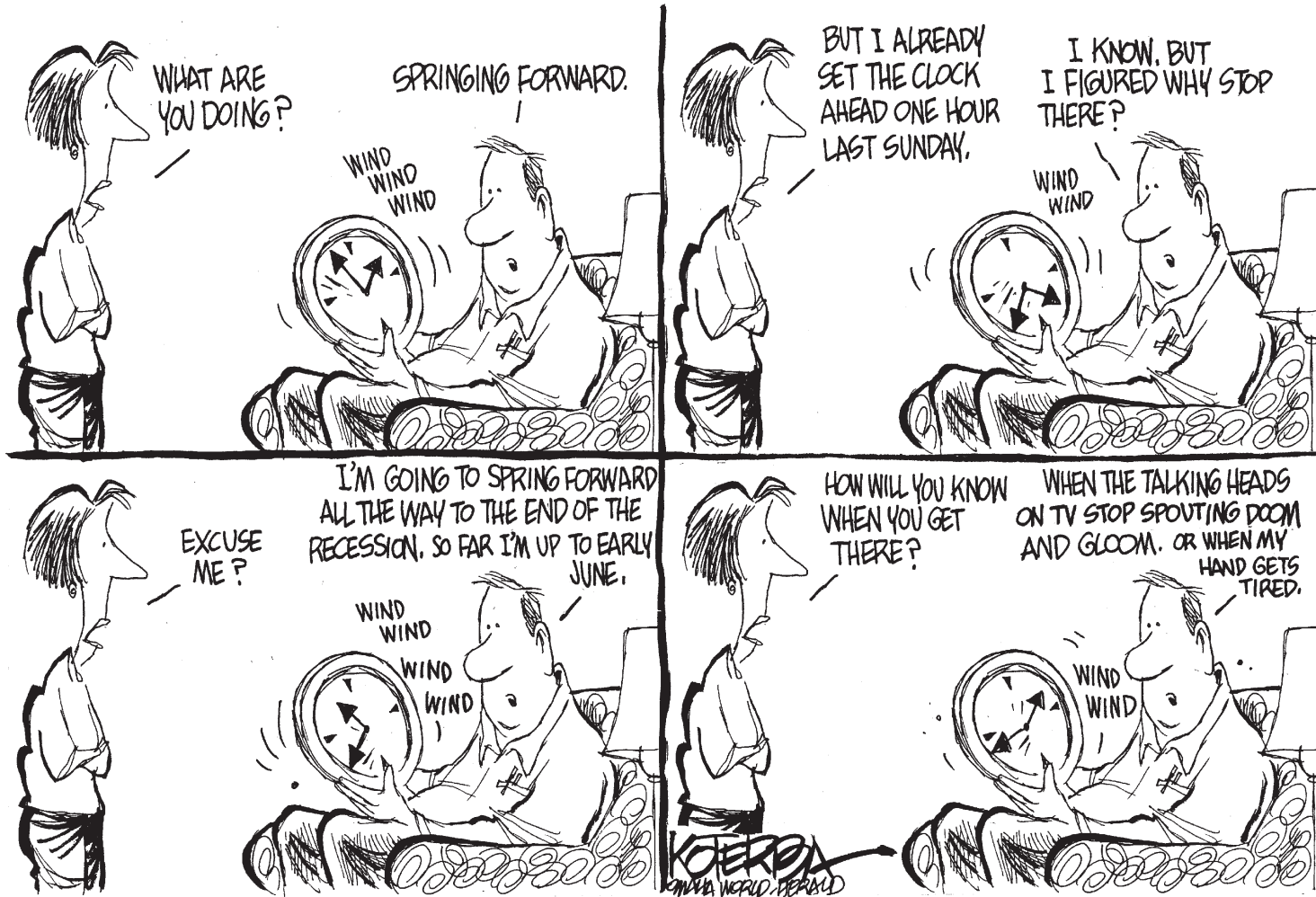
Taxes won't go down, but you won't be able to find anyone to complain to about them.

No, this is not a pleasant future.

Far better to do what the state Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations proposed in the compromise bill this year and allow cities and counties, or adjacent counties, to merge if they wish.

Voluntary mergers, determined by voters in the areas affected, would result in more efficiency while keeping government closer to voters. It would make a lot more sense to consolidate El Dorado and Butler County, for instance, than to merge both into one county with Wichita.

In the end, local voters, not the Legislature, should decide if they want and can afford to keep their cities and counties. We're glad Farm Bureau has seen the light. — *Steve Haynes*



Fancy food bags hard to remember

Red bags, blue bags, green bags, black bags, beige bags.

I have bags brought back from conventions. Bags bought to bring home groceries that I got in Kansas, Colorado, Georgia, Washington, D.C., and Mexico. I even have one Steve brought back with presents from Taiwan.

They are all there for the great effort to save the world.

When the grocery bagger asks that inevitable question, "Paper or plastic," I can smile superiorly and say, "neither, I brought my own recycled canvas bag."

Of course, that never happens, because all those bags are all sitting on the front seat of my car.

In fact, there are bags on the front seat and behind the driver's seat. There are several in Steve's truck. And when we go to the store, we bring out our groceries in paper or plastic 70 percent of the time. Another 20 percent of the time, one of us rushes out to grab the bags and 10 percent of the time, we actually remember to take them with us.

Now, 10 percent isn't very good.

A major league baseball player would be playing in Hoboken for a long time if his batting average was .100.



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

A surgeon would not do well if he saved only 10 percent of his patients.

A — oh well, you get the idea.

And I'm not the only one. I've been doing an informal survey. I've asked 10 people so far. Eight of them said they have canvas bags that they plan to use at the grocery store. Of those, five said they keep them in their cars and never remember to take them into the store, two said they forget theirs at home and one said they're all in the garage full of recyclables.

There has got to be a way to remember to take those dratted bags into the store.

I've tried leaving my purse on top of them. I just grab the purse and hop out of the car.

I've tried putting my grocery list in or on them. Grocery list? Who ever remembers the grocery list?

I've thought of just using one of the bags as

my purse and stuffing all the rest inside. However, while my bag may not be the latest style, a shopping-bag purse sounds really ugly. Unstylish, even.

My final solution is to have the grocer run a "penny" operation. They would all have a rack of bags. If you need one, take it. If you bring two, you leave one, just like they do with pennies.

I'm not sure that this would work, because somebody would fill all the bags with recyclables and leave them in her garage, but it does sound better than the other idea I had. That may be what happens anyway:

There are no more free bags. You bring your own or you pay for a new bag.

I don't like this idea, but one store I visited in Mexico does it — which explains why I have several Mexican shopping bags — and a plan not to visit that store again.

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@nwkanssas.com

Abortion bill has strong support

Here are some of the bills that have been before the House in recent days.

Abortion — Passing by a veto-proof vote of 85-37, House Substitute for SB 238, the Woman's Right to See and Know Act, will require that 24 hours prior to an abortion, the mother must be provided a list of free sonogram locations and with information for free counseling assistance for medically challenging pregnancies. Additionally, the woman will also be provided with contacts for free perinatal hospice services.

Thirty minutes prior to an abortion, when the mother consults with her doctor (which is required under current law) and a sonogram is used, the woman must be offered the opportunity to see and get a copy of the sonogram image and to hear her baby's heartbeat. All four abortion clinics in Kansas use sonograms.

Additionally, the bill requires that an anti-coercion sign be posted in the clinic so that every woman knows her legal rights. It also requires the state to create a standard information video and online website that includes modern fetal ultrasound in two-week developmental increments.

This bill keeps Kansas in step with the 15, and counting, states that have passed some form of sonogram legislation to ensure that the mother is making an informed choice based upon seeing her unborn child.

HB 2206, which passed 82-40, clarifies existing law, providing civil remedies against abortion providers who violate the statute, and will ensure that Kansas law will conform to current federal guidelines that have been upheld by the Supreme Court.

Bill to Protect State Employees — A bill was introduced on Thursday to ensure that the executive branch makes employee salaries a priority.

Currently, there is nothing in law to prevent the executive branch from taking high profile,



Jim Morrison

• Capitol Review

high-priority expenditures and threatening nonpayment when there are many other low priority expenditures that can be delayed in order to ensure that the most important obligations are met first.

This bill will prevent wages from being held hostage by the governor and end the speculation and unnecessary concern that follow.

Coming up this week (March 9-10):

Annexation — HB 2029 would revise annexation law to:

- Require a city proposing to annex land unilaterally to submit a copy of the city's plan for extending services to the county commissioners at least 10 days before the required public hearing on the annexation.

- Modify current law to reduce the total time that must elapse before there is a review of the new municipal services. After a review, if the services are not being provided as stated, then deannexation proceedings may begin.

Budget Stabilization — Sub. for HB 2320 is Legislation from my Government Efficiency Committee to fix the policies surrounding the structural imbalance in the budget. This is a great step in order to provide a responsible and accountable state budget that prioritizes taxpayer dollars.

The bill would establish the Budget Stabilization Reserve Fund (Stabilization Fund) in the state Treasury. Revenue sent to the state General Fund in excess of the amount expected during a fiscal year, based on the April consensus revenue estimate, would be transferred

to the Stabilization Fund. Money in the fund could only be spent to make up for shortfalls when compared to the previous year's budget. This bill will take effect in fiscal year 2011. The bill would prevent the governor from proposing expenditures from the fund.

I consider it an honor and privilege to be your representative in Topeka and I want to know what you think. Please call my Topeka office at (785) 296-7676, e-mail jmorriso@ink.org or write me at Rep. Jim Morrison, Room 242-W, State Capitol Building, Topeka, Kan. 66612.

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COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
 Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

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State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

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THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 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 herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby by carrier: 4 months \$40, 8 months \$56, 12 months \$74. By mail within 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.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

