

Other Viewpoints

Closed sessions in public meetings not required by law

A misconception among elected officials and citizens is that school boards and other public bodies are required to go behind closed doors to discuss personnel and other matters.

They're not. The Kansas Open Meetings Act allows – but doesn't require – elected officials to go into so-called "executive" session to address a few topics.

While boards should discuss as much as possible in the open, Kansas law does allow exceptions. Sometimes, as with attorney-client discussions, a closed session may seem necessary.

Too often, though, boards favor privacy when open discussions would better serve the public. Talks leading up to a controversial pay increase for Holcomb Superintendent Robert O'Connor were a prime example....

Holding public office can be thankless work. While it's no wonder some elected officials would rather duck behind closed doors to talk, they need to consider the importance of letting the folks who pay the bills in on their discussions as much as possible.

Too many boards routinely go into closed session to discuss business, whether sensitive or not, and don't always follow proper procedures. For example, announcing a reason for a closed session, and then taking up other topics in private is not allowed....

All citizens should want to understand laws designed to keep their business in the open.

That includes one that allows, but doesn't require, boards to go into closed session — an option that should be exercised with great care, and not only because it's more convenient than discussing the public's business in public.

— Garden City Telegram, via The Associated Press

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U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

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

Send news to: colby.editor @ nwkansas.com

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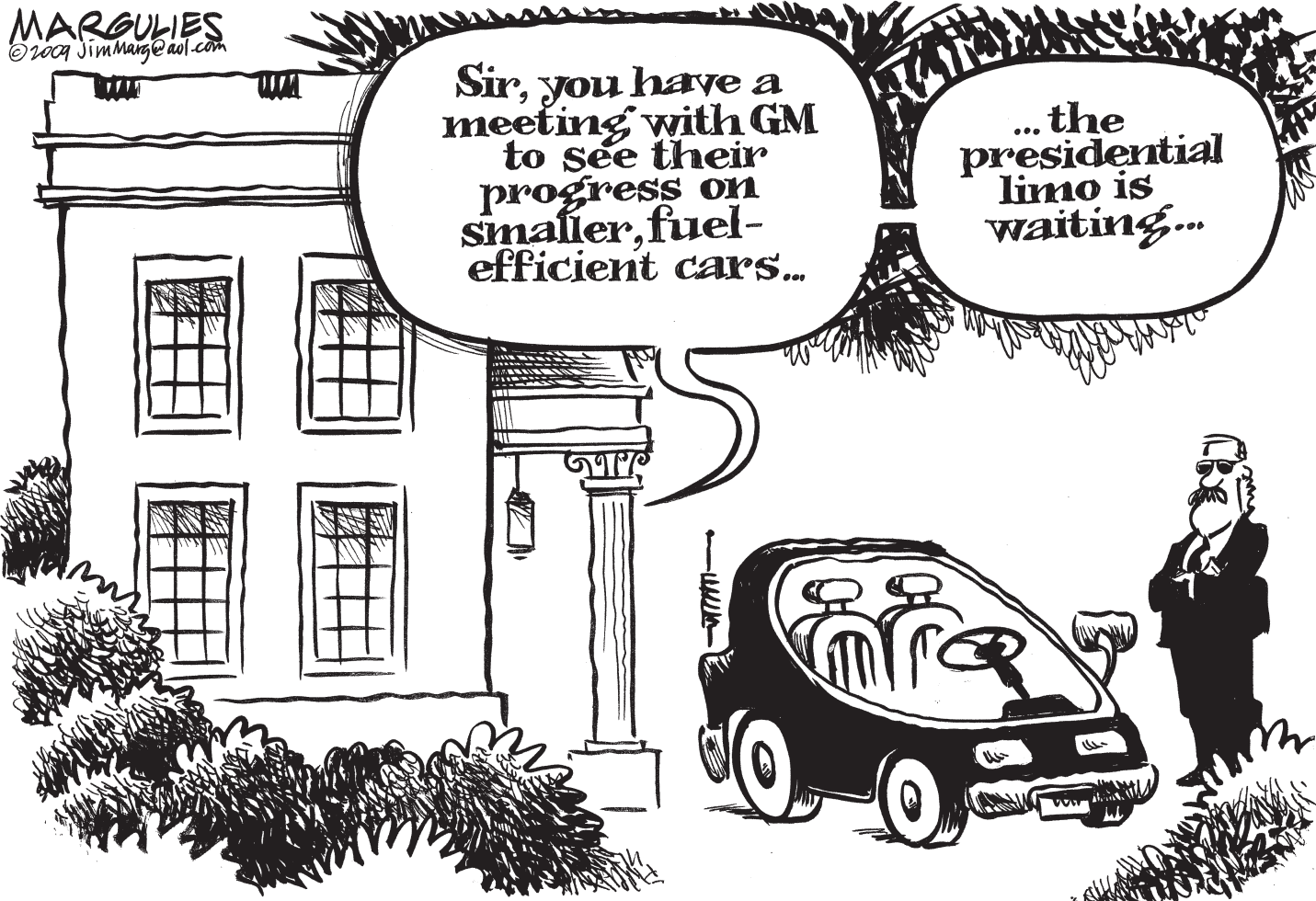
THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

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, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72

MARGULIES
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Lost art of letter-writing gets a revival

I love writing thank-you cards, and I also like getting them. And not just than-you cards, but also encouraging cards, the ones that make me smile as I walk out of the mail room.

Every time I receive a scribbled note of encouragement in the mail, I treasure it until I'm forced to throw it away. If it's a truly special card, I'll stick it to my mirror or prop it up by my bed. Letters or notes I'll stick in my Bible or journal.

Periodically, my mom sends me a card in the mail with a clipping of my published column that I put in my portfolio. I always look forward to the little message she writes inside the card. Sometimes, it's a funny story, or a verse that's been on her heart and in her prayers. Sometimes, she just wants to let me know that she misses me.

Unfortunately, the art of writing longhand notes is becoming lost.

Most people write cards and notes out of obligation, and that saddens me. Now, an e-mail, text message or Facebook message will suffice.

But I learned this year that letter-writing may not be as lost as I thought.

The year before I enrolled, a student at my



Michelle Myers

• A Moment with Michelle

college took note that the art of letter-writing can have an impact on a person's life. This student also saw that the women on campus needed encouragement from their brothers in Christ. As a brother of the women, this particular student collaborated with other men students who had a passion for affirming their sisters.

And the Barnabas Brothers was born. Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement," which comes from the fourth chapter in Acts. Every month, they write a personal letter to each girl on campus (about eight letters for each guy). The letters include a verse and encouraging words that let the girl know that she is being prayed for and that someone cares about her.

When the letters are distributed, the Barnabas Brothers decorate the women's lounge

(usually in a theme during holidays) or put together bags of candy and goodies for each girl. Some months, the girls get flowers, hand-made Valentines or a treasure chest full of Skittles (my favorite).

And no one knows who these men are. They decorate undercover. They have a "runner" who will mail the cards or set up the station where the cards will be distributed. They meet in an undisclosed location.

Whoever these men are, they reassure us women that they are praying for us each by name and that they are trying to become godly men in the midst of an ungodly culture.

These are the letters I look forward to the most. I'm always astounded by the neat handwriting and the tone of genuine care for me. And it's not done in a creepy, stalker sort of way, but out of a pure passion to see the women grow and mature in their faith.

I may never know who these men are, but it's comforting to know that not all is lost when it comes to handwritten letters and men who deserve more than a thank you.

Michelle Myers, a Colby native, is a student at Multnomah University in Portland, Ore., majoring in Bible and journalism.

Farmers need to toot milo's horn

While it's not considered the golden child of Kansas crops like its cousins corn and wheat, grain sorghum remains a sure bet to produce a crop in the High Plains.

Farmers in this hot, dry area from South Dakota to Texas grow grain sorghum like Corn Belt farmers plant corn.

Often called milo, this BB-sized bronze-colored grain has been called the "water-sipping crop." It is especially suited for growing in semi-arid climates, using about one third less water than its thirsty cousins.

Grain sorghum generally out-yields other grains in dry conditions. Until the early '50s and the beginning of irrigation from the Ogallala aquifer, milo was second only to wheat production in Kansas and many Central and Southern Plains states.

For decades, this hardy crop took root and flourished on millions of acres in the High Plains. During peak production in 1966-67, 13,902,000 acres of grain sorghum were planted in the central United States. Today, Kansas producers still grow more than 40 percent of the nation's grain sorghum every year. Kansas is the nation's leading producer of grain sorghum, with 214 million bushels grown on 2.65 million acres.

Kansas growers like Osage County farmer Jeff Casten value grain sorghum because it is well suited to perform in many types of soils and weather. Casten operates a diversified farm, growing wheat, milo, corn and soybeans in the rich bottomland of the Marais des Cygnes River valley. He's been elected to the Kansas Grain Sorghum Commission for sever-



John Schlageck

• Insights Kansas Farm Bureau

al years and currently serves as chairman. He's also past president of the National Sorghum Producers and serves as secretary of the newly formed United Sorghum Check-off Program.

Kansas is a diverse state, with soils ranging from sandy to clay to loam, and summertime weather patterns ranging from hot and humid in the east to hot and dry in the west. With these varying weather and soil conditions, grain sorghum is a crop that Kansas farmers can depend on.

"I grow milo as an insurance policy," Casten says. "In Kansas, dryland corn has to have everything just right to grow a good crop. Beans are the same way, and a dry year with low yield on either crop can really kill you. But with grain sorghum, it'll weather the dry conditions and punch out a pretty good yield."

And while this water-sipping crop has battled high temperatures and dry-weather conditions to a stand still, there's another adversary that's threatening. Dwindling sorghum acres and production have led to decreased private investment in sorghum. These declines have brought about a "technology gap" between sorghum and other crops, such as corn, cotton and soybeans.

Casten believes this gap can be overcome by producers investing in their own research through a national check off.

"Funding hasn't been forthcoming to put into research for grain sorghum," the Osage County farmer says. "We haven't had significant research and development for this crop for 20 years."

The investment of check-off funds can address a lack of yield improvement, bolster sorghum market development and promotion and stimulate lagging ethanol research and promotion, he says.

"Our objective with the National Sorghum Check-off funding is to increase crop yields, technology improvement, enhance markets and increase awareness of sorghum as both a food grain and a feedstock for ethanol production."

The check-off rate for grain sorghum is 0.6-percent of the harvested crop value, collected at the first point of sale. The check-off value for forage sorghums is 0.35-percent per ton above 5,000 tons.

"I feel really good about our grain sorghum check-off program," Casten says. "It's inspiring to see producers take it upon themselves to invest in their own industry and their future."

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

