



Free Press Viewpoint

Open government better for everyone

A couple of recent happenings here illustrate pitfalls public officials face in dealing with the Kansas Open Meetings Act.

One involved an appointment to an open seat on the City Council. From a political or a practical viewpoint, almost nothing went right. We saw no intent to violate the law, but its spirit was trampled.

The mayor breezed through the newspaper office, saying there was a special council meeting, but the topic was “a secret.”

Huh?

Turns out, the city manager had hired a councilman to fill a vacancy as public works director, supervising one of the city’s biggest departments. The councilman appeared to be qualified, the appointment appeared to be legal, but his resignation took not just the public, but most of the council, by surprise.

Few knew there was an opening on the council, and no one had a chance to show interest in the seat. Several council members expressed displeasure. The mayor had gone to a former councilman and asked him to return. The appointment – a good one – was approved after some animosity.

The agenda for the meeting reached the newspaper late, so there was little or no notice to the public.

Was there a violation of the law? Perhaps. The city manager said she’d sent the agenda out in time, but the e-mail address for the paper contained a mistake. The notice bounced back.

More importantly, the voters and anyone who might have been interested in the council seat were bypassed, violating the spirit and intent of the law, if not the letter.

Better that the mayor had announced the resignation and vacancy and asked for applications, then waited two weeks to make the appointment. He would have seen all the candidates. He might have chosen the same person, and no one said his choice was poor. But everyone would have had their say.

It’s no joking matter, though, because if there is a violation of the Open Meetings Act, decisions can be declared void and those responsible, including council members, fined \$500.

In another instance, county commissioners attended a meeting put on by the Economic Development board. They did not meet as a board themselves. Someone complained.

Was there a violation of the law? We think not. The presence of a majority of the commission does not make a commission meeting. The session was called as an Economic Development meeting. Adequate notice was given. The commissioners were there to take part, but not to do county business. They discussed and made their decision later, at a regular county meeting.

Nonetheless, the county clerk took care to announce a county commission meeting when, a week later, all three commissioners planned to attend a social event put on by another entity.

A good idea? Probably not. It’s one thing to announce that all three will be at the same place, but to call that a special meeting might be bad. It technically would allow the commissioners to vote on county business over cocktails.

But you have to give the county an “A” for trying.

Public officials and taxpayers alike should remember the Open Meetings Act is a law with practical goals. The idea is to let the public watch how and learn why decisions are made. The spirit of the law is open government.

That’s why, while neither involved bad motives or an intent to get around the act, the city gets a scolding and the county gets kudos. It’s all about keeping your cards on the table and playing fair with the voters. Because they pay the bills.

– Steve Haynes

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Sharon Friedlander - Publisher
sfriedlander@nwkansas.com

NEWS

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

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard@nwkansas.com

Sam Dieter - News Reporter
colby.editor@nwkansas.com

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

ADVERTISING
colby.ads@nwkansas.com

Kathryn Ballard

Advertising Representative
kballard@nwkansas.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design
khunter@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Office Manager
rschindler@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Richard Westfahl - General Manager

Jim Jackson, Jim Bowker, Gary Meyer, Pressmen

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Eggs multiply behind refrigerator door

I don’t keep chickens, since it’s illegal in Oberlin unless you have an acre or more, and our lot barely holds our house, garden and a few trees. But boy, do I have eggs.

They seem to grow in the refrigerator.

First there was the dozen from Carolyn. She raises chickens in Norcaturn, and usually has plenty of extra eggs, which she is willing to share with co-workers.

These are good, farm fresh – well at least small-town fresh – eggs with wonderful yellow yolks from chickens that get to scratch in the dirt, eat bugs and have a good ol’ time around the yard.

Then there is the dozen from the “egg lady.” I have no idea what her name is, and I’m not sure that Steve does, either. She brings eggs to the *Colby Free Press* off and on. Everyone there saves their egg cartons in anticipation of her visits, because her eggs are, like Carolyn’s, fresh and wonderful.

Then there’s the dozen from the grocery store. They are factory eggs from chickens that lay eggs for a living and don’t get to wander around outside, where they could get eaten by foxes and badgers, chased by dogs or get their feet dirty. They all eat perfectly balanced



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

chicken food and their eggs have a standard light yellow yolk – nothing to write home about, but pretty nice to get when the egg lady doesn’t show up and Carolyn forgets to bring eggs to Oberlin.

So, last week there I was. Carolyn had forgotten my eggs on Monday, so I bought a dozen. On Tuesday, Carolyn showed up with two dozen. Pat, the office manager said she could use a dozen, so she took one and I took one.

Now I had two dozen eggs for a household of two people. That’s a few more than two people who aren’t big bacon-and-eggs-for-breakfast eaters can eat in a reasonable time.

Then Wednesday, Steve came home with a third dozen. The egg lady had struck, and he had put in his order weeks before.

What do you do with three dozen eggs?

‘PowerPoint makes us stupid’

I told my students to take out their pencils and paper and “draw with me” as I sketched an outline of basic insect anatomy on the board. Barely a hand moved. This was unusual because this was an upper division class in insect identification at a Chinese university. And Chinese students are by habit very obedient.

One small problem was that many had not brought notebooks with paper to class.

The larger problem was that many had become PowerPoint-addicted. They were accustomed to their teachers projecting fully-complete and complex illustrations. They were conditioned to passively observe and memorize. They did not know how to build up concepts themselves.

“You learn in your arm as you draw the structures,” I say half jokingly. But there is a teaching truth: blackboards, white marker boards and overhead projectors are clearly superior when it comes to building concepts.

With a quiz every day, nearly every student was bringing notebook paper and pencils by the third class.

“PowerPoint makes us stupid” is a quote from Marine Gen. James Mattis, the U.S. Joint Forces commander in 2010. The military’s fiasco with PowerPoint came to a head and made the front page of the *New York Times* on April 27, 2010. War presentations had become so complex they were incomprehensible. *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Bumiller reported Gen. McChrystal as saying “When we understand that slide, we’ll have won the war.”

Additionally, “Brig. Gen. H.R. McMaster,



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

who banned PowerPoint presentations when he led the successful effort to secure the northern Iraqi City of Tal Afar in 2005, followed up at the same conference by likening PowerPoint to an internal threat.”

The view of those military commanders was that the “rigid lists of bullet points” are a problem because PowerPoint “stifles discussion, critical thinking and thoughtful decision-making.”

“Death by PowerPoint” is not just a military phrase. It accurately describes this major snooze-generator in high schools and universities. Freshly-minted professors often enter their first classrooms proudly armed with a detailed PowerPoint outline packed with illustrations taken from the Internet. And they stick to their projected scripts regardless of their students’ questions and misunderstandings.

We formerly derided the aging professor who read from class notes that had yellowed over decades, unchanged from his first class. Today, some young professors use technology to make the same mistake, sometimes reading their PowerPoint slides verbatim (yawn).

And to achieve boredom and lack of learn-

ing in the first degree, some young professors even print off class handouts that have mini-pictures of their full PowerPoint sequence, thus “freeing” the student from the onerous task of taking notes – and actually learning something.

One (now retired) colleague who would never use PowerPoint, closed her office door two hours before each class and wrote out her class outline afresh, modifying it for the unique upcoming class and updating both the science and the examples she would use. Teaching is communication. Different students require different communication. But PowerPoint standardizes the message, forcing the student and the soldier down one path. These scripted presentations substitute for carefully-studied and polished presentations, curtail eloquence and dumb down the message. Again, according to the *Times* report, the military actually refers to the PowerPoint bullets as “dumb dumb bullets.”

Every semester that I enroll students, I have several advisees ask, “Is there a section that doesn’t use PowerPoint?” If the students know it’s inferior, if the generals know it has problems, then it is time school administrators let professional teachers get back to using the media that they know work.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Where to write, call

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774
roberts.senate.gov/public/

U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran, 354 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510 (202) 228-6966. Fax (202) 225-5124 moran.senate.gov/public/

U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp, 126 Cannon House Office

Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124. Web site: huelskamp.house.gov

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW10th St., Room 225-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us

State Rep. Rick Billinger, Docking Building, Room 754, Topeka Kan., 66612, (785) 296-7659

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