



Free Press
Viewpoint

Sunshine brightens
good government

Sunshine Week came and went last week with little notice in this part of the state.

Be that as it may, the cause is worthy, and the need bears occasional mention.

Sunshine Week celebrates a year-around cause dear to many, and vital to all of us in a free society: open government.

Its backers range from the American Library Association to the League of Women Voters to the Society of Professional Journalists. And while many of this effort's leaders are news people, it's not just a "media" cause.

Sunshine is meant for all of us. Secrecy in government hurts everyone.

Over years of struggle, Sunshine proponents have passed laws in nearly every state requiring government meetings and records to be open to the public. The federal government, too, has such laws.

But that's not the end of the fight. Every year, state legislators and members of Congress, office holders and lobbying groups propose dozens of new exemptions for state and federal laws. Worse yet, many federal agencies simply ignore the law when they choose.

The federal Freedom of Information Act has no enforcement tools, no penalties, no teeth. A bill to create an ombudsman's office to handle citizen complaints passed Congress and was signed into law a couple of years ago, but it's been hamstrung by poor treatment and budget cuts from the Obama administration.

And while the administration pays lip service to openness, or "transparency," as the politicians like to call it today, it too often backs more secrecy, especially in the areas of security, law enforcement and diplomacy.

But even workaday federal agencies sometimes ignore this law. And despite charges by some politicians that open government is just a "media" issue, it's often an ordinary citizen who's faced with a recalcitrant agency. The taxpayer's choices are few: forget the information he or she needed, or pay big legal fees to sue the government.

And while lawsuits often succeed, they can take years and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Why should anyone, a citizen or a reporter, have to sue the government to get what should be an open record, available to anyone who asks?

"The media" often get involved in this issue because it's our job to ask questions of the government. We see the abuses day after day; the average person could go a lifetime and never get turned down on an a request for government records. Until the day comes....

Around here, we find that public officials normally do their best to honor both the open records and open meetings laws. City and county attorneys usually advise officials to comply, and Kansas law does carry penalties: \$500 fines and court orders to take classes on open government.

Still, there are exceptions. Gov. Sam Brownback invited members of the Legislature to meetings at his official mansion, Cedar Crest, which obviously were aimed an influencing legislation this year. The governor and legislative leaders bobbed and weaved, but it was an ugly move. Mr. Brownback should have known better than to skirt the law.

For what we expect of our leaders is not lip service, but compliance with the letter and spirit of the laws which declare public business to be public. It's our right, and it's the right thing to do. — Steve Haynes

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor @ nwkanssas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

Sharon Friedlander - Publisher
sfriedlander @ nwkanssas.com

NEWS

News Editor

colby.editor @ nwkanssas.com

Kayla Cornett - Sports Reporter
colby.sports @ nwkanssas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard @ nwkanssas.com

Christina Beringer - Society Reporter
colby.society @ nwkanssas.com

ADVERTISING
colby.ads @ nwkanssas.com

Kathryn Ballard

Advertising Representative
kballard @ nwkanssas.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design
khunter @ nwkanssas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Kylie Freeman - Office Manager
kfreeman @ nwkanssas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support @ nwkanssas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Richard Westfahl - General Manager

Jim Jackson, Jim Bowker, Gary Meyer, Pressmen

Lana Westfahl, Judy McKnight, Kris McCool, Stacy Brashear, Tracy Traxel, Mailing

THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72

©2012
MRC.org/BMI
Dist. by King Features



THE ADMINISTRATION'S PLAN TO REDUCE THE
COUNTRY'S CARBON FOOTPRINT.

Spring is bugging out all over

Spring seems to have sprung, and while I love it, I'm getting a little bugged.

You know, bugged, as in ants, wasps, flies and assorted small, multi-legged irritants.

We have a routine around our house. The first Sunday of each month is the day to give the dog her heart-worm medicine "treat" and the cats and dog their rub-on tick and flea medicine.

While the dog gets her treat year around, at \$8 to \$10 a dose, we don't bother with the flea and tick stuff in the winter. So when the first Sunday in March came in like a lion, we decided that the animals could wait until April for their treatments.

Big mistake.

Within a week, the weather turned warm and spring-like. The daffodils started to appear. It was time to clean out the flower beds and the cats, which hadn't stuck their noses outside most of the winter, started going outside, rolling in the dirt and sunning themselves on the back porch.

I haven't seen any fleas or ticks yet, but the season is definitely here.

This morning, while brushing my teeth, I was visited by a little leaf hopper thingee. I don't know how it got into the house, but I'm betting it hopped a ride on a wandering cat.



Cynthia
Haynes

- Open Season

However, it got in, it was not a good idea. It hopped around on the edge of the sink as I was brushing my teeth and finally, as I was washing off the toothbrush, it hopped into the sink and joined the toothpaste residue going down the drain.

Then there are the ants. We've had a problem with minuscule ants for years. Some people call them "sugar ants." They come marching into the house from cracks around the window sills, baseboards and goodness only knows where else. They are so small, they are not much more than moving dots, but when I see a swarm of moving dots in the kitchen, I reach for the bug stuff.

This week they found one of the cat-food bowls. We have four – one for each cat.

I looked down at the bowl, and there was the cat food with dots swarming all over it and the sides of the yellow plastic bowl.

I quickly got out an ant pellet. Leaf hoppers don't bother me too much. They mostly stay outside. But ants can take over the kitchen, and who needs them?

The pet-safe ant pellet soon lured my unwanted guests out of the food. Or maybe the cats ate them; I'm not asking.

Then there was the wolf spider in the kitchen sink, a small one. He was there Saturday morning as I was making the coffee. I let him be. He wasn't hurting me and I had to get to work.

When I got home eight hours later, Steve said I had to see the drama that had played out in our sink.

There in the sink was a bigger spider and the remains – eyes and a couple of legs – of the one I had seen earlier. I guess in the insect world, it's every spider for himself.

I'm not sure where the second spider went, but hopefully, he'll dine on some of the flies that are starting to come in.

Bugs and flowers – yep, spring is definitely here.

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 @ nwkanssas.com

Budget holds strong ending balance

This week was the last full week most House committees had to consider legislation, with Friday being the hard deadline for bills to be passed out of committee. March 31 marks the end of the regular session and the legislature will adjourn for its annual break before returning to Topeka on April 25 for what is called the "veto session."

An agreement with the Senate on areas of unfinished business like redistricting, the budget, tax reform and addressing the unfunded liability of the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System will have to be reached during the veto session. This will be a daunting task.

House Budget (H. Sub. SB 294)

Friday was budget day on the House floor. The budget was debated from 11 a.m. until agreement was reached at 6:30 p.m. After the dust had settled, we were successful in making sure that the \$29 million was included so that school districts would not have to take that amount in increased head count and at-risk program cost from their special purpose funds.

Last year, the Legislature passed a budget that, for the first time since 1972, decreased all-funds state spending by over \$880,000 and turned a \$500 million deficit into a \$100 million surplus without raising taxes. However, we still have very serious obligations facing the state, which makes it important to keep spending in check. For too long, Kansas's government lived beyond its means and we've worked diligently to turn the tide.

This year's proposed budget has an approximate ending balance of almost \$500 million, which exceeds the 7.5 percent statutory requirement for the first time since 2008. In the past, this ending balance, in my opinion, would have been quickly spent, perpetuating the cycle we've been stuck in for years.

Today the Senate will approve its budget. After the House budget is passed, a conference committee with members of the House and Senate will be appointed to negotiate the



Rick Billinger

- This Week in Topeka

differences between the two budgets. Kansas is a diverse state with distinct urban and rural issues, often making reasonable and agreeable solutions difficult. Budgeting is never an easy process and increased revenues and sizable ending balances complicate the process. I believe it is in the best interest of the state that we continue on shrinking the size of state government, pay down our debt and spend responsibly to better improve the fiscal condition of Kansas.

Kansas Income Tax Reform
(H Sub. SB 177)

This tax bill will reduce the income tax rate beginning 2013. Some of the key provisions include maintaining current tax reductions, credits and exemptions, including food sales tax refunds, historic tax credits, mortgage deductions and earned income tax credits proposed for elimination. It also eliminates the individual income tax on non-wage business income at a graduated cap for four years and expands the successful Rural Opportunity Zone to include 23 more counties.

The bill also maintains the statutory sales tax sunset, passed during the 2010 session, which lowers the sales tax rate to 5.7 percent in 2013 and includes a 3 percent growth factor that require increased revenues over 3 percent to trigger reductions in individual tax rates. Each of these provisions were designed to lower income tax rates while also insuring a healthy ending balance to keep Kansas at a sound fiscal status while limiting spending.

I was successful in getting my first piece of legislation added to this tax bill as an amend-

ment. This amendment allows residents of counties with unemployment rates over 5 percent that move to a county designated a rural opportunity zone for employment to receive a tax credit for three years. The tax bill will go to a conference committee for approval.

The House debated the bill and made the following amendments: exemptions for most food purchases from sales tax, removal of provisions that amend severance tax collections to keep current law, clarification that the 9 percent earned income credit remains refundable in 2013, removal of the current sunset provision on state historic tax credit, allowance for cities or counties to opt out of the food sales tax exemption and addition of Sumner County to the rural opportunity zone.

Teacher Evaluations (HB 2634)

This bill would require teacher evaluations to be based on multiple measures of student achievement and growth as determined by the State Board of Education. The bill would classify each teacher as highly effective, effective, progressing or ineffective. The classification would primarily be based on the growth in student achievement. Also included in the evaluation would be a recommendation for improvement and plans of assistance, if needed.

I would like to congratulate Road Runner Manufacturing, Brad and Marie Skolout, from Levant. Their trailer manufacturing business received an award from the Kansas Small Business Development Center as a 2011 Existing Business of the Year. I was honored to help present their award at the Small Business Development Banquet.

Thank you for the honor of serving you, Rep. Rick Billinger, (785) 889-4700, rick.billinger@house.ks.gov.

Rick Billinger is the state representative from the 121st District. He serves on the Commerce and Economic Development, Education Funding, Insurance and Local Government committees.

Mallard
Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

