

# commentary

from other pens...

## West Nile is here; no need for panic

### The Hutchinson News on West Nile:

News last week that the West Nile virus had made its way to Kansas set off alarm bells around the Sunflower state.

While there's no need for panic, people should take reasonable precautions. ...

The CDC reports that even in areas where the virus circulates, few mosquitoes become infected with it. Furthermore, even if bitten by an infected mosquito, less than 1 percent of people who become infected will turn severely ill, let alone die.

Nevertheless, the thought that something as common as a mosquito bite could lead to illness or death has rattled Kansas. ...

Given the disease's relentless progression across the United States, particularly including its presence in neighboring Oklahoma, Missouri and Nebraska, it's no surprise that the West Nile virus arrived in Kansas.

But public health notices indicate that mosquitos transmit other serious illnesses, such as three other encephalitis viruses potentially affecting humans, as well as Dengue Fever, Rift Valley Fever and Yellow Fever.

It made sense before last week's West Nile virus headlines for people to wear mosquito repellent and take other precautions.

It makes even more sense now.

### Great Bend Tribune on cell phone tax:

You lose control of your car and go off the road.

It's night.

You're in an area you aren't too familiar with.

Luckily you have a cell phone with you and you are not too injured to find it and use it.

The only problem is, you can't tell the emergency dispatcher you contact where you are.

If you are lucky you have this accident in a part of the state where there is triangulation equipment, so experts can use the signal from your cell phone to determine your location.

If that is not possible then you better hope you can figure out landmarks to tell to the dispatcher or you will wait until someone finds you.

And that can be too late.

That has already happened in Kansas and the tragedy is that with the right equipment it need never happen again.

Now emergency officials are looking to the state legislature to support cellular phone taxes that will help fund the purchase of such equipment.

What we are seeing in Kansas is a shift in how we communicate.

More and more people are relying on cell phones, even at home.

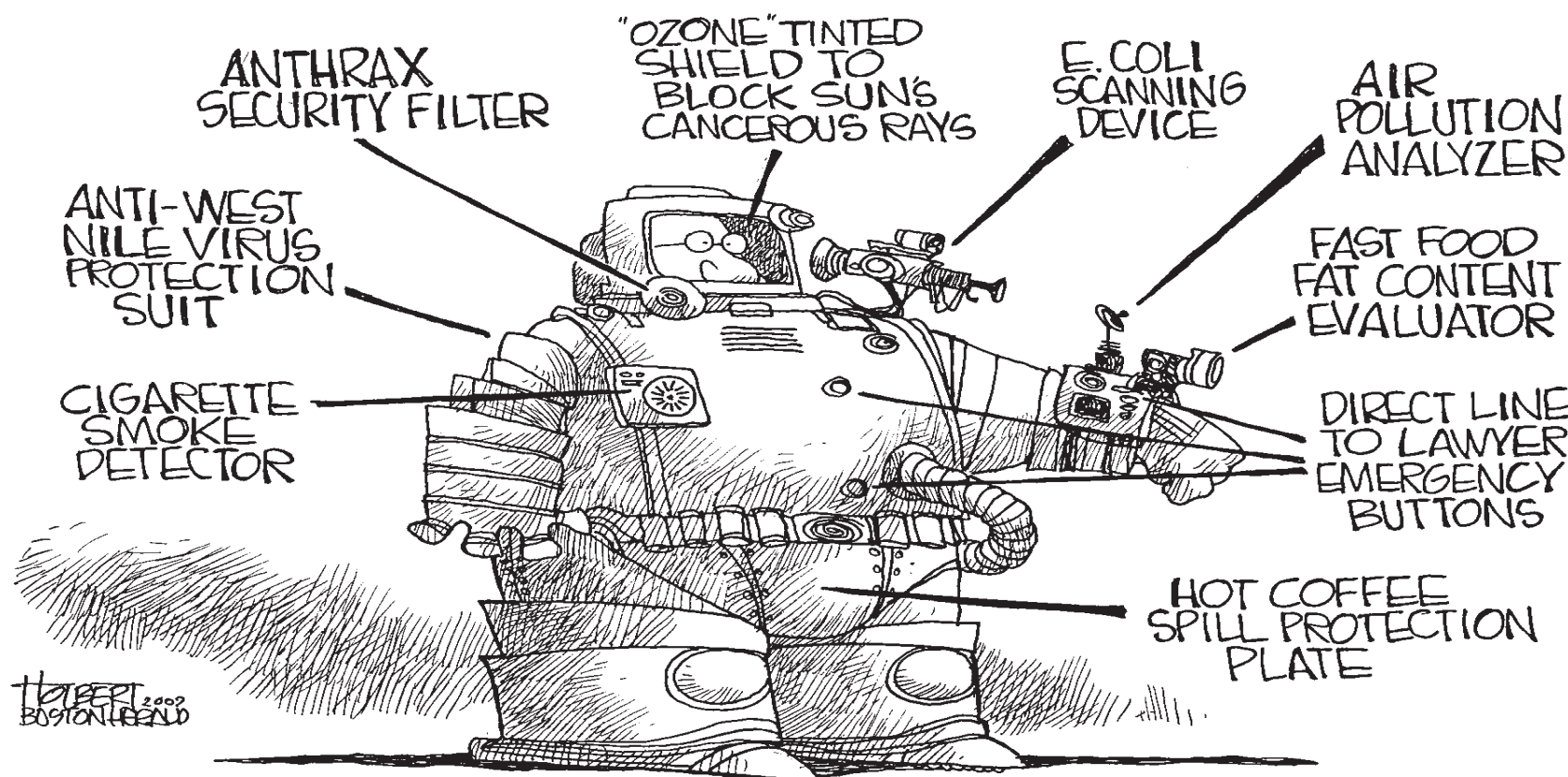
That means they are not contributing to the land line phone tax that supports emergency communications.

We need the emergency communications.

Someone is going to have to pay for it.

Maybe those who use it, even if they use it from a cell phone, ought to be kicking in.

Just a thought for our legislators.



## THE NEW "AMERICAN COLLECTION" FROM CALVIN DECLINE When facts collide with the activist's cause

The Northern California Cancer Center sits in a nondescript industrial park in Union City, a few minutes off the 880 freeway. The scientists work quietly in separate small offices crammed with three-ring binders and stacks of paper. They spend their days looking for clues, for connections, for even one tiny piece of the picture that advances the confounding jigsaw puzzle of cancer.

So when the results of the long-awaited study of breast cancer on Long Island, N.Y., hit newsstands last week, the NCCC epidemiologists — like cancer epidemiologists everywhere — examined the data like detectives at a crime scene.

One thing became clear to them right away:

The controversial results would further strain the delicate relationship between the hard-working activists who raise money for cancer research and the scientists who carry it out.

The Long Island study found no solid environmental link to breast cancer. The seven-year, \$8 million project concluded that a woman isn't any more likely to get breast cancer if she has high levels of four toxic chemicals in her blood than if she has low levels.

This is not the conclusion that the Long Island activists, or other environmentalists, expected when they pushed Congress to mandate the elaborate study. It is so contradictory to their long-held assumptions that they are unwilling to accept the findings.

They remain convinced, as do many reasonable women across the country, that the high rates of breast cancer in their communities are the result



joan ryan

• commentary

of toxins. They have vowed to keep pushing scientists to find a way to prove it. They believe only then will the government clean up the environment and save women from this awful disease.

Tina Clark, an NCCC epidemiologist studying breast cancer, understands and admires the activists' drive to find a cause. She talks about the amazing women she has met from breast-cancer organizations who have saved so many lives and pushed forward so much valuable research.

But Clark can't ignore the hard facts of the Long Island study, which affirms results from previous studies. So she gets frustrated when breast-cancer organizations use up limited research dollars vigorously pushing an environmental hypothesis that has yet to yield productive results. In the meantime, other promising theories go untested.

"Environmental health is really important," says Clark, taking a break from crunching the stats on her computer. "But it doesn't seem to have much to do with breast cancer. It might cause any number of other diseases, but so far we haven't seen much of a link to breast cancer. With the best set of tools at our disposal (in the Long Island study), we

didn't show an association."

Clark has been looking closely at Marin County, which, like Long Island, has an alarmingly high rate of breast cancer. Despite pressure from some breast-cancer organizations, she isn't looking at the environment of Marin but rather the lifestyle and genetics of its mostly white and affluent residents.

Does hormone-replacement therapy play a role? Birth control pills? Delayed child-bearing? Alcohol consumption? What is the cumulative effect of this combination of factors?

"My hope (after the Long Island study)," Clark says of her relationship with Bay Area activists, "is that we can all still stay together and keep our eye on the ball — which is to reduce the burden of this cancer in our communities."

Medical research needs both activists and scientists. Activists get scientists to consider unusual but promising possibilities. They get politicians to pour money into organizations such as NCCC so the Tina Clarks of the world can do their important work.

I was one of those who assumed the key to breast cancer would be found in our water or soil or air. I still believe the toxins in our environment harm our health. But it's time to separate environmentalism from breast cancer. They are different crusades. Theories and anecdotes and circumstantial evidence have their place. But in the end, with so many lives at stake, science must triumph over suspicion.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@schronicle.com.

## Gas 'n' Go away



jim mullen

• the village idiot

I ran into Gus at the Gas 'n' Go filling up his pickup. (Bumper sticker: "For a small town, there sure are a lot of jerks.") Actually, the word was a lot stronger than jerks.) The entire time he pumped he complained about the price of gas, how it's all the government's fault and that they're in cahoots with the oil companies.

We went in to pay and all the while he kept complaining about how he's getting ripped off and how do they expect the little man to get ahead with the price of gas being what it is. As he's complaining, he picks up a \$1 strip of buffalo jerky, a \$1.50 cup of coffee, a 99-cent snack cake, a \$5 pack of cigarettes, a \$2 bottle of fancy water and \$5 worth of lottery tickets. And he's complaining about the price of gas?

At \$2 a quart, the bottled water is four times more expensive than gasoline. To make gasoline they had to find oil, pump it out of the ground, put it in a tanker and then refine it. The water came out of the tap. Which one should be four times more expensive than the other?

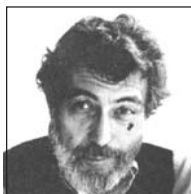
I've figured out that it's not the price of things that make people crazy, it's the change in the price of things that bothers us. As long as jerky is a dollar, nobody will say anything. If it were \$1.40 one week and 85 cents the next, people would be outraged. When I lived in the city, every time they raised the price of the subway a nickel people screamed and howled as if they'd been stung by a rogue cop. While they were ranting about the cost of public transportation, they'd be busy writing out a \$2,500 rent check for a studio apartment half the size of an RV, as if that was the most sensible way

to spend money in the whole world. I thought I was getting a bargain when I only had to pay \$250 a month for a parking space. "Who did I know to get such a deal?" my friends would ask. It was a front-page story when movie tickets in Manhattan inched up from \$9.50 to \$10 at some movie theaters. It was only a 50-cent jump but it crossed some imaginary mental price barrier.

I remember reading about it in a Starbucks while I drank a cup of custom Kona blend thinking, "Ten dollars for a movie? I'll pay ten dollars for a movie the day I pay three dollars for a cup of coffee." Oh yeah. I just did pay \$3 for a cup of coffee. Obviously, I won't be missing many movies. At \$3 a cup, coffee is running me \$48 a gallon. It'd be much cheaper to drink gasoline. And then I'd have plenty of money left over for lottery tickets and cigarettes.

Jim Mullen is the author of "It Takes A Village Idiot: A Memoir of Life After the City" (Simon and Schuster, 2001). You can contact him at Jim\_Mullen@entertainmentweekly.com

## The Children left behind



nat hentoff

• commentary

A recent national poll by the Public Education Network and the newspaper Education Week revealed that, next to jobs and the economy, education is the most pressing priority for Americans. And, indeed, there is a profusion of books and articles on the need for educational reforms.

But how many Americans know — or care — that, as Michael Rebell pointed out in Education Week (April 24), "Over 70 percent of African-American and Latino public school students in the United States currently attend predominantly minority schools." So much for the glowing promise of the Supreme Court's unanimous 1954 decision, Brown v. Board of Education, declaring segregated public schools inherently unconstitutional.

Rebell focused on the crucial reason so many children are left behind: "The inner-city schools attended by most of these minority students receive substantially less funding and have fewer qualified teachers, larger classes, and vastly inferior facilities than schools attended by more affluent white students in the surrounding suburbs."

Often overlooked by school "reformers" is that fact that there are many poor white and American Indian children in this nation who are subject to the same bleak futures as black and Hispanic youngsters in inferior schools.

In the 19th century, Horace Mann was the champion of the common school — publicly supported, nonsectarian and committed to teaching youngsters how to become active citizens in a democracy. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 1900, he achieved a great deal in Massachusetts and in the rest of the country.

But that dream has faded. The poll by the Public Education Network and Education Week shows that many Americans recognize that crucially unequal financing of public education is at the core of the need for reform. A majority of those surveyed — 53 percent — want elected officials to protect schools from budget cuts.

As Education Week notes, this strong concern is manifested "at a time when most states are reducing spending because of declining revenues." Nonetheless, the majority of those polled wants "early-childhood education, class-size reduction programs, teacher training and teachers' salaries to be shielded from cuts."

In my view, one way to persuade more taxpayers to protect and increase school budgets is to institute a clear, enforceable system of accountability for teachers and principals. And that means, despite teachers' union opposition, pay based on the actual achievement of students.

As Rebell emphasized, a number of state supreme courts are also recognizing that equal-education opportunity requires equitable financing of public schools, "particularly in those cities and rural areas where generations of children are being left behind."

Sounding like Mann, in Rose v. Council for Better Education, the Kentucky Supreme Court has

reminded that state's taxpayers that the delegation to the 1891 state constitutional convention intended to ensure that "the boys of the humble mountain home stand equally high with those from the mansions of the city. There are no distinctions in the common schools, but all stand upon one level."

But in this century, they still do not stand on one level — girls, as well as boys. And that's why, in Claremont School District v. State of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Supreme Court declared: "Given the complexities of our society today, the state's constitutional duty extends beyond mere reading, writing and arithmetic. It also includes broad educational opportunities needed in today's society to prepare citizens for their roles as participants and potential competitors in today's marketplace of ideas."

Nonetheless, on June 26 of this year, a panel of the Appellate Division of New York State's Supreme Court ruled — as The New York Times reported — that in terms of spending on public schools, the state "is obliged to provide no more than a middle-school level education, and to prepare students for nothing more than the lowest-level jobs."

New York City Schools Chancellor Howard Levy said, "The constitutional standard cannot be that children are entitled to be menial laborers."

Or as Oliver Twist said, "Please sir, may I have some more?"

In every state, the common school cannot offer the opportunity for a meaningful future if every child does not have a chance to "stand equally high with those from the mansions of the city."

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights.

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(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: [daily@nwkansan.com](mailto:daily@nwkansan.com). Advertising questions can be sent to: [gdnadv@nwkansan.com](mailto:gdnadv@nwkansan.com)

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$25; six months, \$42; 12 months, \$79. Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$30; six months, \$45; 12 months, \$80. By mail daily in Kansas, Colorado: 12 months, \$115. (All tax included.)

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The Sherman County Herald  
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