

# commentary

from other pens...

## Utility companies want tougher 'cold weather rule'

**The Manhattan Mercury on cold weather rule:**

The Kansas Corporation Commission will have a tough challenge when members begin rewriting the so-called "cold weather rule."

That's the policy that prevents utility companies from disconnecting gas and electricity service between Nov. 1 and March 31 for customers who haven't paid their bills.

The challenge will be preventing utility cutoffs for people who are poor and who do the best they can to pay their bills while making sure the utility companies aren't being ripped off by people exploiting a well-intended rule...

Indeed, the KCC agreed to consider rewriting the cold-weather rule after turning down a request from Kansas Gas Service to require customers to pay their outstanding balance before receiving winter gas service...

The rule isn't the main problem, though utility company frustration is understandable. Customers now are required to pay just one-twelfth of their balance (slightly more than 8 percent) to get reconnected... Utilities and KCC staff consider 15 percent or more a fairer figure...

Citizens Utility Ratepayers Board (CURB) is right to insist that any proposal to change the rule distinguish between people who are content to exploit the system and those who are poor and who pay what they can.

If the KCC errs, it must be in keeping honest people warm, even if that means a few folks who deserve a dose of cold reality slip in.

**The Garden City Telegram on the Legislature's inactions<**

With all the talk during the legislative session about the money crunch, you'd think lawmakers would be diligent and prudent when it comes to spending on themselves. Not so.

Because the Legislature didn't get its work done in the prescribed amount of time, they'll be heading back to Topeka to work overtime. The 11-day wrap-up session will cost taxpayers nearly \$300,000 in legislative salaries and expense reimbursements.

One lawmaker, Lynn Jenkins, R-Shawnee, says she won't accept her paycheck for the wrap-up session. It's a modest gesture and one that the rest of the legislative body should adopt. Why reward tardiness?

The Legislature is going to get paid for working the overtime it created itself by not getting its work done on time...

Children look to adults and will learn from what they see. They'll pick up on the values adults exhibit.

They're taught to look to their elected officials as leaders, people to emulate. That's how politicians posture themselves when currying votes.

But alas, we've seen myriad examples to underscore the necessity to not put politicians on a pedestal.

Maybe Jenkins can serve as a beacon of light for the those who want to find virtue in an elected representative.

By forgoing her paycheck, she sends a positive signal to her constituents, indeed all Kansans, that lawmakers shouldn't exacerbate a problem they've been elected to solve.

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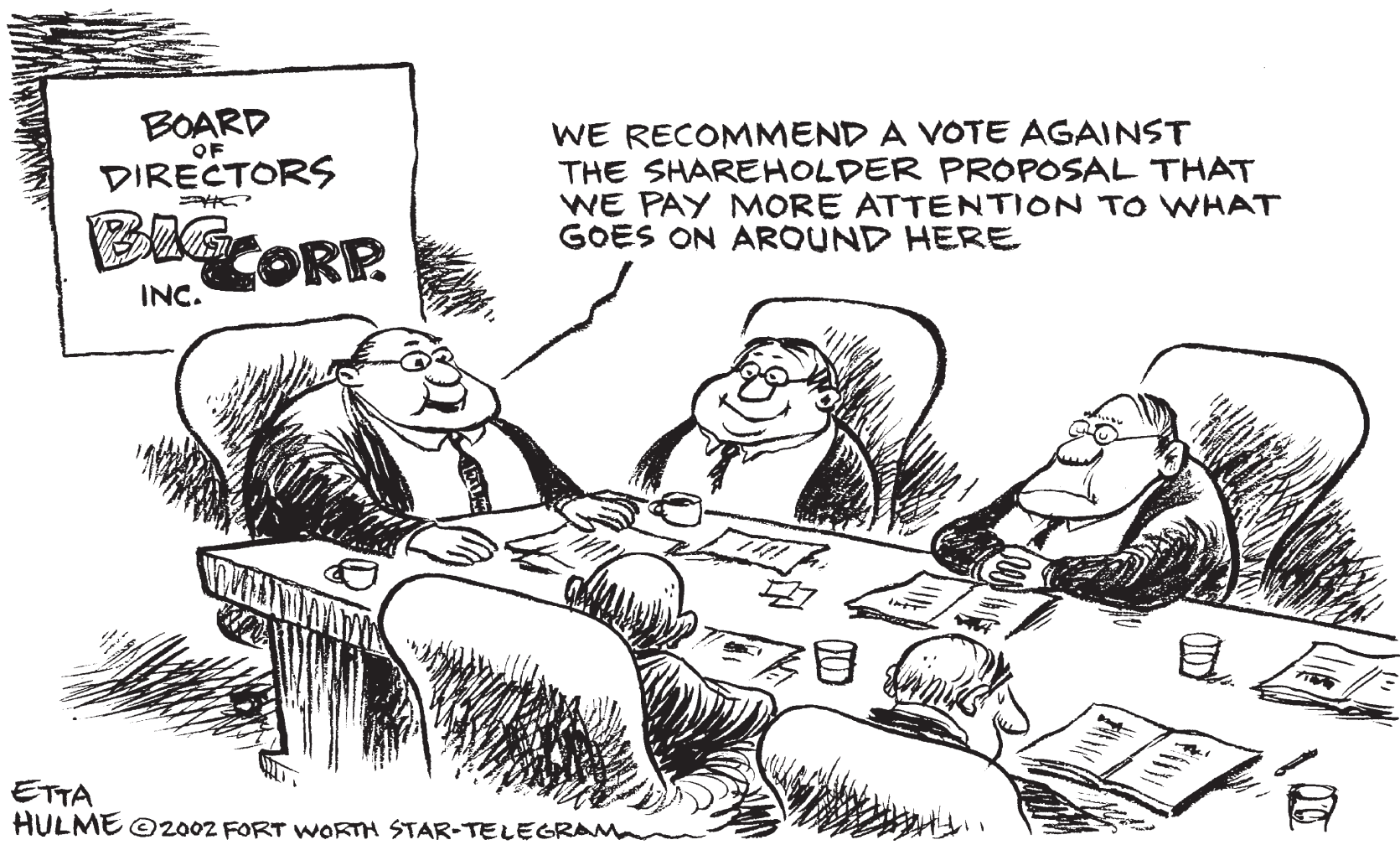
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## I enjoy writing — it is fun, instructional

I don't know about you, but I enjoy writing.

Recently in a class, we were asked to divide into small groups. Then we were to read and re-write the Bible's Book of Jonah in our own style.

Try doing that with a scripture passage some time. It can be fun and instructional.

Here's the one my group wrote: "Headlining today's news is a story of a man named Jonah who mysteriously appeared in Ninevah.

He claims to have spent three days in the belly of a whale.

We had only his version of the preposterous story until we were able to interview sailors from a ship bound for Spain.

"These men had experienced an unusually great



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storm that threatened to capsize their ship. They verified that Jonah was indeed also on the ship.

Jonah confessed to them that because he had disobeyed direct instructions, his Lord had stirred up the waters. Jonah felt they and the ship would be saved if he were thrown overboard. The sailors swear they hesitated to do this, but when all other measures failed, they threw him into the sea.

The waters immediately became calm.

"The sailors were happy and amazed to find Jonah alive on the shores near Ninevah. Jonah spent his time in this town proclaiming destruction of the city within 40 days unless the people and government repent of their evil ways.

Amazingly, the people have listened and are wearing sackcloth and ashes to indicate a change of heart. Even the king has changed. Surprisingly Jonah has left the city to pout.

"This reporter feels that no further corroboration of this story is possible without confirmation by Jonah's God, who is unavailable for comment."

Hey, don't be too critical. We only had 20 minutes to work on it!

## If you know something we should cover call us

Once in a while, we should have this little chat. Down here at the paper, we are always looking for news. We need your help. Without a tip now and then, we have no idea what's going on.

If you know about something you think ought to be in the paper, by all means call us. Call us now. Call us sooner, rather than later.

One of the most disappointing things that happens is when someone stops an editor on the street and says, "Why didn't you cover such and such last weekend?"

I think people sometimes believe that we just know everything because we work at the paper, which would be nice. But not likely.

We try to keep up, of course, but the way we find out about most events is someone calls us and clues us in. And we appreciate that. We really do.

Any community has way too much going on for one editor to know it all. One rule we have is, if someone thinks it's important enough to tell us about, it should be in the paper. It might be an item or a mention in the calendar. It might be a Page 1 feature. But if you give us a call, or drop us a line, or send an e-mail, we'll try to get it in.

All we need to know is the basics of what is going on. We'll write the story. Even if you bring us something all written up, it's not likely we can use it as is anyway.



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If the item is about a person, whether it's a graduation, an award, an anniversary or a wedding, by all means, bring a picture. But be sure it's sharp and clear, so your son or aunt won't turn out to be a blob. We can't run blobs in the paper. Nor can we run big pictures of people lined up against a wall, passing checks, shaking hands, holding plaques or doing something else posed and static. In the interest of getting everyone's story in, we try to stick with people and faces.

Do us all a favor, though. Call today, not the day of the meeting or event. There aren't very many of us, and we get booked up. When someone calls and invites us to a luncheon starting in five minutes or a school event in 10, it's more than likely that no one will be able to go.

In fact, there are times when we won't be able to go even if we want to. We have deadlines to meet and other events to cover. Sometimes there is breaking news, a fire or storm or whatever. Sometimes reporters even have personal plans, though

it's not common. We'll get to whatever we can and always try to get a story in the paper if we can't be there, but the sooner you call, the easier it is to do the right thing.

It comes down to this: You need to let us know what is going on. The sooner you call or write, the sooner we can make plans to help. And we do want to help.

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Said it before, but it bears repeating. If you can't sign your name, why bother?

A steaming letter floated in last week from someone who thinks the school board it not doing so great.

It sets out events over the last couple of years, all reported at the time. It's well-reasoned and logical, a good representation for the author's views. It might even be right; who knows.

But it won't see the light of day, because the author was afraid to sign it.

Unless people care enough to get involved, nothing will change. Just talking about problems out of the public eye won't do it.

That's the way the world works. You have to care enough to put your name on the line, as the current school board members have, or you're not going to be part of the process.

That's why they're making the decisions today — because they care.

## The French connection

WASHINGTON — To this American, the political news from France carries a whiff of the 1930s. After decades of fearing the European left, we suddenly confront the ugly face of the right.

The results of last week's French presidential elections showed all the old pre-World War II elements: anti-Semitism, hatred of minorities, armies of the unemployed voting their bitterness at a tired political elite they accuse of betrayal.

Pay attention here. The Fifth Republic, created by the great Charles de Gaulle, is beginning to act like the Third Republic: that weak, defeatist, hopelessly cynical republic that fell so quickly to Adolf Hitler.

The face on the poster is that of Jean-Marie Le Pen, rightist candidate of the ominously named "National Front." Le Pen won 17 percent of the vote last week, second only to incumbent President Jacques Chirac, who won with barely less than 20 percent. The two now face each other in the May 5 runoff.

Le Pen's politics (which are strong), not his chances for victory (which are weak), loom as the issue here. Why would French voters, famous for their bourgeois practicality, cast so many ballots for someone who (a) cannot win and (b) speaks so bluntly against immigration and the street crime he connects with it?

One obvious answer is that the emergence of a large, unassimilated immigrant population from North and West Africa, both areas of former French colonization, is causing a severe challenge to a society famous for its ethnic, cultural and linguistic chauvinism.

The second: The center-right and moderate-left political parties have failed to address the country's social and economic problems. As we have learned here in America, those who see their jobs and way of life threatened do not make the best liberals.

The third: Le Pen knows how to talk, especially



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to the French. During the campaign, he called himself "the candidate of the French people against the candidate of the system." Afterward he came off even stronger.

"We are witnessing the toppling of a decadent, corrupt and ossified political system," he said after his stunning second-place finish that saw him outdraw the well-known Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin.

What's been the response from the French establishment he has humiliated before the world?

Typical. Chirac says that he will refuse to debate Le Pen. He says it is not "possible" for him to meet with someone so intolerant, so hateful.

Once again, the establishment will use the tool of moral superiority against the weapon of populist bitterness. Having failed in the primary balloting, it is going with the same gambit in the general election.

With a stupid strategy like that, I predict that Le Pen will double his vote on May 5, proving once again that a candidate with something to say, even if it's ugly, beats the one merely clinging to office.

But needless to say, the emergence of an angry European right presents a potent danger. Back in the 1930s, the whiff of fascism was followed by its horrid reality. Antipathy toward ethnic minorities led to their official extermination. Here at the dawn of a new century, the grand hope is that the political moderates of right and left will beat the extremists in meeting the real political demands of soci-

eties facing the double whammy of high unemployment and massive immigration.

Chris Matthews, author of "Now, Let Me Tell You What I Really Think" (Free Press, 2001) and "Hardball" (Touchstone Books, 1999), is a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and the host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels.

### berry's world

