



Free Press
Viewpoint

Sunshine’s needed
for good governing

Since it’s Sunshine Week, it’s a good time to talk about the Kansas Open Meetings Act, sometimes called the Sunshine Law, which requires public meetings in this state to be announced in advance and open to the public.

Maybe the most important section of this law is the first, which declares open meetings to be “the policy of the state.”

Oddly enough, this law is and has always been unpopular with some elected public officials. You’d think as our representatives, they’d want the public to know what they are doing and many do – but there’s a strong undercurrent among those few who’d just as soon we didn’t.

This is not a problem we’ve seen in Oberlin or Decatur County. Public meetings here have been conducted pretty much in compliance with the law over the years, because officials have cared enough to follow the law, and because they’ve had good legal advice.

Elsewhere, however, that’s not always the case. The law comes under attack from officials who chafe at its restrictions. One that’s often cited is the basic rule that a “meeting” includes any gathering of a majority of a given commission, committee, council or board where public business is discussed.

Because a majority of a county commission is two, commissioners are particularly sensitive to this rule, which also includes telephone calls and e-mail discussions.

One claim, being repeated in the wake of Gov. Sam Brownback’s ill-starred meeting for legislators last year at the governor’s mansion, is that members at a “social gathering” such as a party or wedding might be breaking the law if they talk. That’s just not true; they would have to be discussing public business with a majority capable of making a decision (together or in a “serial meeting”) to break the law.

Besides, the governor’s meetings, where he invited the members of whole committees, then talked about his policy goals, were hardly social events. He’s not covered by the law, however; he’s not a member of a board or commission. And the legislators were OK as long as they did not discuss what he said during the sessions.

Still, it was one of those times where the appearance of impropriety could have been avoided by just inviting a few reporters – or some taxpayers.

This year, however, the Sunshine Law is under attack in both houses of the Legislature, with bills aimed at easing the definition of a “meeting.” One (SB200) would soften the definition to require “substantial discussion” of issues and even votes. HB2336 would change the definition to exclude “social gatherings,” even, apparently, if the purpose is public business. Neither bill has moved, but there’s always the danger they might.

The law, as it stands now, works, and we see no reason to weaken it. It’s not about inconveniencing elected officials, but about allowing voters to see and hear what’s going on. So, for Sunshine Week, we say, just let the sun shine on Kansas government. – *Steve Haynes*

Write us

The *Colby Free Press* encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

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@nwkansas.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.

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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



Finance or feline, the tale/tail goes on

You could call this column an update on finances and felines.

Does anyone remember the euros I gave to oldest daughter and son-in-law for Christmas and Hanukkah?

I gave \$200 in euros to the children because they were planning a trip to England. It was only later that I learned that they still use pounds in England, but the kids didn’t get to go on the trip anyway. Talk about your star-crossed gifts.

Then I learned last week that the story has a second chapter, even weirder than the first.

One of the reasons the kids didn’t go to England is Nik’s sister, who lives there, was planning to come over here at the same time, which she did.

After she went back home, her mother Julie decided to go visit her in England and they both went to France. Thinking this was a great opportunity to get the foreign money spent, Felicia sent Julie the euros by Priority Mail.

The in-laws live on the coast of Georgia about three hours from Augusta, where the kids live. It should have taken that package one, maybe two days to get to them.

However, Julie left the country before that piece of mail arrived. In fact, it took five weeks



Cynthia Haynes

- Open Season

for the euros to travel a few dozen miles down the Savannah River. Nik’s mom was back home by the time it got there.

Oldest daughter just shakes her head, but her younger sister says that it’s a sign. Terrible things will happen if anyone ever tries to spend that money, she says.

Well, at this rate, we’re all pretty safe.

The second story this week involves Molly Monster, our hard-headed cat.

When she was young, Molly found out that while the pet door only allowed cats to exit the house, the laundry vent was big enough for her to crawl back in through.

It took Steve and me a long time to figure out why the laundry hose kept getting unhooked from the vent and the basement kept getting showered with lint. Or who let the kitten back in?

Then one day, Molly ate a little too much for lunch and got stuck in the vent. We had to call the vet over to extricate her. She never tried getting back into the house through that particular “door” again.

This last week, however, she started showing up when neither of us remembered letting her back in the house. Then we noticed it was cold, really cold, in the kitchen.

After some investigation, we discovered that she had forced open a basement window that doesn’t latch well. She was getting us to let her out or using the pet door, then coming back in through the window.

That cat is too smart for her own good.

The window is now closed and has a large cookbook and two bricks against it. So far, that has been enough to keep the cat from using her new entry. But, where will she strike next?

Will the euros ever get spent? Will the cat find another way into the house?

Stay tuned for the next installment of “Finances and Felines.”

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@nwkansas.com

Charter school rankings biased

On Kansas Day, Jan. 29, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools released its annual rankings of state charter-school laws. Kansas ranked fourth from the bottom or fourth from the top, depending on whether you are a fan or foe of charter schools.

This National Alliance is an advocacy group in the business of promoting charter schools – just as tobacco companies would rate states on the number of smokers.

Unfortunately, we live in an era when schools are terribly over-regulated – good intentions but bad policies. Good teachers are constrained in how they can teach. One contradiction built into the charter school concept is that we must allow exceptions from well-intended regulations so these special schools can function better.

I know enough frustrated teachers and ex-teachers that, given the chance, we could form a school that returned professional decision-making to each teacher and again excited students to learn. So why would I oppose charter schools?

Diane Ravitch describes a similar motivation for the origin of charter schools in her book, “The Death and Life of the Great American School System.” Both a Massachusetts professor, Ray Budde, and the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, independently suggested how groups of teachers could run experimental schools within regular schools to better teach students who were not learning in the regulated environment.

However, this 1988 proposal for teacher-led experimental schools-within-schools was hijacked by the voucher movement. Shanker withdrew his support in 1993. (The voucher movement appeals to many who wanted to use tax money to send their children to private or parochial schools. The courts continue to rule against this entanglement.)

Private enterprise folks also embraced charter schools, believing that competition is



John Richard Schrock

- Education Frontlines

always good and improves product quality. But school is a public good (similar to policing, fire fighting and national defense) and not a product. It also assumes there is an excess of qualified teachers so that every student will end up with superior teachers, an assumption every rural superintendent recognizes is false.

But what are the “criteria” that place Kansas near the bottom for this National Alliance (or near the top for professional teachers)?

“Kansas’s law needs improvement across the board,” said Todd Ziebarth, lead author of the report.

Kansas does not allow many authorizing routes for charter schools, he noted.

“First, the local school board must approve it,” Ziebarth said. “Second, the state Board of Education must approve it.”

Supporters want more routes to charterdom. They also want more authorizer funding, complete alignment with their pro-charter model laws, operational autonomy and operational and capital money.

Kansans have been pro-education ever since our state was settled. The obvious problem is that charters would eventually shift the best teachers and resources to elite voucher schools. Shanker realized at an early stage that its purpose was to undermine, not support, public education for all.

The National Alliance claims: “Charter school studies that use the best data and the most sophisticated research techniques show charters outperforming comparable traditional public schools.”

Of course they cherry-pick their data, as do

some charter opponents.

The best discussion of the many comparative studies is again from Ravitch. Representative is a Stanford University study of 2,403 charter schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia that concluded 37 percent of the students had learning gains below public schools, 46 percent were no different and 17 percent showed significantly better growth.

In the end, the charters would tend to pull out the good teachers, students and resources and leave behind public ghetto schools.

The rural states of Montana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska and Vermont were not included in this survey because they make no provisions for charter schools. Perhaps it is time for Kansas to simply take charter schools completely off the table and join our common-sense brothers to the north.

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.

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