

# Opinion



**Free Press  
Viewpoint**

## Miles measure our county needs

What can people in rural Kansas do to fend off the uncaring bean counters back east who would have us drive 50 to 90 miles to get a set of tags for the pickup, confer with the tax assessor or protest to the commissioners?

How can we keep them from forcing our kids to ride a bus for an hour or more to get to an "efficient" school in a town big enough to have a McDonalds and a Wal-Mart?

This is a scary prospect if you live off the Interstate, where distance is measured in time, not miles. Proposals for consolidations for counties and school districts may make sense in the east, but not out here where we and our kids would suffer.

Most state officials and even most legislators today have never lived in a small town. They have no idea how life is like west of Salina, which they view as the edge of civilization. If it costs more to run a school out here, they say, consolidate. If counties are small or inefficient, put a few together.

Even if they stopped to consider the realities, it's doubtful most would understand.

In Johnson County, with nearly half a million people, they get by with one courthouse in Olathe. All the counties in this corner of the state don't have a tenth of the people — in nine counties, we have about 37,000 — but maintain nine courthouses with nine sets of elected and appointed officials. And city government of nine county-seat towns.

So, consolidation proponents maintain, just merge a bunch of counties — one proposal calls for 36 in place of 105 — and save nearly \$1 billion a year.

First of all, the savings are dubious. No one really knows how much the state might save by consolidating counties. Many of the "savings" would be paid for by people who would have to drive 50 to 90 miles out of their way to get to the courthouse instead of just going downtown.

Branch offices in the old courthouses? Ah, there go the "savings." Besides, they'd never last past the first budget crunch.

And schools? With one high school serving up to nine counties, some kids are going to be on a bus for nearly two hours each way. With activity routes, their bus might not get them home until 9-10 p.m. after practice.

We're supposed to cheer this?

So what do we do? Consolidate. But do it our way. We all need to keep a close eye on Greeley County, where voters agreed to merge the county and the city of Tribune — named for 19th century editor Horace Greeley and his newspaper — into one unified government to serve 1,500 people.

That's one route we might take, combining city and county government to keep decisions close to home while still saving money. Some counties might like this idea, others might not.

As it has with school districts, the state should make it easy to consolidate any government units. Today, it's next to impossible, as each merger takes an act of the Legislature.

And while the state should not finance gross inefficiency, it should not force every county and school district into a one-size-fits-all mold. It should trust people to make their own decisions about what they can afford and are willing to pay for.

We think most rural Kansans are willing to pay for good local schools and local government within an easy drive.

We must answer the call and look for ways to cut our own costs, but the state must give us the freedom to do that. It's us, not those back east, who will be driving all over if they do not. — Steve Haynes

### COLBY FREE PRESS

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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.



## Green fields and frogs herald spring

The rain last week has caused an explosion of green in the yard and fields.

As we drove across Kansas and Nebraska over the weekend, all we could see was endless fields of green wheat and alfalfa, with some fallow wheat and mud brown waiting to be planted.

Out in the yard the grass is greening up and growing after a long, dry winter. The daffodils and grape hyacinths are blooming. Here and there, you can even see a tulip opening up its bright red or yellow blossom.

Down by the creek, every frog in western Kansas seemed to be singing its heart out. Life is short and tough when you're a frog. You gotta get out there and find your lady love right away if there is going to be a good crop of tadpoles later in the spring.

The migrating birds soar in huge flocks and settle in the cedar-tree fence rows at night. If you go up and clap or shout late at night, you can hear a huge rustle of wings and watch birds dart in and out of the tops of the evergreens.

The bird feeders out back are being drained at a great rate and the corn on the cob that



**Cynthia Haynes**

• Open Season

Steve has had out by the alley all winter has suddenly become a cornless cob. Either the squirrels or a pair of blue jays have found us. Either way, he replaced the corn with the hope of seeing our guests.

Spring is definitely in the air. Out in the street as the rain came down, you could see people dart from car to building. As they entered, they would shake the water off themselves and smile. No one was complaining about the miraculous water from the sky. Most of us were just glad it was rain and not a couple of feet of snow.

I got down on my hands and knees and studied my garden. The little lettuce and spinach plants are just starting to emerge, as are the

radishes on the side of the house. I found several earthworms on the patio. I moved them over to the garden, where they could work their magic on the soil.

I love gardening, but I got carried away buying seeds. I have enough seeds to plant a garden about six times the size of mine.

The sun was shining today, and I made the most of it by pulling weeds and getting grass out of the garden.

Tomorrow, I'll probably be hobbling off to work. That seems to happen every year when the rain and sun come and send me out to play in the dirt.

And it's worth every groan and moan tomorrow to get out in the sunshine with the birds, frogs, flowers and worms.

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## Stop spending other people's money

Last fall, Washington was pushing for "bailouts" of banks and insurance companies to stabilize the economy. Now, under the Obama/Pelosi/Reid triumvirate, the terminology has changed from "bailout" to "stimulus."

The name may have changed but the function remains the same — borrowing enormous amounts to try to restore an economy that was damaged by excessive and risky borrowing. Opinions about the concept remain divided; those who believe big government is the solution to all our problems are overjoyed, while free market proponents think it will only make matters worse.

History bears the free-market thinkers out. Every recovery from a recession in our nation's history has come about through the marketplace, not from government intervention.

"Stimulus" may be a more positive way to characterize the concept, but it certainly isn't accurate. A great deal of the money is going for projects that are not likely to stimulate the economy. For example, \$75 million has been appropriated to fund programs to help people quit smoking. We have borrowed another \$335 million for the treatment and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Four hundred million went for research into global warming and \$2.25 billion for national parks, which just about doubled their annual budget.

"Bailout" isn't an accurate description, either. We need a new label that applies to all of these spending plans, whether for smoking cessation, covering banks' bad investment decisions or buying new cars for government officials. How's this: "handouts."

We could even develop a great logo for this giant handout program; massive lines of mayors, lobbyists and other special interest folks descending on Washington with their hands out and an expectant look on their faces. And the caption could read, "Brother, can you spare me a billion?" If the left is determined to go down this path, they could at least have a good marketing plan and stop confusing the issue. While we are changing language, could we

### Other Opinions

• Dave Trabert  
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please stop calling this government spending? It is not government's money to spend as it sees fit. It is our money, Other People's Money. Government never has its own money, it only has what it accumulates from taxation and borrows.

Government spending other people's money under the pretext of fixing the economy is not good policy. It would be better for Washington to suspend the income tax for a year.

There is no question that tax cuts have a stimulative effect; imagine what a one-year tax holiday would do. The benefits of letting taxpayers keep that much more of their hard-earned money would be enormous:

- Consumer confidence would do an immediate about-face.
- People would have the cash to catch up on mortgage payments and credit cards, helping banks clean up their balance sheets.
- Investors would have the money to scoop up stock market bargains and rally the markets.
- People could save for a down payment on a home much faster, enabling banks to make solid loans.
- It wouldn't cost government a penny to administer this stimulus program, but you can bet we'll spend a few billion monitoring the handouts.
- Other People's Money wouldn't be used to further political agendas and expand government.
- Soon-to-be retirees would have the means to replace at least some of their retirement nest egg.

Tax money wouldn't be used to reward bad financial planning by state and local governments. Any of those "shovel-ready" projects that are truly necessary should have been properly budgeted and underway; instead, government spent tax hiring more government employees. The private sector lost 2.2 million jobs over the last two years, while state and local governments added 498,000.

There might also be a lasting benefit long after the one-year income tax holiday ends. Give people a taste of what it's like to keep most of their money and they may put real pressure on Washington to reduce spending and cut tax rates.

Of course, this will never happen because it violates the liberals' primary objective of redistributing wealth and growing government. But hey, if they can plan big, so can we.

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### Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

