



Other Viewpoints

Speaker's legacy: caring about policy

It had to be a difficult decision for Mike O'Neal – continue in the Kansas Legislature at a time unlike any other when he could get things done, or respect tradition and step aside after two terms as House Speaker.

He made the right decision when he announced June 1 that he would retire from a long career in the Legislature. In the end, he seemed to accept the notion that it was better to go out while he was being encouraged to stay. Another term or two in this political environment could have changed that.

As it is, O'Neal will retire with a staggering 28 years of service in the House, four of them as Speaker. His last session might have been the one in which he had the most impact, though many don't view his role in passage of a massive income tax cut as positive.

And that feeling typifies his legacy. As a fiscal conservative, not everyone agreed with O'Neal. But agree with his positions or not, O'Neal cared about making good policy.

Public school spending is another example. The education establishment surely felt it had no friend in Mike O'Neal. But O'Neal probably didn't see it that way, in the last two sessions pointing to untapped and growing reserves in school districts across the state as where they could go for more resources.

O'Neal arguably created more controversy with conflicts of interest that marked his tenure on more than one occasion. The latest was serving as attorney for plaintiffs suing the state over fee fund swaps even as he served the state as House Speaker.

Still, no one can question O'Neal's dedication to public policy. Just his serving 28 years in the Legislature – a part-time job with few benefits and often more criticism than praise – is testament to anyone's commitment.

Though we didn't always agree with him, O'Neal deserves public gratitude for his long service and the dedication and thoughtfulness he brought to Topeka on behalf of his Hutchinson district and the state.

– The Hutchinson News, via the Associated Press

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“Hello, 911?...something escaped from the laboratory of democracy!”

Policy by special interests light on facts

Energy policies shaped by the election? A recent opinion writer, representing the Kansas Independent Oil and Gas Association, seems to think so. Maybe it will, but should it?

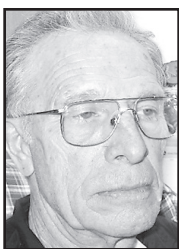
Politics shapes our elections and money shapes our politics. Special interests aren't always too careful with all the facts.

I don't know anyone who is a member of the Oil and Gas Association and I don't have any education degrees that would indicate that I'm an expert concerning oil and gas exploration and production. We have special interest groups on both sides of the issue, who don't have any more technical or scientific knowledge than I have.

When those individuals form their opinions on what is and isn't fact, they quite often are driven by their own economic interest or ideological ideas, rather than real knowledge.

I'm not too sure we have very many elected officials who are experts with factual knowledge in the field of energy exploration and development. Money buys a place at the negotiating table, through political campaign donations. It takes money to run a successful campaign to get elected. The special interest group with the most available financial resources has the most influence politically.

A number of years ago, we had an oil company expert presenting arguments at a forum discussing underground water protection and the oil industry's exploration and drilling practices. He presented as fact that the holes they were piercing through the Ogallala formation would close by natural attrition in just a few years. Thus, our local water management office shouldn't be concerned over the fact that



Ken Poland

• Ken's World

they stuffed sacks down only a few feet into the abandoned holes and covered them with a few feet of soil.

Then I pointed out that, just the previous year, we had two holes, from abandoned hand dug wells (those were drilled most likely before the 1900s), that had opened up and you could still see the spade marks down 15 or 20 feet.

We also had a hole that had been drilled some 20 or more years earlier where high voltage electric lines were now directly over head. The drilling had to have occurred before the lines were built. You could drop a rock into the hole and hear it hit water.

He basically said I didn't know what I was talking about and went on with his, supposed, facts. He was the expert and I was just a dumb farmer sitting on the Water Management Board. The oil companies weren't doing anything that would endanger our underground water supply from surface contamination? Who knows what kind of short cuts, for economic reasons, they were practicing to prevent contamination from below the Ogallala aquifer.

Sad to say, many of us don't see any need for government regulations unless someone is driving across our lawn, then some official had

better put a stop to their trespassing.

I am also a little skeptical about his facts about our fossil fuel reserves. It hasn't been very many years since our natural gas prices quadrupled on the basis that we were running out of gas.

You don't suppose someone had some economic interest in those facts? You don't suppose the coal industry doesn't have an economic interest in trying to convince us that coal is creating less environmental damage than the wind generators or the oil- and gas-powered generators?

I'm sure the oil and gas industry is looking at the honest assessment on true cost to the consumer and the environment concerning ethanol and oil. Could the National Corn Growers Association be a little hesitant to show all the facts on that same issue?

Who are the special interest groups? How about: Farm Bureau; Chamber of Commerce; National Rifle Association; Animal Rights activists; Pro Life advocates; Freedom of Choice advocates; National Teachers Association; Bankers Association; religious groups (all flavors) – and the list is inexhaustible.

Most of us belong to one or more special interest groups and we are all prone to be biased on need for regulation or oversight from anyone, but ourselves.

Ken Poland describes himself as a semiretired farmer living north of Gem, a Christian, affiliated with American Baptist Churches, and a radical believer in separation of church and state. Contact him at rcwinc@cheerful.com.

Keep farm safe when kids have fun

The dream of many young farm boys and girls is to ride with their fathers on a tractor. For a youngster, the mammoth tractor epitomizes raw power, responsibility and coming of age.

Nothing is more exciting to youngsters than the belch of diesel smoke, the roar of engines and rubber wheels rolling on powerful tractors, combines or silage cutters. They draw children like a moth to a flame and, like fire, can be dangerous. Such equipment can cut, crush or trap children. It holds potential harm for the ones we want to protect the most – our children.

Now that children are home from school, the chance of farm accidents is greater. During the summer months, never invite your children to ride in the tractor with you. Stress that your youngsters stay away from machinery. Never let them play or hide under or around machinery like tractors.

Farms offer children a unique environment to live, play, work and grow up. As a child, I can remember tossing a lasso around the grain auger and climbing into the grain bin of our combine. At the age of five, this giant silver machine symbolized the far away Rocky Mountains and I was scaling their peaks like my legendary (Mountain Man) hero, Jim Bridger.

Safety experts have labeled agriculture a hazardous occupation, and farm children are routinely exposed to the same hazards as their parents who work the farm.

Education and awareness are the key ingredients to help make the farm a safer place for children to play, according to Holly Higgins,



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

Kansas Farm Bureau safety director. Brushing up on some of the potential hazards can also make it safer for parents.

“While you're visiting with your youngsters about safety on the farm, don't forget to stress the positive aspects of farming with the possible hazards,” Higgins says.

Describe to children how horses can be fun to ride, Higgins says. Talk about how lambs and baby calves can be pleasurable to pet or feed. Remind them that while animals are fun to be around they can also bite, kick and trample.

“Discuss with your youngsters the signs that show an animal may be dangerous,” the safety director says. “Some of them include pawing the ground, snorting, raised hair and ears laid back.”

Animals – even friendly ones – can be unpredictable. Have your children stay away from large ones. Emphasize they stay away from animals with newborn or young. Tell them to remain calm, speak quietly and move slowly when around animals.

While barns, grain handling facilities and big buildings can be fun to play in, falls can occur or children may be exposed to harmful substances like chemicals and electricity, Hig-

gins says.

Wide-open spaces also provide children with ideal playgrounds. This isolation may also lead to difficulty finding help in the event of an emergency.

Explain the dangers associated with stored grain. Stress the principles that grain can entrap a person almost immediately. Children should never play around, or in, grain that is stored in bins, trucks or wagons. Emphasize that it is difficult, or can be impossible, to pull even a child out of grain if he/she becomes trapped.

Remember, it is important that youngsters have a safe place to play. Ask them to identify safe play areas. Talk about areas away from farm machinery, animals, manure pits, silos, etc. Carefully define safe boundaries. Let them know where they can and cannot play.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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Mallard Fillmore

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