

commentary

from our viewpoint...

Holding the session to the 60 day limit

After last year's marathon disaster in Topeka, there'll be a real movement this year to cut the Legislature back to just 60 days. Some people will say that's not enough time, but we think it's more than the House and Senate require to get done what's important.

And what isn't important probably shouldn't get done. Last year, the Legislature put in more than a week of overtime. With the clock running on their salaries and expenses, that cost thousands. Since the state is broke, we certainly can't afford any extra legislating.

That means just cutting the session isn't enough. The members abused the current 90-day limit last year, and they'd be just as likely to overrun 60 next year.

We also need to eliminate any extra pay or expense money for members. If they stay past the deadline, they'd be on their own nickel.

We bet that won't happen too often. Only if the governor calls a special session to clean up some unfinished business should there be any extra pay, the members would have to appropriate the money.

Somebody is going to say that the Legislature isn't going to have time to get anything done in 60 days, but that's just so much BS. Last year, and every year, the members spent the first two months posturing and didn't get around to any serious business until March. That's the way it usually works.

Members are supposed to be citizen-legislators, and it's not good for them to be in Topeka too long. They get to feeling important. They are, but they shouldn't act like they know it.

In 60 days, the Legislature can do everything it did last year, and if the members work at it, they might be able to balance the state's budget.

We're not saying it's going to be an easy year. The state faces a budget gap nearing a billion dollars. Everyone has promised not to increase taxes and not to cut education, so there won't be many decisions to make.

Cut the posturing and the squabbling with the governor, and they'll be home in no time. And we'll only have to read about it for two months instead of four.

The change might save the state a little money, too, what with expenses and heating the big chambers. But that's not the real point.

As voters and taxpayers, we want the Legislature to get its work done and go home. We don't need the delays and carping that have marred recent sessions.

So go ahead, cut the session. But do it right, and take away the automatic overtime for long sessions.

That's what we need in Topeka. Less bluster and debate, more common-sense solutions. — *Steve Haynes*

Letter Policy

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Fun window shopping in Columbia, Mo.

The National Newspaper Association moved its offices from the District of Columbia to the City of Columbia last year, and I like it a lot better.

If the meeting that Steve needed to go to last week had been in Washington, I would have stayed home. It's just too expensive to fly to Washington for a meeting I'm not even going to attend.

Columbia, Mo., is another story. The only extra cost was my food — or so Steve figured. Silly boy.

The hotel room was a double. It didn't cost any more gas to get both of us there, and I had to eat anyway and if he were out of town, I'd probably eat out.

I encouraged Steve to think about all this. I never used the word "shopping" until we got there.

Now, you have to realize I don't mean clothes shopping. I don't really like to go clothes shopping, and I see no reason to go all the way to Missouri when we have some very nice shops right here in western Kansas. There is very little in clothing I cannot buy at home or in a nearby town.

That doesn't mean I didn't look while walking through Dillard's and past Lerner's and a dozen other shops in the mall. It only confirmed



cynthia haynes

• open season

my suspicion that there are more ugly clothes in this world than I want to think about.

Who in their right mind would buy a pair of lime green slacks with black polka dots the size of saucers on them?

Of course, these things are the Christmas leftovers, and like all leftovers, they get a little much after awhile.

Another problem I noticed about the clothes in most of the boutiques I passed — no one over 25 years old or 100 pounds can wear them.

I was 25 once. I was even 100 pounds once, but not since before I was 16. (My first driver's license listed my weight as 119 pounds.)

My husband always thinks I should be able to wear these outfits that have no middle. I bless his blindness, but I refuse to wear anything that would show that I have NO bellybutton ring and NO tattoos.

I spent all day at the Columbia Mall and spent about \$100 on books. That's right, 20

minutes strolling through Dillard's to get to the main hallways, another hour walking up and down the halls looking in windows with an occasional excursion inside, and six hours in the book store.

It was heaven. I'm addicted to books. I love to read. If I had lived in the Middle Ages, I probably would have tried to join a monastery so that I could have been around the books they wrote by hand.

As it is, I just bide my time and when I'm somewhere with a bookstore — the Columbia Mall has a Barnes and Nobles — I go nuts.

I have books upstairs, books downstairs, books stored in spare bedrooms, books beside my chair, beside my bed, under the stairs, in bookcases, behind doors, on shelves, on the floor, in the corner, on the television and in the bathroom.

I've got books I read as a child, books I've read in high school and college, books I've read since I've been an adult and books I'll never live long enough to read.

I love them all. And now I've got another dozen to add to my horde.

Steve says I'm a bookaholic. Maybe I'll buy a book on the subject.

The trend setters



jim mullen

• the village idiot

The big topic of conversation at the Liar's Table in the Big Pig Family Diner was the news that an Applebee's was opening a half hour away in Trout Creek. The Big Pig is the only restaurant to speak of in a 20-mile radius around our farm. They're open from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day. As long as you're in the door by 7, they'll feed you. They'll sweep the floor around you and fill up the ketchup dispensers while you eat, but out here in the winter that's as good as a cruise ship floor show. And you'll get just as sick. I'm starting to think some people show up at 6:55 p.m. on purpose, just to watch them start turning the chairs on to the tabletops.

In the morning the old timers sit at the Liar's Table (named for obvious reasons) to tease one another and spread the gossip. No order is ever written down, no check will ever come; when you've drunk about as much coffee as you can stand, you tell Ruth Ann what you had and she rings you up. Someone will take your place at the table the moment you get up.

The Big Pig serves big food to big people. The breakfast special is a five-egg omelet with a side of sausage. The sausage is the size of a hamburger. You get two. I'm 5 foot 11 and weigh 200 pounds. When I go to the Pig I feel anorexic. Often I am the smallest person there, and that includes women and children. That

feeling won't last long if I keep eating this stuff. Anything that's not deep fat fried is barbecued. Sometimes it's deep fat fried and barbecued. Those are the vegetables.

"My sister was in an Applebee's once," said Carmine. "She said they have salads the size of this plate."

"And that comes with your dinner?" said Vardon.

"No, you gruesome, old fool, that IS your dinner."

"A salad. That's all they make, salads?"

"No, you can get other things, I'm just saying my sister says they have these big salads. They are so big that they are a meal. They put chicken on them and whatnot."

Sammy, the 13-year-old busboy, was listening to this while filling the saltshakers. Sammy has long, thin blue hair on the left side of his head and the right side is shaved clean. He always wears a black T-shirt that has the name of his favorite band written across it in letters that look as if they're carved in crumbling

marble. It says "Drops of Spit." I'm hoping he owns several of the exact same T-shirts, but then, that's very optimistic on my part.

Chef Bob makes Sammy wear a hairnet, but since he has to push up all the blue hair from one side to the shaved side to make it all fit, he looks as if he has a big blob of cotton candy on his head. It is not the "don't mess with me" look he had in mind.

"I've had a salad before," he volunteered. "I wouldn't eat another one. Tasted like grass. Cows eat grass. When I want grass, I'll eat a cow."

Carlton didn't think Ruth Ann should be worried about the Applebee's taking too much business away from the Big Pig. He adjusted his John Deere baseball cap and said, "Oh, it'll get your trendy crowd, but they're a fickle bunch, they'll be back here in no time."

I looked around the half-empty restaurant at the handful of aging farmers wearing Agway baseball caps and washed out Dickey work shirts eating five-egg omelets. Take a black-and-white picture of this and it'd look like something out of the dust bowl. If they're relying on our trendy crowd, poor Applebee's.

Jim Mullen is the author of "It Takes A Village Idiot: A Memoir of Life After the City" (Simon and Schuster, 2001). He also contributes regularly to Entertainment Weekly, where he can be reached at jim_mullen@ew.com



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The Goodland Daily News

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

Member: Kansas Press Association

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nwkansan.com

N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services

(nbetz@nwkansan.com)

Evan Barnum, Systems Admin. (support@nwkansan.com)

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. Advertising questions can be sent to: 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.)

The Sherman County Herald

THE SHERMAN COUNTY STAR
Founded by Eric and Roxie Yonkey
1935-1989 1994-2001

Nor'West Newspapers

Haynes Publishing Company