

Free Press Viewpoint

Internet map becomes pork pie

Call it a phony issue with an expensive solution. Typical government work.

Congress put \$350 million in the "stimulus" bill to pay for a national map of Internet availability, with the emphasis on where customers can and cannot get broadband, or high-speed, service.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration says it will spend \$100 million just to see what needs to be done to create a map. States, sensing blood in these pork-infested waters, have asked for \$107 million to map their own territories, plus \$26 million for "related" projects.

And when the state maps are done, of course, there'll be millions to spend on collating them into a national map.

All to learn that we've used up a whole lot of money to find out that most of the country, nearly everyone in towns big enough to have cable, already have access to broadband Internet. Farmers and others in rural areas sometimes do not, but wireless and satellite services are catching up with this need, too.

North Carolina officials, on the other hand, say it cost them only about \$275,000 per year to keep up a detailed map of Internet service in their state. One consultant calls \$350 million a "ridiculous" amount of money to spend on this project. He said his firm could do the job for about \$3.5 million. Another expert put the reasonable cost at under \$30 million.

Of course, the map won't be ready when the government starts giving out stimulus money this fall for broadband projects, or formulation of a national broadband policy by the Federal Communications Commission.

Officials estimate that a good two-thirds of American homes have broadband service already, with high-speed service available to perhaps 90 percent of all U.S. homes. One survey showed that most people who don't have broadband in those areas simply don't want to spend the money.

Politicians cry that the U.S. is falling behind the rest of the world in Internet access, but the existing patchwork of private enterprise and cooperative providers seems, in fact, to have done a pretty good job.

Most efforts by states to expand service have wound up spending tax money that could have been put to better use somewhere else. If Congress is really concerned about rural folks, it might want to put a few million into research on ways to get wireline broadband to areas now beyond the reach of ordinary "DSL" lines used in towns and cities.

The Rural Utilities Service, part of the Department of Agriculture, might give priority to loans for people who will wire rural areas or install wireless systems to serve farm homes.

There are some needs out there. But \$350 million for a map? Come on.

The government has got better things to do.

— Steve Haynes

Write us

The Colby Free Press encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

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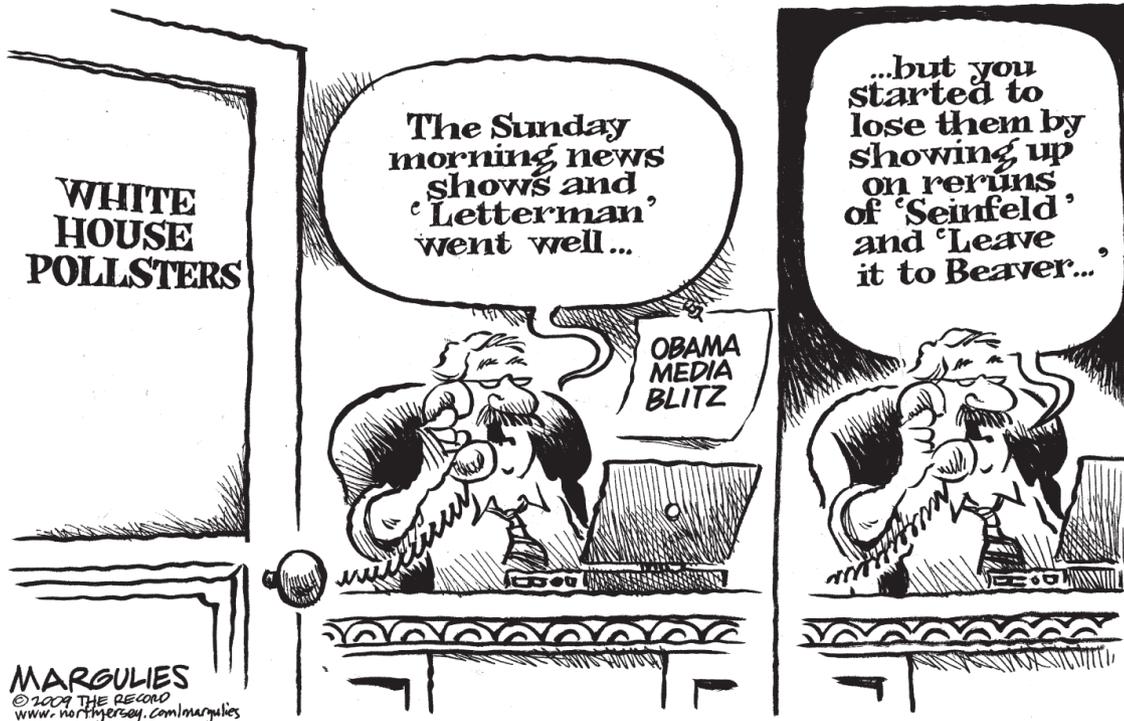
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Garden screams, but roof lands anyway

"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

I could practically hear the screams coming from my side garden as the roofers removed the old shingles and tossed them over the side of the house.

Remember that big hail storm last year? Have you noticed that almost every house in town seemed to be getting a new roof last summer or this?

Well, the adjuster came out and said our roof was toast, although it hadn't started to leak yet. That was about 18 months ago.

The same thing happened about 15 years ago. There was a big hail storm. The insurance company paid off and it took so long to re-roof this house that it was sold and the former owners gave us the money to put on a new roof.

It's not hard to understand why we always seem to be the last on the roofing list.

Our house is tall and it goes straight up like a teenager in a growth spurt. The roof is high and steep and has lots and lots of angles. No one wants to get up there and work, and I don't blame them, but we gotta have a new roof before we wake up some morning with a puddle



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

in the middle of the bedroom and a dripping ceiling.

Last time the roof got a redo, the insurance company refused to pay to have more than one layer of the old shingles removed. They said the roofers should just put on another layer.

So this time when the insurance guy said rip it to the base and put on all new, it's been like taking wallpaper off the wall of a very old house. You can see lots of layers and patterns as things are stripped away. It also means that there is a lot of junk coming off our roof and landing in the yard, because there is no way to get a dump truck close enough to just shove it in.

Down on the ground, I have a small garden

plot right next to the house. So, while much of the junk landed on the grass, the garden also got pelted.

I came home after work and immediately dug out my green beans. The broccoli and zucchini were impossibly buried but I was tired of broccoli and had more zucchini in the main garden, so I wasn't worried about them.

I'm happy to report that after the sky fell and the debris cleared, the green beans were only slightly injured. Their guardian nasturtiums are about half gone, as are the broccoli plants. The zucchini, which had been crawling out into the yard, has retreated to the garden. It is curled up like a sleeping dog and blooming its head off, which just goes to show, even dropping a house on zucchini vines won't get you out of having a surplus of squash.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of NorWest Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes @ nwkansas.com

City offers answers to tax questions

The following questions and answers, meant to explain the background of a city proposal to increase the sales tax to pay off bonds for a new pool and fire station, were prepared by City Manager Carolyn Armstrong and the pool committee and approved and modified by the city council:

What is the purpose of the additional .75 of 1 percent (3/4-cent) city sales tax for a 10-year period?

The money will be used to pay off a bond issue used to finance the City of Colby's new fire station (\$2.5 million) and to build a new outdoor swimming pool (\$5 million). Any remaining money will be used for the operation and maintenance of the pool or other purposes as determined by the City Council. The estimated annual payment on \$7.5 million in bonds over a 10-year period at 5 percent interest would be \$971,285.

What will the total city sales tax be if this is approved?

The city sales tax would be 1 percent and total sales tax in town will be 7.3 percent.

If I vote for this additional sales tax, how much more sales tax would I pay on a \$100 purchase?

75 cents.

When does the .25 of 1 percent (1/4-cent) city sales tax for economic development expire?

The existing 1/4-cent city sales tax for economic development will expire April 1, 2012, unless an extension is approved by voters.

What are the sales tax rates for Colby and the surrounding communities?

Colby is 6.55 percent; Atwood, 7.05 percent; Garden City, 7.2 percent; Goodland and Hays, 7.55 percent; the Hays Development District, 8.3 percent; Oakley, 7.05 percent; Oberlin, 6.3 percent; WaKeeney, 6.8 percent and Salina, 7.2 percent. On Oct. 1, Garden City's sales tax will rise to 7.45 percent, and Hoxie and Selden to 7.3 percent.

How much money will be raised with the additional .75 of 1 percent city sales tax?

We believe it will raise about \$1 million per

year.

What are the benefits of using a city sales tax rather than the property tax to pay off the fire station?

Using the sales tax will enable the city to pay off the fire station in 10 years rather than 20, saving about \$462,300 in interest. If the interest rate on the General Obligation Bonds is 5 percent, the annual payment on a 10-year issue would be about \$277,140 and the annual payment on a 20-year issue would be about \$171,700. If the property tax is used to pay off the fire station bonds, it will require about 5 mills per year over a 20-year period or 7.25 mills per year over 10.

What would an extra 5 mills or 7.25 mills cost on my home or business?

If your home has a market value of \$100,000, the assessed valuation would be \$11,500; an extra 5 mills would cost \$57.50 per year and an extra 7.25 mills would cost \$83.37 per year.

If your business property has a market value of \$1 million, the assessed valuation would be \$250,000; an extra 5 mills would cost \$1,250 per year and an extra 7.25 mills would cost \$1,812 per year.

Who pays sales tax in Colby?

If sales tax are used to build a pool and pay for the fire station, every dollar spent by visitors to Colby would help make the payments. According to the last information from the Kansas Department of Revenue, Thomas County has a population equivalent to 10,997 people with the visitors who shop here; that is 3,529 extra people paying sales tax in Colby.

Where will the new pool be built?

Several sites are being considered, but the choice will be made after an engineer is hired and conducts a study.

What amenities will be included in the proposed aquatic center?

Again, no final decision will be made until a firm is hired to design the pool, but the Aquatics Committee hopes to include water slides, splash areas, zero-depth entry, water spray features, a toddler slide, diving, 25-meter lap swimming, grassy and shaded areas, and maybe a "lazy river" feature.

What will happen to the existing pool?

If a new location is selected, the existing pool will be razed to add parking for the Community Building. The bathhouse is on the <state or national?> Historic Register and the council will make the final decision on what happens to it. It can be left standing or torn down as the council sees fit.

Can alterations be made to the existing pool?

If any alterations are made to the existing pool, the entire facility would have to be brought up to the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 2009. These regulations include such things as continuous, unobstructed paths connecting all accessible elements and spaces of a building or facility.

An accessible route is required to the swimming areas and all the supporting amenities, but is not to serve raised diving boards, platforms or water slides. Each wading pool must provide at least one sloped entry into the deepest part.

With the space constraints at the existing pool and given its age, the City Council decided in January 2008, to continue operating it as is and to explore options for a new pool.

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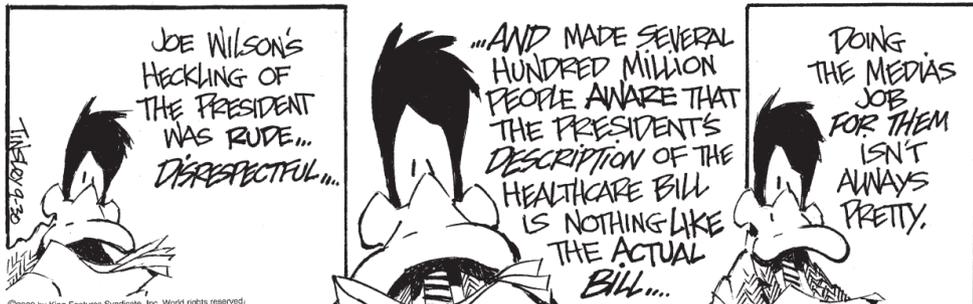
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• Bruce Tinsley



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