



Governor’s orders deserve debate

Gov. Sam Brownback has a lot of tools at his disposal, first and foremost a Legislature that is led and dominated by Republicans. Yet he’s been in office less than a month and already issued seven executive reorganization orders, something done only eight times by the last three governors.

Is he exercising this power responsibly, with enough opportunity for public and legislative input?

The state Constitution allows such orders to transfer, abolish, consolidate or coordinate agencies and functions within the executive branch. And what Brownback seeks to do via such orders may serve Kansas well as he tries to reorganize and streamline state government. But they deserve public debate.

One of Brownback’s orders, signed two weeks ago in Cottonwood Falls, will move the state Division of Travel and Tourism and its 13 employees to the Department of Wildlife and Parks, tacking “tourism” onto the agency’s name. That will serve Brownback’s laudable goal of making Kansas more of a destination for those who want to hunt and fish. But what will it do for the state’s urban tourist attractions?

Brownback also has issued executive reorganization orders to abolish the parole board and transfer its duties to the Department of Corrections, and move the Kansas Commission on Disability from the Department of Commerce to the governor’s office. More of these orders are expected, privatizing the Kansas Arts Commission and merging the Kansas Health Policy Authority into the health department.

Under House and Senate rules, legislative committees are assigned to consider each order. State lawmakers need to exercise their constitutional authority to scrutinize Brownback’s orders, which he must issue them during the first 30 calendar days of a session. Either chamber can pass a resolution disapproving an order within 60 days of receiving it. Otherwise, they become effective July 1.

Legislators may be reluctant to show disunity by challenging Brownback’s executive orders, but their role is to provide more than a rubber stamp. Since then-Gov. Robert Docking began using this power in 1973, the Legislature has disapproved 14 of 33 orders, including four of the eight issued over the past 15 years, according to the Kansas Legislative Research Department.

Republican Gov. Bill Graves only got one of his orders past the GOP-led Legislature, related to emergency planning. In 2005, the House blocked Democratic Gov. Kathleen Sebelius’ order establishing a Health Policy Authority, favoring an alternate GOP plan. Lawmakers have a responsibility to review Brownback’s executive reorganization orders and decide whether they’re right for Kansas.

– *The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press*

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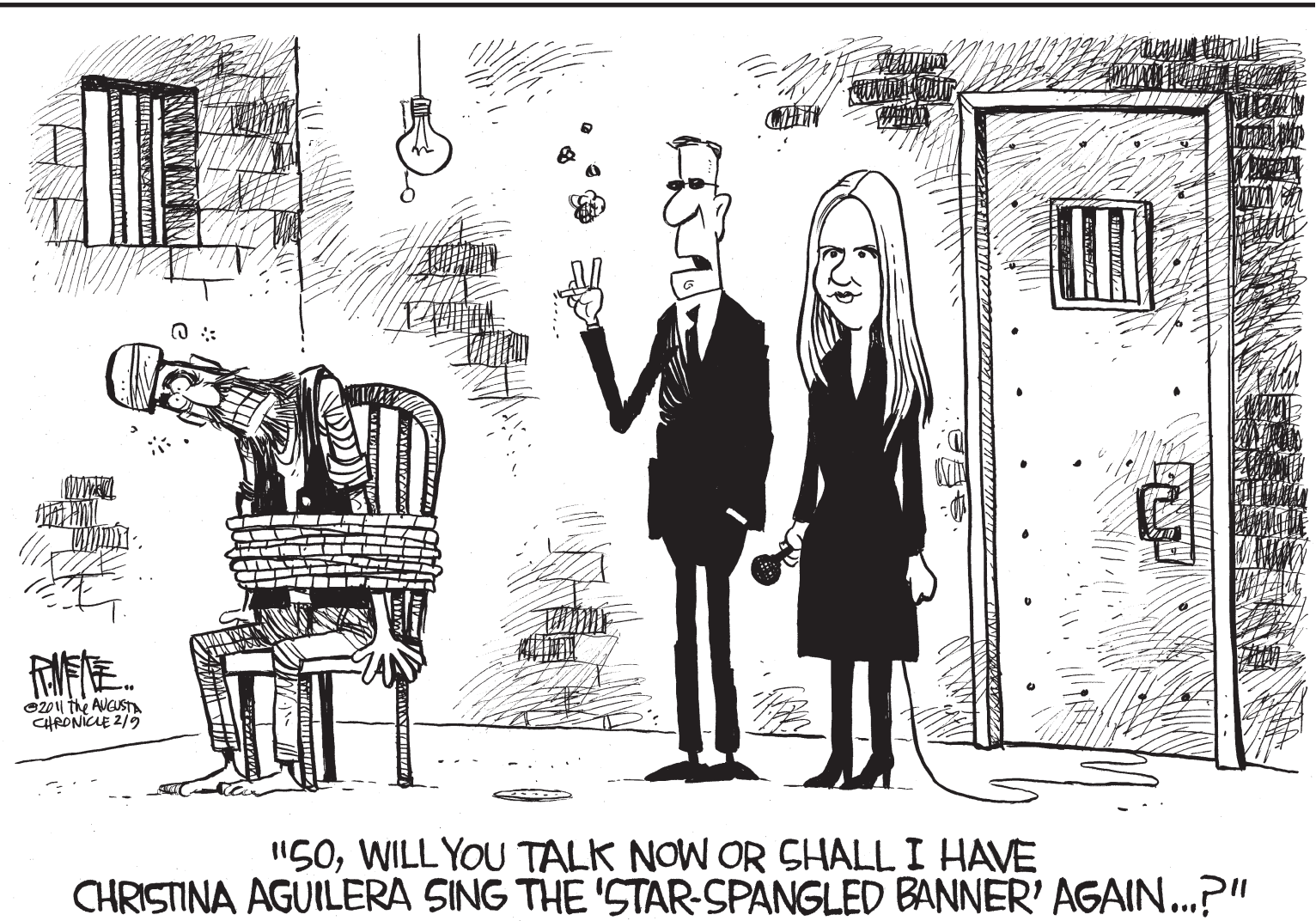
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Walk softly and carry a big snow shovel

On Wednesday, at about 2 in the afternoon, I walked from home to the newspaper office. Along the way, there were five houses where the sidewalks showed no evidence of shoveling. Some of the others were clear and dry (or drying), some were kind of snow-packed and some looked as though they had been clean about half an inch before the snowfall ended.

By Thursday morning, the count was down to four. By next week, they’ll be melted off.

By and large, I have to say that Colby homeowners are no better or worse about clearing sidewalks than people in many other places. Some probably don’t think of cleaning walks because they go directly to a car in a driveway or garage and never set foot on the sidewalk. Some don’t even have sidewalks, especially in the newer parts of town.

Colby, like many small towns on the plains, is not particularly geared to pedestrians. It’s too spread out for conveniently getting around on foot and there are areas completely without walkways. There’s a truism that the smaller the town, the less likely people are to walk as a primary means of getting around. City people often find it handier to walk a mile than to move the car and find a new parking space. Small town folks (especially teenagers) whine about walking two blocks.

In a small town – surrounded by a big agricultural region – people generally don’t expect to walk as a means of getting from Point A to Point B. Instead, businesses such as grocery stores and shopping centers are built where there is room for enormous parking lots. Have



Marian Ballard

- Collection Connections

you ever noticed that most of those enormous parking lots are mostly empty about 360 days a year? What is the point in paving that extra five acres?

With plans for big parking lots, new businesses have to go to the edge of town. That’s great for drivers, not so great for walkers. The same holds true for other buildings intended for public or group use, like schools, hospitals and churches.

Cities wind up with suburbs, grown up around these big parking lots. Small towns like Colby wind up with empty downtowns.

All of this is not to say that no one walks in Colby. Lots of people walk – mostly, it seems, for recreation. With only one fairly small college campus (in contrast to the last city I lived in, which boasted at least four) there are relatively few involuntary pedestrians. Cities with more vehicularly-challenged residents see walkers and even bicycles out in even the worst weather. I haven’t seen a single bicycle this week.

Those recreational walkers, though, seem to think that sidewalks are for wimps. If you are a person who walks in the street beside a per-

fectly good, visible sidewalk, I wish you would reconsider. You’re really hard to see, even when it’s not completely dark out – and your evening walks are often taken in the dark.

You’re also breaking a basic rule I learned when I was eight – to walk facing traffic when you have no sidewalk to use. When you walk at night, in the dark, on the right side of the street, with a baby stroller and two preschoolers, right next to a sidewalk, you are not only breaking every rule in the book, you are teaching your children that exercise is important but safety is not.

Recreational walkers, oddly enough, are few and far between when it comes to wading through snow drifts. They stay home, or find an indoor path of some sort.

When the temperature falls along with the snow, walkers are more of the getting-from-here-to-there variety. They either don’t have wheels, or their wheels don’t work (I don’t want to talk about it). They don’t want to be out getting exercise in the snow – unless they are kids – they just have to get where they are going.

So take pity on them. They city ordinance says sidewalks should be cleaned within five hours after the end of the storm. Don’t wait for the spring thaw.

Please?

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

School budgets in perpetual crisis

School finance is a lot like your household budget.

If you are a property owner, you have a chunk of property taxes that come due once a year that you can’t cover with one month’s paycheck, so you have to plan ahead and set some money aside. And you had better have a little reserve to fall back on when your transmission goes bad or the water heater dies.

School budgets are one target as our state Legislature tries to solve the \$200 million education shortfall. Two years of federal stimulus money propped up school budgets after state tax revenues dropped in 2008. That money run out in June.

One scheme that is still bouncing around is a plan to free up school money now set aside for restricted use. Some want to raid every dollar in school bank accounts, claiming districts are hiding bags of loot.

Large amounts are tied up in bond and interest funds, but bond issues were approved by local voters, and any diversion of money to other purposes requires going back to voters for approval. That is the law and it is only fair.

Why not change regulations to open up restricted funds such as capital outlay or require schools to spend down and exhaust any discretionary funds? That is where our household budget example applies.

Special education money come to Kansas in lump sums, starting months after the school year begins, yet each school must provide special education programs and pay those teachers from the beginning of the year.

If schools are funded on a day-by-day basis, receiving just-in-time payments from the state



John Richard Schrock

- Education Frontlines

to cover payroll, superintendents might have to trot down to payday loan stores to borrow money to carry them through until the next federal payment. And now, capital outlay reserves are dropping fast. Some districts have nothing. But the bigger the school, the more discretionary reserves need to be available for the boiler that breaks down and that roof that leaks.

Every responsible business maintains some reserve for unexpected contingencies.

The irony is that the major advocates for raiding school funds claim to represent business interests. Yet they will be the first to accuse schools of poor business management as soon as districts are unable to repair boilers and fix roofs, or sustain special education programs until the next federal check arrives.

The harsh truth is that some districts have absolutely no reserves, restricted or discretionary, to fall back on. A little over a year ago, in December 2009, state tax revenue fell short to the point that the Kansas was unable to make its regular payments to school districts on time. Kansas fell behind by nearly a month.

Schools were allowed to tap some “restricted” accounts to make payroll, as long as they put the money back as soon as the state could meet its obligation. Sadly, at that time there

were a handful of districts that had no backup at all. The deputy commissioner of education and the state budget director made a heroic effort to pass through state money to those districts on time.

Today, one education specialist estimates up to half of Kansas school districts may have exhausted all restricted and discretionary funds.

Attempting to close the \$200 million education shortfall by changing regulations on restricted funds and forcing schools to use up all discretionary money could put Kansas schools on a hand-to-mouth existence. It makes any school bus breakdown or leaky roof a financial disaster that cannot be solved. Since it is the smaller schools that have fewer to no reserves, this would rapidly accelerate school consolidation.

And such a “solution” would be a one-time raid that leaves Kansas schools in a perpetual money crisis. Meanwhile, the \$200 million shortfall in operating costs would continue after the contingency funds were gone. Such a short-sighted one-year “solution” merely “kicks the can down the road.”

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher’s college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

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Mallard Fillmore

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