



## Other Viewpoints

### Tight budgets mean fewer schools

For better or worse, one of the likely outcomes of the state's current budget crunch is that more Kansas school districts will be willing to consolidate.

One such plan, awaiting likely approval from the state Board of Education, would combine school districts in three small towns northeast of Russell: Lucas, Luray and Sylvan Grove. The Luray building, which served kindergarten through eighth grade, would be closed at the end of the year. The high school in Lucas would be converted to hold kindergarten through sixth grade and the K-12 building in Sylvan Grove would become Sylvan-Lucas Unified High School for grades seven through 12. It's about 20 miles from Luray to Sylvan Grove, and Lucas is about halfway in between.

For these districts, consolidation simply was a matter of dollars and cents. According to a *Hays Daily News* report, the Lucas-Luray district spends about \$1.6 million a year to keep its schools going, but the district only generates only about \$1 million in revenue. Enrollment has dropped about 30 percent in the last decade and the district has only about 110 students. It's hard to argue with numbers like that. The Sylvan Unified School District only has about 145 students, but by merging, it can stay afloat.

To those of us who live in more urban areas of the state, it's relatively easy to accept, even encourage, such consolidation as a simple matter of practicality. However, for a town like Luray, the loss of its last school is a devastating event, perhaps even a death knell.

That's why state officials have hesitated to force consolidation on districts with declining enrollment, often hoping they would come to that conclusion on their own. That thinking, no doubt, has been pushed along for some districts by the four recent rounds of cuts to state aid.

While school consolidation may benefit the budget as a whole and seems particularly practical in the state's current financial distress, it's good to remember what a sad financial reality it is for Kansas towns that may lose their schools.

— *The Lawrence Journal-World, 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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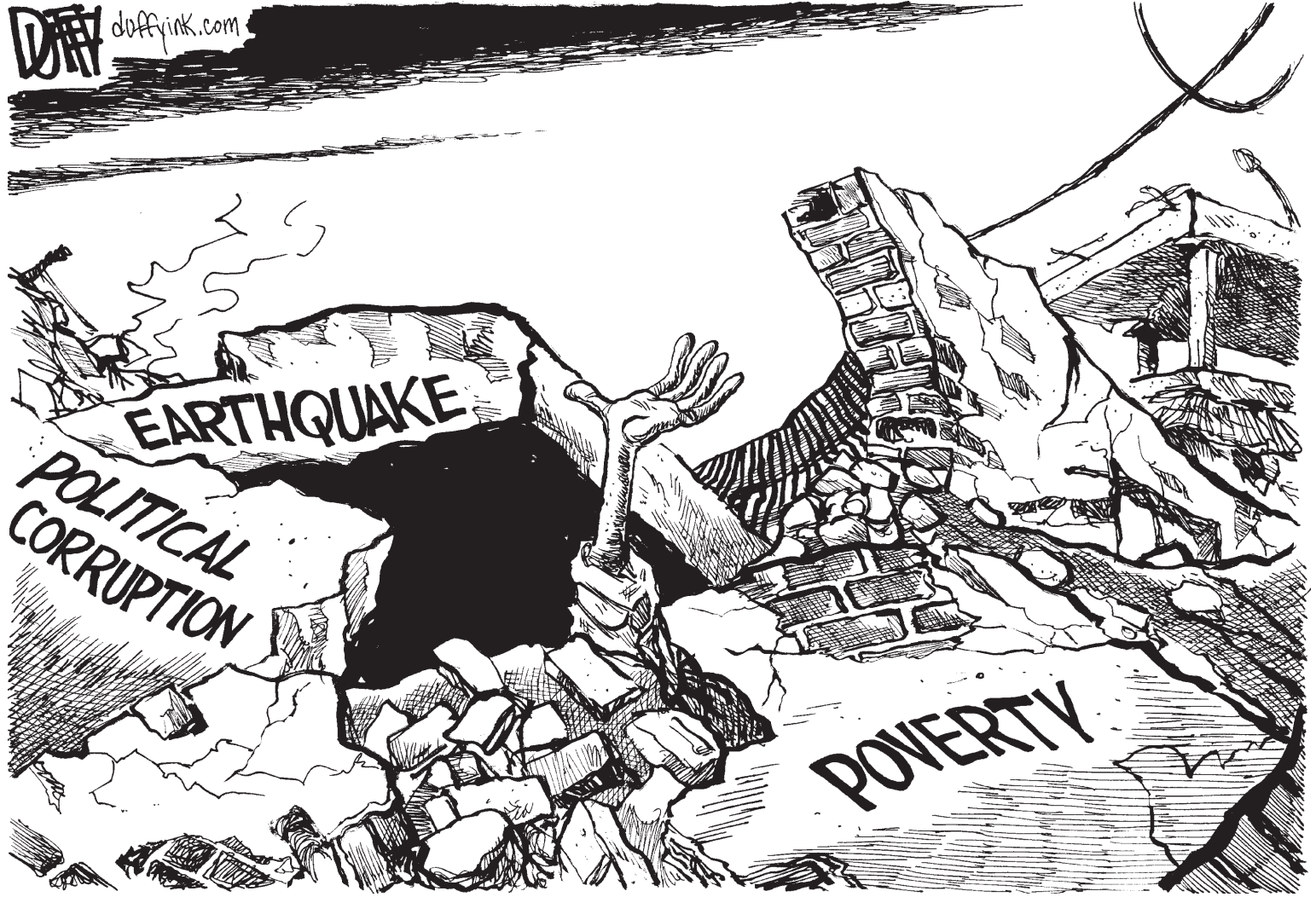
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### Cultures and con men matter in helping

As members of the human race, what is our responsibility when disaster strikes our fellow man?

I'm certainly not an expert, nor do I have any executive experience in the logistics or politics of dealing with disasters. Many folks in our area have been involved with the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and church-sponsored teams that have helped in other states and other nations. They can all attest to the satisfaction and good feeling that comes from helping others in their time of need.

In responding to need, though, we sometimes discount the long-standing history of a culture. Haiti is hampered by a culture that dates back centuries, to the landing of Christopher Columbus on the little island of Hispaniola back in 1492.

He found a culture much different from Europe. The residents were ill prepared to cope with the greed and aggressiveness of the Europeans. Traders, the con men of the day, took advantage of the primitive practice of bartering and religious charlatans took advantage of the superstitious nature of the people. Oh yes, there were honest traders and religious workers, but they were far outnumbered by those whose scruples allowed greed, self gratification and the animal nature of man to be the dominate male or female in their social group.

In the five centuries since Columbus, that little island has had very few years of real freedom and reward for individual achievement for the masses of the people. There is, essentially no middle class. It is a nation where limited numbers hold vast wealth, while the great majority live in abject poverty — a fertile field for con men and charlatans.

The lack of scruples is evidenced, in our own society, when we recognize that looting



**Ken Poland**

#### • Ken's World

following a disaster begins almost before the last thunder clap or tremor.

That lack of scruples is why we have to be careful to screen the rescue squads and workers flocking into the area. When I was involved with an American Baptist Men's Disaster Team that went to Hoisington a few years ago, we had to sit for nearly 12 hours waiting for the security system to establish a protocol on who was responsible for protecting resident's safety and property. They had to establish proper recognition of volunteers and who was responsible for their actions.

I wasn't involved with our group in the New Orleans area or Greensburg after those disasters, but they were limited for several days until the system for proper identification of volunteer outside workers allowed unrestricted activity for legitimate relief workers.

An excerpt from a news report in the *Miami Herald* noted, "With emergency crews from the United States, Spain and Venezuela already on the ground, others were being turned away from landing at the city's airport due to overcrowding."

The magnitude of a 7.0 earthquake in a densely populated area or of a Katrina-sized hurricane is beyond comprehension when it comes to coordinating rescue operations and cleanup. We are ill prepared to recognize the enormity of the situation. Poor old "heckuva

job, Brownie" Michael Brown, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency during Katrina, was plagued by a "hell of a job" trying to coordinate all the different agencies that had to work together.

Our culture tells us not to get involved with the other people's problems. Look after yourself and make them look after themselves. What can we in northwest Kansas do? Very few of us will be privileged to go to Haiti and become physically involved. But, we all have wealth beyond the imagination of most Haitians, and we have our selection of numerous civic clubs, religious organizations and civil entities that will use our donations efficiently to render aid. Check them out, make a selection, and give generously.

I can't resist a little political statement. I do support our leader in his pledge to provide military resources to help transportation and clean up efforts. The financial support of our nation should be enormous in relieving immediate hunger and medical needs.

How much better is this than using our military might and wealth to browbeat the world to satisfy our greed and pride? Is greed and pride a part of our culture?

If domestic security and equal opportunity for our citizenry was a real part of our culture, we could use our resources in a much better way than promoting destruction around the world. We can't seem to be able to afford to beat up on our enemies and love our friends at the same time.

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### Farmers need to confront priorities

Heading into the New Year and new decade, several key issues remain at the top of the priority list for Kansas farmers and ranchers, with health care, climate and environment, animal issues, balancing the federal budget and ag sales tax exemptions among the most important.

Health care is on everyone's minds today. Most Kansans and their fellow Americans are either adamantly for or against proposed health care changes. This has ignited a national debate with a passion and fervor rarely seen on legislative issues.

The health care issue is personal for all of us. It covers two overarching factors important to ag producers and rural America — reducing health-care costs and improving rural access.

To help ease the burden on farmers, and all of rural America, tax credits could help the self-employed pay for health insurance. This would also allow farm and ranch employers affordable insurance for their employees.

Requiring that individuals purchase health insurance will only work for rural America if costs are brought under control and tax credits are generous enough to make insurance affordable.

Turning to the climate and environment, most farmers and ranchers oppose cap-and-trade climate regulation because it would raise their production costs. The potential costs are far greater than any benefit to farmers.

Congress must focus on renewable energy, which is far better for the environment and this nation's domestic energy security. It should not tie the hands of U.S. growers, whose productivity feeds the world.

In the livestock arena, stockmen have already gone through several years of lean prices for their animals. They cannot withstand the mounting pressure to restrict the use of



**John Schlageck**

#### • Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

antibiotics because some believe the use of such drugs produces disease-resistant strains of bacteria.

Anti-animal-agriculture activists continue to attack livestock producers at the state level after being defeated by organized groups in Ohio. The Humane Society of the United States will propose ballot indicatives in Missouri this year.

Then the budget. Like so many segments of our society, Kansas farmers and ranchers believe it's time for government to live within its means. Simply put, don't spend money you don't have.

Kansas Farm Bureau members recently called for a reduction in the federal deficit each year, reaching a fully balanced budget by 2019. Government services and entitlements must be reduced to do this.

Farmers and ranchers would also like to see meaningful relief from the estate tax, which threatens family farms when a long-time owner dies. They want to see no conditions or qualifications, just an overall exemption. They also support a full stepped-up basis at the time of death to reduce the capital gains tax burden on farm and ranch heirs.

Expanded world trade remains a key for prosperity in farm country. Movement on pending trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and Peru would be a step in the right direction

Trade with Cuba could be another bright spot. There is growing interest, led in part by Kansas Congressman Jerry Moran, to ease travel restrictions and promote broader trade in commodities and other goods to Cuba.

The state budget and tax policy will be the main focus during the 2010 Kansas legislative session. Lawmakers will look for any way possible to balance the budget, including tax and fee increases. This could affect agriculture in the following ways:

- Ag sales tax exemptions — Most ag tax exemptions apply to ingredients or component parts or farm machinery essential to production. Elimination would significantly hurt farmers, and place Kansas growers at a competitive disadvantage to those in neighboring states.

- Dedicated program fees — These are collected by certain participants of an industry to pay for regulatory programs such as license, inspection, registration and the like. Often these programs have a statewide benefit far beyond those paying the fee. In tough economic times, the Legislature often "sweeps" these fees to pay for other areas of state government. This tax increase would not be affordable.

- Property tax — Increases in property tax disproportionately affect landowners, who are particularly concerned with the steady creep of increased Local Option Budget authority to pay for schools in place of state money.

Buckle up: 2010 will be a bumpy ride.

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

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