

Other Viewpoints

Scavenger hunt worth state's effort

Selling surplus property isn't going to earn the state a bundle of money it can plug into future budgets or shore up the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System.

Apparently, selling its surplus property wouldn't make the state much money at all, simply because there isn't much surplus worth very much money when you're talking in terms of the state's annual budget or the unfunded retirement liability, estimated to be \$8 billion.

Legislators and other state officials who had hoped to find a windfall, or even a mini windfall, hidden in unused or underused property will have to look elsewhere.

That's not to say the recent scavenger hunt for surplus property was a waste of time and effort, however. A list of all state-owned property and how it's being used has some value, if only to reassure taxpayers the state isn't sitting on a treasure trove that could be put to better use.

Legislators brought the issue of surplus property to the forefront this spring when they included in the budget bill a requirement the Department of Administration evaluate the state's real property and create a list of property, amounting to 10 percent of the state's holdings, that could be sold.

An official with the Department of Administration said the Legislature's request was interpreted to mean 10 percent of each state agency's property was to be listed as surplus.

The problem was the only state property some agencies controlled was the building, or buildings, they were using. And the buildings some agencies were using were acquired from the federal government, which wants it back if the state no longer has need of it.

The Kansas Board of Regents, to meet its 10 percent levy, offered land used for agricultural research at Kansas State University, although it noted some university buildings were on part of the land. Some University of Kansas students might suggest the entirety of K-State is surplus and could be sold. But that wouldn't be realistic, and K-State students might suggest the state would be better off selling KU.

The state does own a vacant lot in Colorado City, Colo., that appears to meet the definition of surplus – it was obtained in 1979 by the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services as part of a child support settlement. The lot is valued at \$1,500 and the state pays about \$45 year a in property taxes on it. If the value is accurate, the state has paid just about that much in taxes since the property was acquired.

Now that sounds like surplus property.

Undoubtedly there are other bits and pieces that could be sold, but the most valuable result of the search for surplus property may be the comprehensive list of all the state's real assets, something no one seemed to have on hand until now.

That in itself makes the exercise worthwhile.

— *The Topeka Capital-Journal, via the Associated Press*

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Careful use keeps shrinking pool wet

The City of Colby is hovering on the edge as I write this. The combination of heat and lack of rain was expected to cause a water warning to be put into effect, meaning over 4 million gallons have been used every day for three days.

Instead, we seem to be holding at a lower alert level, thanks at least in part to the rain we got Thursday evening. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Water supply emergencies were a familiar tune when I was growing up. My home town did not have the benefit of the Ogallala Aquifer, or so it seemed. Our water supply came from two reservoirs. If it didn't rain, the reservoirs got low.

In later years, new wells were drilled 10 miles from town or more, which may have tapped into the Ogallala.

But the summers of my childhood included watering bans, and it seems like they coincided with 15-bushel-an-acre wheat harvests and hail stones as big as baseballs. Or not – memory is a tricky thing, that far back.

One memory stands out, though. On a visit to a town 50 or 60 miles to the south, I was



Marian Ballard

• Collection Connections

amazed that every lawn in town was green. So amazed that I asked about it, and was told that the city had only a flat rate for water and everyone was allowed to use as much as they wanted, as often as they wanted. That was the difference between a town with access to an underground ocean and one without access.

Fast forward to Colby and Kansas.

According to Public Works Director Omar Weber, Colby's water supply normally comes from eight wells in various locations around town. In the winter, the city's water use is less than a million gallons. Yesterday it was 3,753,000 gallons.

Our water doesn't come from a reservoir above ground, built and maintained by the city. It comes from a reservoir underground that

stretches from the Gulf Coast to South Dakota, with tight controls on who uses what.

Agriculture depends on the aquifer. Cities depend on the aquifer. And while some water percolates back into it, the level of the aquifer has been dropping for years.

Perhaps we take it for granted. After all, this wonderful lake that we drink from is not the kind where you can sit on the bank with a fishing line. It's not a lake where you can stand and see the receding shoreline, as at Bonny Reservoir or Lake Atwood.

It's going to stay hot for the foreseeable future. It's going to stay mostly dry.

Let's all do our part as good citizens and exercise care in the amount of water we use. Green lawns are pretty, but they're not as important as green crops. Let's take care not to use more than our share of the pool we live over.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

Election money criticism legitimate

It must have been the title of the book that caught my eye.

I've always enjoyed wandering through bookstores and their stacks of hidden treasures. One day in Rio de Janeiro years ago I was indulging in this favorite pastime when I came across a book entitled "Fidel and Religion," by a Brazilian priest named Frei Betto. Maybe it's odd title was too intriguing to pass up, and I bought it.

The book was the result of conversations that Betto had with the Fidel Castro over a couple days in Havana back in the mid-1980s. It didn't change any of my negative impressions of Cuba from a previous visit, but the work did offer interesting insights into the Cuban leader's thinking.

One particular point from the book has returned to mind frequently in recent years. When asked about the lack of democratic elections in Cuba, Castro defended his system and criticized the influence of money and special interests in American elections. His criticism was legitimate this time.

The U.S. Congress has become increasingly dysfunctional. No one seems willing to compromise for the greater good. Much of the reason points back to the chase for campaign cash. Given that over half the money many congressmen use to fund their campaigns come from special interest political action committees, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that the pursuit of political action money increasingly trumps the search for good public policy. With discipline-enforcing party leaders controlling the spigots for special interest donations, members are less and less willing to reach out to the other side in search of common ground.

And then there's our presidential race. Instead of preparing for grassroots Tea Parties this year, Republicans spent the second week of April marking the coronation of Mitt Romney as their presumptive nominee. On April 11, rival Rick Santorum dropped out of the race, effectively handing the nomination to the former Massachusetts governor. Could it



Alan Jilka

• A Voice of Reason

be that big money triumphed over grassroots campaigning?

Indeed, one could argue that Romney won the nomination by winning the battle of the Super PACs. 2012 will mark the first year that our citizenry will feel the full effects of the Citizens' United Supreme Court decision that allowed corporations to spend unlimited amounts on political campaigns. Disclosure requirements seem to be somewhere between lax and nonexistent.

Romney's better-funded super PAC, "Restore our Future," carpet-bombed his nearest opponent of the week with attack ads. When rivals complained he feebly noted that a candidate is not supposed to have contact with or coordinate advertising with super PACs. How long will candidates have to say that with a straight face?

The brave new world of super PACs ushered in one particularly notable distortion this spring. Newt Gingrich, who won only two primaries, was able to continue his campaign long past where it should have ended based on voters' judgment. As long as Nevada billionaire Sheldon Adelson continued funding his "Winning our Future" super PAC, Gingrich continued campaigning.

President Obama has criticized the Citizens United ruling early and often. But he also recognizes the new reality created by the court decision. The Obama campaign has helped launch Priorities USA Action, which will assist in making the case for another term for the president.

Wall Street Journal correspondent Jeremy Singer-Vine is making a credible effort to track Super PAC spending this election cycle. But

the spending numbers listed on the page seem to sanitize this type of activity. For the television viewer buried in attack ads, no relief will be in sight until Nov. 6, especially for those with the misfortune to live in a swing state.

There's got to be a better way to elect our leaders. The Founding Fathers can be forgiven for not envisioning television, radio, PACs and Super PACs when they wrote our Constitution and enshrined our commitment to free speech in the First Amendment. But we're evolving toward the best government that special-interest money can buy.

The brittle system developed by the Castro brothers will disintegrate upon their passing. Hopefully we can update our system to accommodate the realities of the 21st century and make our government more responsible to its citizens.

Alan Jilka is a former Salina city commissioner and mayor. He was the Democratic nominee for Congress in the 1st District in 2010.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

