

Free Press Viewpoint

We should expect meetings to be open

Leaders of the state Legislature and the Shawnee County prosecutor are snarling at each other over charges that legislators may have violated the state's Open Meetings Act when they gathered last month at Cedar Crest to mingle with the governor and his staff.

Many Republicans have charged that District Attorney Chad Taylor, a Democrat, has a political motive in pursuing the charge. In fact, it was the *Topeka Capital Journal* and the Kansas Press Association that filed the complaint. Mr. Taylor responded by opening an investigation, which is his duty.

House Speaker Mike O'Neal of Hutchinson barked that Mr. Taylor "should have gone through legislative leaders" to get information, rather than writing to all members of the House and Senate. The speaker, a lawyer, and a good one, should know better; a prosecutor has every right to look where he may for evidence of a violation.

Violation of the Open Meetings Act, while not a crime, is a serious matter. The law forbids public officials of all ranks from meeting behind closed doors to decide public business. Its basis is that the people have a right to know about state business.

The governor's office claims these meetings with legislators were strictly social affairs, and the members were cautioned not to discuss official business among themselves. The meeting involved Republican members of several key committees, who came together, presenting at least the appearance that a majority may have been meeting behind closed doors.

The way things were set up, it's no wonder many were suspicious. Why, we wonder, were the press and public excluded from these "social" gatherings? If the purpose was to get together and get to know one another, why not invite a few of the statehouse reporters and others to come mingle as well?

The governor himself cannot be accused of violating the Open Meetings Act, since he is an elected individual state officer, and not a member of the Legislature. The appearance of undue secrecy cannot help him, however, and he and his staff must have anticipated that tongues would wag.

Inviting Democrats, now that's another manner.... How much smarter the governor's office – and the legislative leadership – would have been to simply have avoided this trap and kept the meetings open. They were not, after all, conducting any important business.

"Social gatherings" held at a state facility with state money and state officials – there's a smell to that, and it isn't good. We doubt the investigation will turn up any serious wrong. But it never should have been necessary.

The governor, the leadership, the Legislature as a whole should set an example of openness for all public officials. It's what the voters and taxpayers expect and deserve.

– Steve Haynes

Write us

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We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise. Nor do we run form letters or letters about topics which do not pertain to our area.

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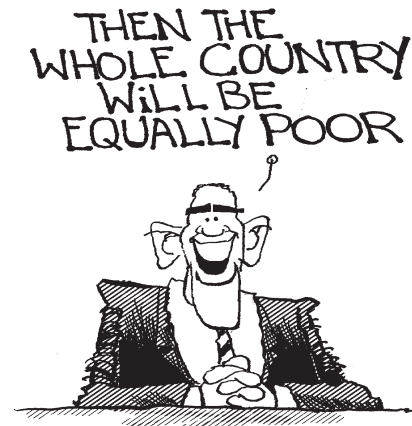
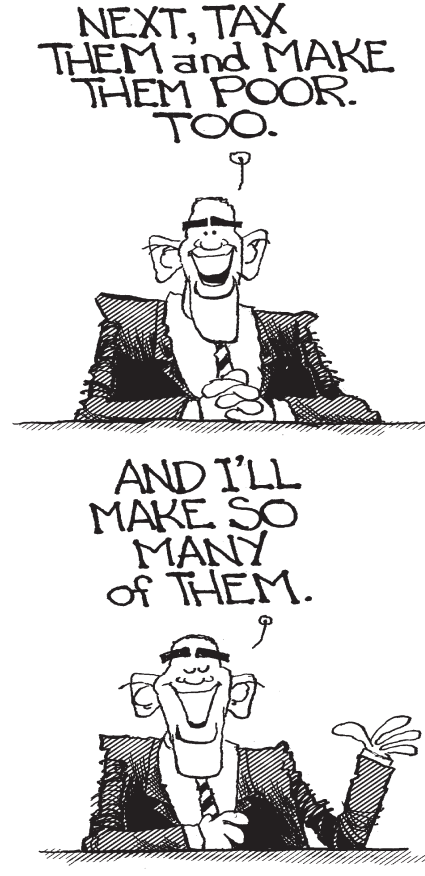
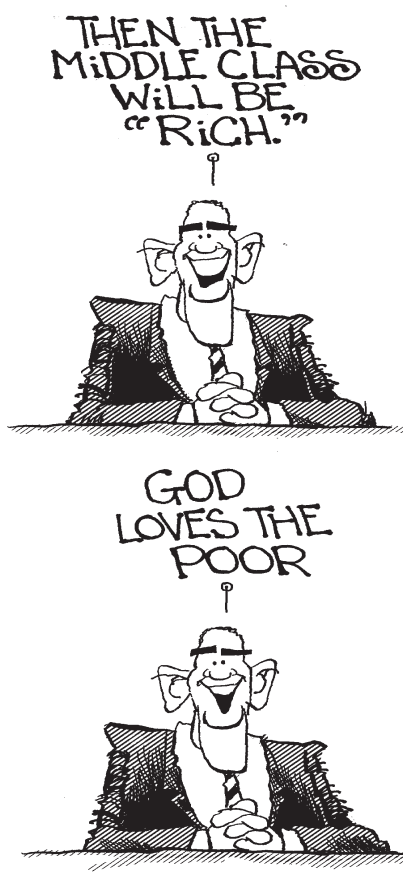
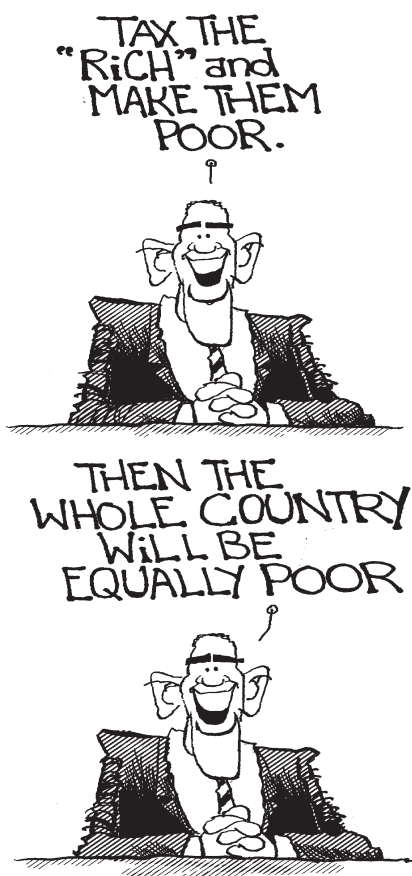
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Doing the Lord's Work.

Who knows where cats wander?

Where, oh, where has little Frank gone. Oh, where can he be?

We returned from Lawrence last week to find ourselves a feline short.

Molly was at the vet's. April Alice was in the kitchen looking for supper, and Jez was upstairs on her chair. But Frank was nowhere to be found.

We've gone through a lot of cats since we moved to Kansas in 1993. I can count 10 that we used to have but don't anymore and only three of those died of natural causes as far as I can tell. The other seven just disappeared.

So, we've gotten into the habit of counting noses, especially when we return from a trip.

Our cats are in-outs. They can go outside anytime they want, either when a servant opens the large back door or by using the small pet exit in the basement. The problem is they can't get back in without someone opening the big door in either the back or front of the house.

We put the pet door in with the idea they could come and go, but turned it into a one-way device when we started finding strange cats in our house.

One night as we were going to bed, Steve looked down and asked me if we had a black cat. Let's see, one white and gray, two sand and a tabby. Nope, no black cats.



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

This fellow turned out to be a friendly little tom from across the street. A nice cat, but not ours, and a) we really didn't need another cat and b) really, really didn't need a tomcat with a full set of claws around the house.

Mr. Tom got tossed outside and the pet door turned into a one-way ticket to the outside for the resident felines.

But this can present a problem when we are gone. Our young caretaker knows that the cats have the right to go in and out, but he's only here once a day to cater to their whims as he feeds them and brings in the papers and mail.

If they go outside then or any other time, they will be out until he comes back the next day. This is normally not too much of a problem.

But, it was cold last week. Really cold. Freezing cold. And Frank was not waiting for us.

Frank was nowhere to be found the next morning when I got up early to get Molly from the vet's. (Molly has to have insulin shots twice a day, so she gets to spend our time away from home at the vet's.)

When it was time to leave for Goodland for a funeral, there was still no Frank. We called, but we couldn't leave the door open with the temperature hovering around 15 degrees.

All we could really do is worry.

When we finally returned late that afternoon, sand-colored cat shot out of the garage like his tail was on fire. He was at the back door before we could get out of the car, and he hit the food bowl in the house like he had never, ever eaten before.

My only guess is that he took refuge somewhere warm, maybe in a neighbor's garage, and couldn't get out right away.

Whatever the reason, Frank has returned and we are once more than maxed out on cats.

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

Home-owned carnivals under attack

Many of our northwest Kansas counties have home-owned carnivals. These organizations have been developed over the years out of the need for a carnival at county fairs and community events, but mostly out of community pride.

This tradition may be threatened by a bill filed for the state Department of Labor which would end an exemption from state regulation and inspections required of commercial carnivals and amusement parks.

Home-owned carnivals are run by nonprofit organizations that buy and maintain small and large rides catering to our rural towns. These rides are maintained and operated by volunteers, and the groups work hard to keep them going from year to year.

The labor force has always been dedicated local residents donating their time in maintaining and operating these carnivals. They are proud of their excellent track records of safe and injury-free operations.

It is my understanding that our home-owned carnivals were developed over the years because traveling carnivals were not dependable. There was a clause in their contracts stating that if they received better offers, they didn't have to honor their obligation to our small towns.

After being disappointed time and time



Ralph Ostmeyer

• State Senator

again, the towns (Oberlin was the first in Kansas) began investing in carnivals of their own. These carnivals are good for our small communities, and the pride that goes into pulling these events off each year is evident. Our rural towns work together and allow people to spend money at home and keep it invested at home.

There is no question that the volunteers have a vested interest in keeping the rides maintained and in safe operating condition. Many of our operators have 20 to 30 years of experience. Our home-owned carnivals provide a safe environment, though I am aware of a couple of accidents. That should not necessitate any changes to our present mode of operation.

A bill passed by the Legislature in 2008, Senate Substitute for House Bill 2504, would have created a hardship on these small home-owned carnivals. We managed then to carve out exemptions from inspection requirements meant for commercial operations.

A bill proposed by the Labor Department this year, Senate Bill 356, would take away the exemptions from state regulations, creating a major burden on the volunteers, who are equally as qualified as any inspector who would train them. This bill is a direct response to an accident at the Norton carnival, though there also was a minor accident in Goodland last year.

Our home-owned carnivals have always taken every possible measure to ensure safety for their people. I have witnessed the pride and hard work that goes into these annual events.

It is important that we protect the rural way of life that so many of our family members look forward to every year. I have heard from many of my constituents concerning this issue.

I am waiting for a hearing date on this bill. We need to be organized in order to hold this exemption. This will be my testimony when the bill is worked. Please contact me if you have any questions.

I can be reached by writing to Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol, 300 SW 10th Street, Room 225-E, Topeka, Kan., 66612, or call (785) 296-7399. My e-mail address is Ralph.Ostmeyer@senate.ks.gov.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

