



Free Press Viewpoint

Postal fix overdue, outside Post Office

The U.S. Postal Service hopes to eliminate 11 Kansas post offices among about 2,000 facing the ax across the nation. Most are small towns where the postmaster has died, left or retired, leaving the job vacant. None is in the immediate area of northwest Kansas, though that doesn't mean we might not continue to lose post offices. Several have closed in recent years, and we have others that do not make money.

The Postal Service is desperate, facing an \$8 billion deficit this year. Mail volume is dropping, competition growing and the service is running out of cash. The mail service still makes a profit, oddly enough, but somewhere along the line actuaries misfigured its payment to the federal pension fund.

The fund is said to owe the Postal Service something like \$70 billion, and the overpayment continues at the rate of \$10 billion a year. This has been going on for years.

Faced with running out of cash, though, the service cannot wait for a sluggish Congress to do the right thing. It's throwing whatever it can find overboard.

So far, the service has proposed moving mail sorting from smaller centers across the country into bigger cities where the post offices supposedly are more efficient. (No one believes that, to start with!) Northwest Kansas is one victim of this scheme, with mail sorting to be moved from Colby and Hays to Salina.

Closing post offices where the job is vacant is another initiative. Closing offices where two facilities are close and one could serve the entire area is another. And the service has asked to end Saturday delivery of mail.

None of the cuts, not even the total, is enough to "save" the Postal Service. One estimate for the cuts is almost \$1 billion of the \$8 billion savings needed.

Congress will have to step in to save mail service, and that is being cast as "yet another federal bailout." In truth, the government has been dipping into the service's budget to reduce the deficit, and Congress is reluctant to act because it can spend this money elsewhere.

The Postal Service does not need a bailout. It needs fair treatment and common sense, but those are in short supply in Washington.

By fall, we should know if the mail is something American needs, or if we can do without it. That is not a pleasant prospect, however.

Congress should act now to end the overpayments and to either refund past overages to the postal budget or allow the service a credit on pension payments. Before the service goes broke, not after. — Steve Haynes



Summer means cat hair

Warm, OK, hot summer days are here, and I'm lovin' it.

Of course, it helps that I have air conditioning in home, office and car.

In the mornings, it's usually cool enough to get out and do a little gardening, eat breakfast out on the back deck or read the morning paper under the shade of our pear tree.

In the afternoons, it's time to go inside and work or, on the weekends, take a nap on the sofa.

By nightfall, it's late enough that about the only thing left worth doing is counting the lightning bugs and taking a walk around town.

Ah, summertime — and the livin' is easy. Well, not really, but I sure like it better than winter, when the first task most mornings is shoveling the snow off the porch so that I can find the newspaper. The next task is to clean off the walks so the mailman can get to our door.

Nope, give me summer, when my garden is growing and my cats are spending the day lazily on the back porch.

In fact, I tossed all four of them out on Sat-



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

urday, even the reclusive Jezebel.

The first three were easy. As each went out the door, I grabbed it and gave it a good brushing. The hair flew everywhere, and the cats loved it.

But, then there was Jez, hiding somewhere upstairs, the hairiest cat of all.

I was lucky. She was reclining on the back of Steve's chair on a red-and-white throw that has gone gray with cat hair.

I whisked her outside and grabbed the wire cat brush. She yowled. She hissed. She tried to bite me. She loved every minute of it.

Jezebel is one weird cat. Soon, I had to clean the brush, and again, and again and again. I got more hair off of that cat than I had gotten off of the other three com-

ing. Jez is youngest daughter's cat. We inherited her when husband Brad, who is allergic to cats, came into the picture. But this isn't the first time we have provided board and back of chair for this fur ball.

Last time, Steve was petting her. As he petted, his hands came away with huge chunks of hair. He carefully put the hair in a pile, packaged it up and mailed it to youngest daughter with a note saying that he was sending her a complete cat, "some assembly required."

"You are soooo weird, Daddy," was her reply.

This time, I just threw the extra cat hair away. Brad isn't going anywhere and neither is the feisty Jez.

So last weekend, I was brushing cats, pulling weeds and counting lightning bugs.

It's summertime and the living is wonderful.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkansas.com

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Assessment scores leveling off

Across Kansas, state assessment tests have been tallied. And the No Child Left Behind requirement that all students will score proficient or higher in math and reading by 2014 is rapidly approaching.

Across the country, states chose one of two methods to meet the impossible 100-percent-by-2014 mandate. Some set a low rate of improvement and loaded the increase in scores into the last few years, hoping that the unreasonable law would be modified or repealed by now. Because of how their graph across the years looks, this is called the "hockey stick" strategy.

Kansas took an honest approach and drew the line to 100-percent-by-2014 fairly straight. Kansas has played by the rules and raised scores each year, making the higher and higher adequate yearly progress goals for the state each year. But despite the greatest of efforts — narrowing of the curriculum to focus on math and reading, double-enrolling weak students in additional courses, adding after-school and summer programs — you can only improve scores so far.

To approach the state requirements for No Child this year, 86 percent of Kansas high school students and nearly 88 percent of elementary and middle school students will have to meet proficiency standards for reading. In math, over 82 percent of high school students and nearly 87 percent of younger students must meet proficiency. U.S. Education Secretary Arnie Duncan estimates that over 80 percent of schools nationwide may fail to make their goals this year. Kansas may be among them.



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

According to Kansas Education Policy Report, a new state education news service by veteran journalist Peter Hancock found at www.ksedpolicy.com, Diane DeBacker, commissioner of education and head of the state department, reported to the state Board of Regents on April 21 that Kansas may fall short of meeting these ever-escalating target scores.

With cuts in the school budget and the end of many programs that supported the lowest-performing students, it is possible scores could level off or even drop.

School performance is closely linked to economic status. DeBacker laid out the data: Students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches grew from 28 percent to over 43 percent between 1994 and 2010. Students needing special education Individual Education Plans doubled from 7 percent to 14 percent in that same period. And English language learners in Kansas increased from 4 percent to 9 percent.

All of these groups tend to test less well than more affluent kids. The increases could limit the state's performance this year.

Kansas leads all states in calling for common sense. The state board backed DeBacker's request in February for a state waiver from

No Child to give Kansas time to incorporate new Common Core standards in language and mathematics. Reported in the April 22 Education Week, DeBacker declared "We need flexibility as we age out of NCLB." Arkansas has also requested a moratorium. To this date, the U.S. Department of Education has not responded.

The other hero of the day is the McPherson School District. In a first-of-its-kind action last month, the federal department approved McPherson going off of No Child, using instead a new set of tests developed by the ACT company. The government said the alternative system McPherson proposed is more difficult than the No Child criteria. Nevertheless, lawmakers and superintendents have flooded McPherson with phone calls.

Maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Maybe our Washington politicians will wake up and end the tyranny of No Child.

But if our federal legislators fail to kill this law, there may be one strategy that has not yet been considered.

The fed did give McPherson a waiver. If the other 288 Kansas districts consolidated with McPherson, wouldn't that put the whole state under McPherson's exception? Now that's school consolidation that many Kansans could support.

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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