



Other Viewpoints

Court has chance for fair redistricting

A potentially positive byproduct of the Kansas Legislature’s dismal redistricting failure is that Kansans now can get some idea how a nonpartisan or bipartisan redistricting process might benefit the state.

After months of haggling over the legislative and congressional district maps, legislators threw in the towel last week and allowed the process to be turned over to the federal courts. Three judges scheduled two days of testimony beginning Tuesday to hear from 27 constituents and officials concerning the factors they believe are important in redrawing the district maps based on 2010 census figures.

The judges are well aware of the time pressures that now are coming to bear on this process, including the need to move forward with filing deadlines in time to allow August primary ballots to be distributed to Kansas military personnel who are stationed abroad. They are being asked to complete a task, perhaps in a matter of days, that the Legislature was unable to complete in four months.

Secretary of State Kris Kobach urged the judges to limit the number of parties who can testify in the proceeding in order to speed a redistricting decision. Time certainly is of the essence, but the judges were right to hear from all of the concerned parties.

A small controversy also has broken out over the legal fees the state might incur as part of the redistricting case. It would, indeed, be unfortunate if Kansas taxpayers have to bear significant legal costs in this process, but that’s something legislators should have thought about before forcing redistricting into the courts. The state already has wasted far too many resources on this process. Perhaps additional legal fees will help convince state residents and lawmakers of the need to find a better, less political way to redraw representative districts.

The judges have a number of responsibilities in redrawing the districts, including equalizing the population in each district and respecting various communities of interest. They do not, however, have any of the political obligations that stymied the redistricting process in the Legislature. They have no reason to consider, for instance, what U.S. House Speaker John Boehner thinks of U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kan., or how Kansas Senate districts could be redrawn to eliminate election competition for incumbent senators. Redistricting isn’t an easy task, but it’s far less difficult when it is conducted by a group of people who can rise above the political pressures.

Bickering for months over redistricting and then letting it go to a judicial panel is one way to take some of the politics out of the process. A better option would be to consider routinely turning the process over to a bipartisan redistricting commission like the one proposed by Kansas Senate leaders in the closing days of the last session. The proposal came too late to get serious consideration this year, but it should be at the top of next year’s agenda.

We wish the federal judges well as they move forward with the redistricting process on Tuesday. It’s time to put the interests of Kansas ahead of political gamesmanship.

— The Lawrence Journal-World, via the Associated Press

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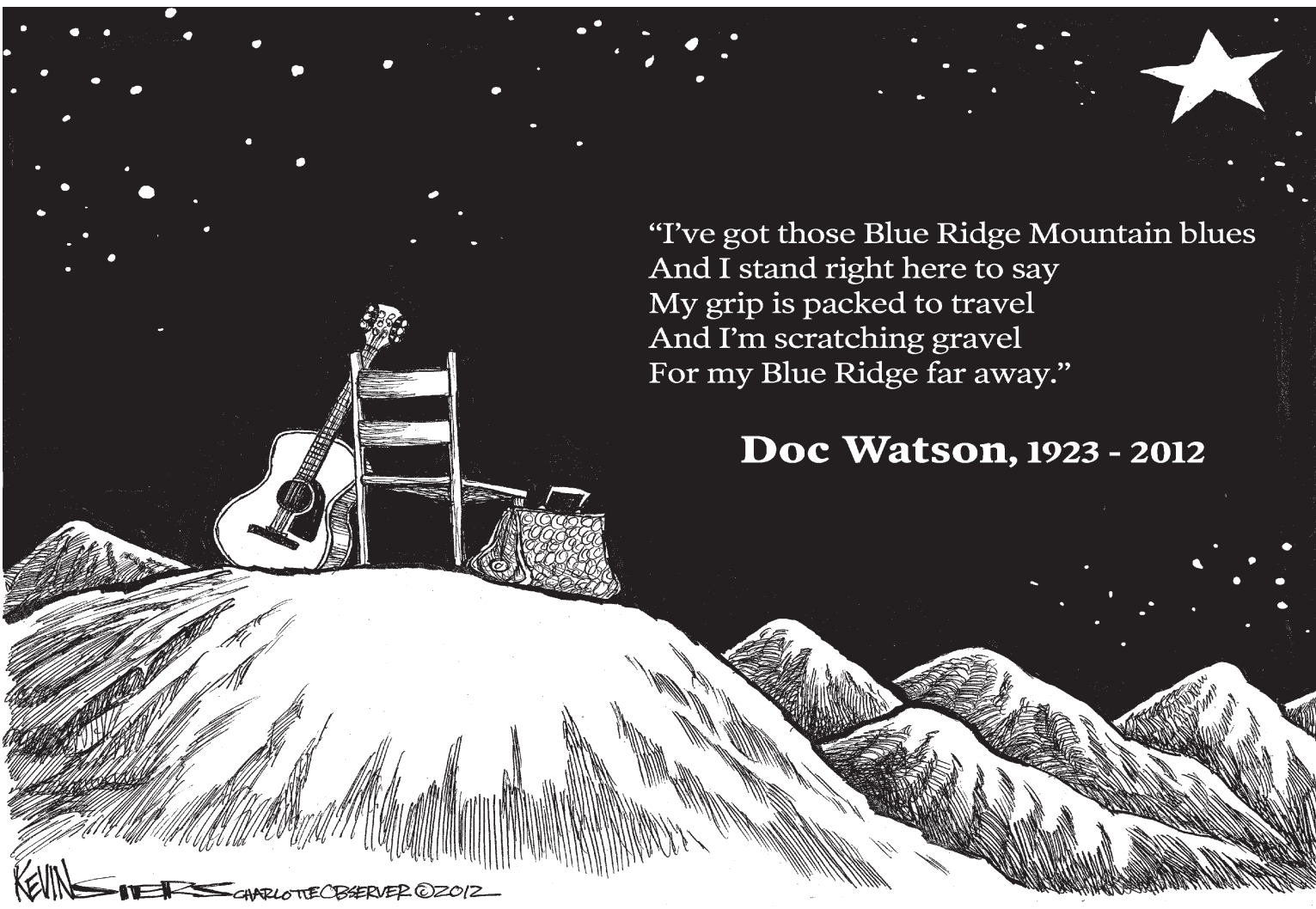
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“I’ve got those Blue Ridge Mountain blues  
And I stand right here to say  
My grip is packed to travel  
And I’m scratching gravel  
For my Blue Ridge far away.”

Doc Watson, 1923 - 2012

College isn’t there, but sees destination

The dust is finally starting to settle – figuratively – from the academic year. (Literally, I had never seen as much dust as Saturday night’s storm created and I do not need to see it again anytime soon.)

Summer has unofficially begun. Over the next few months, many will head out for vacations. In less than two weeks, my family, minus me, will be headed south for food and fun with friends. I do not even have to be in the car to be sure that at some point someone, probably Michael, will say “are we there yet?”

This phrase has become the punch line for many jokes but it is not on the surface an illogical query. Provided that we have a well-defined destination, it is important to know where we are on the journey. Let me share an update then on college activities and where we are and to where we hope to be heading.

Instructionally, 2011-12 was a successful year for Colby Community College. If you were at commencement, you saw 165 graduates receive degrees and certificates; many graduates were unable to participate. For those of us in education, there is no image as satisfying as a graduation.

Additionally, we saw programs use resources from the Hansen Foundation, the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Education to improve technology, research opportunities and access for our students. Just a couple of examples include the conversion of the veterinary technology program to include a stand-alone, online degree and the purchase of a BodPod machine by the physical therapy assistant program to measure body mass and composition.

During this year, the college has also prepared for new initiatives which will begin this summer and fall. The most far-reaching change will be the introduction of the four day class week, with most students only having classes Monday through Thursday, leaving Fridays for specialty classes for students and work days for faculty and staff.



Steve Vacik

• From the president

In addition, the college has expanded its offerings and numbers at Norton and WaKeeney, especially with regard to the nursing program. Not to be left off is the introduction of two new and exciting programs, medical coding and virtual office assistant, both of which have great potential for future employment.

Updating the college mission statement and strategic plan were also important tasks this year. In the spring, a group of faculty, staff and administrators began working on the strategic plan – a blueprint for the next five years, complete with objectives and measures to determine success. A draft plan has been completed and presented to the Board of Trustees for initial review. It will eventually go back to the whole college for comment. Finally, we will have an open period for comment from the community so you also will have meaningful input into the future of the institution.

In addition, a revised mission statement was prepared by the same planning committee and, after feedback from faculty and staff, presented and approved at the May board meeting. The wording changed but not the intent: Our mission is to engage others in learning and service opportunities to positively affect their world. Beginning locally, we hope to engage all those whom we touch in our programs and services in actions which will improve lives – that is what we are all about. Both the revised mission statement and strategic plan will help the college by better defining our destination.

The other major initiative I would like to share is the start of a major gifts campaign by the college. In 2008, Dr. Paul Lanning wrote,

“American community colleges ... need more support than they’re getting ... public funds for community colleges are becoming more and more unreliable ... (and) without reliable budgets, it is difficult for college administrators to think in the long term financially.” I agree.

The college reserves are terribly depleted, which makes it nearly impossible to navigate the challenges that lay ahead. Even with tax support from local citizens, state and federal funds continue to dwindle. To become the best institution in Kansas (and yes, that is our goal), we need additional private financial support.

Recently, I was able to meet with some small groups to share a “state of the college.” I intended to bounce ideas off of them and gather input as well as lay the foundation for financial support.

My ultimate goal has always been to share this college briefing on a broad scale, so in the near future the college will hold another session for anyone who will come. At that time, I will discuss in greater detail this fund raising effort and why it is so important to the future of the college. I look forward to visiting in person with you. Ultimately, we need our citizens to invest further in the college’s future so we can embrace our mission and achieve the objectives set forth. The major gifts campaign can make that possible.

Above all else, you have reason to be proud of your community college. I hope that you will continue to notice us becoming different, better and purposeful. “Are we there yet?” No, but we have the map and a destination in mind. Now, we just need the gas (financial and human resources) – and perseverance – to complete our trip. Have a great summer.

Dr. Stephen Vacik is president of Colby Community College. Vacik is a native of Fargo, N.D., and was vice president of instruction at East Mississippi Community College before moving to Colby.

Veto session acts on oil and gas depletion

The legislative session went into overtime. May 14 was the 91st day of the veto session and many issues were still unsettled. We were able to adjourn on May 20 after agreement on the budget. No agreement was met on redistricting maps, so the courts will be redrawing the maps for the Senate, House, Board of Education and a Congressional map.

I will briefly explain some of the legislation passed during the veto session that directly affects western Kansas.

Oil and Gas Depletion Funds (Senate Sub for House Bill 2537)

Last summer a group of Western Kansas legislators, including myself, started to work on this bill as we saw a threat of these funds being swept into the state general fund. The bill passed out of the House and Senate with an almost unanimous vote. However, Gov. Brownback vetoed the bill. This bill was a bargaining chip in the Senate and late Sunday afternoon the bill passed in both chambers.

The funds are paid by each county that has oil or gas production as money to be accessed when the counties tax collection on these wells fall below a certain level. By doing this, counties use these funds in place of raising property taxes when the wells run dry.

The bill would annually transfer to each affected county the funds in its account in the State Treasury. The bill would require each county to receive money from the depletion trust fund to establish a county oil and gas valuation depletion trust fund to be administered by the county treasurer. On Oct. 1 each year, the Director of Taxation, Kansas Department of Revenue, would certify the amount in each trust account in the state treasury, and the state treasurer would issue a warrant to the county for deposit in the county’s trust fund. The statutory criteria for a county to receive a distribution would not change.

Technical Education

This bill requires the Kansas Board of Re-



Rick Billinger

• This week in Topeka

gents to establish a career technical education incentive program, which would award \$1,000, subject to appropriation, to a school district for each high school graduate from that district with an industry-recognized credential in a high-need occupation, as identified by the Kansas Secretary of Labor, in consultation with the Board of Regents and the State Board.

The bill would allow the governing board of a community college, technical college or institute of technology to apply to the Board of Regents for permission to establish a career program outside of the college’s service area if the program is not currently offered in the area. The provisions of this section go into effect on July 1.

Technical College Boards’ Ability to Acquire Property by Lease-Purchase

The bill amends the powers and duties of technical college boards by allowing them to acquire property by lease-purchase which is necessary or desirable for college purposes. The lease-purchase agreement, limited to 10 years, may provide for annual or other payment of rent or rental fees, including maintenance or other expenses, is subject to change or termination at any time by the Legislature and must contain a clause containing termination language.

At-Risk Students

The bill makes changes to the school finance formula related to at-risk students. If a student submits an application for free meals under the National School Lunch Act, and it is later de-

termined that the student should not have been eligible, the school district or the Department of Education would notify the State Board of Education. The Board would recompute the general fund budget of the school district, excluding the at-risk student. The amount of state aid to the affected district would be adjusted accordingly.

High-Density At-Risk Pupil Weighting

The bill revises the provision in the school finance law concerning the calculation of the high-density at-risk pupil weighting.

It provides for a linear transition formula to calculate weighting for districts with between 35 percent and 50 percent at-risk pupils.

KAN-ED ACT

Senate Sub. For HB 2390 would amend the KAN-ED Act to phase out the KAN-ED network. It would provide funding for the KAN-ED program from the Kansas Universal Service Fund for fiscal year 2013, subject to the provisions of appropriations acts. The purpose of the program would be to facilitate use by schools, libraries and hospitals of broadband technology-based video communication for distance learning and telemedicine.

I will have one more weekly update, a summary of the 2012 session.

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

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