

from our viewpoint...

Fair, cone zones mark our progress

It is fair week, and all the barricades are gone from 17th Street and North Caldwell.

For once, all roads are open into Goodland, and most of the main roads are in great shape.

The two major city projects from the joint city-county road program being paid for by a special 1-cent sales tax passed last year are mostly done.

"They are open," said Darin Neufeld, engineer from Evans, Bierly, Hutchison and Associates, who handles the city projects, Saturday morning. "They are not totally done, but that can wait until after the fair."

Rich Simon, city public works director, said Friday morning that the contractor was finishing up packing the shoulders on Caldwell, which had been opened from Toelkes to Armory Road. By late afternoon, the road was open all the way to K-27.

Neufeld said he was pleased to get 17th Street done and opened before the fair.

Driving the new pavement is great. Gone are the old bumps and the deep dip at Cherry Avenue and 18th. It took a bit longer that planned to get the east end of that project done, but the reconstruction of that main thoroughfare should last and the new drainage will help reduce flooding between Main and Broadway.

Completing 17th Street ties in the new entrance to downtown on Cherry and gives drivers smooth access to the businesses district. People coming in from the north will find a smooth road from K-27 down to the fairgrounds, and once the mill and overlay is done from Eighth to Toelkes, that project will be completed, too.

Neufeld told the city last spring the projects would be done by fair time, and with a day to spare, that promise was kept.

The City Commission is working on a plan to continue the street improvements with a bond issue of about \$2.4 million. The money would pay for about 12 projects the city staff and commissioners felt were the top priorities.

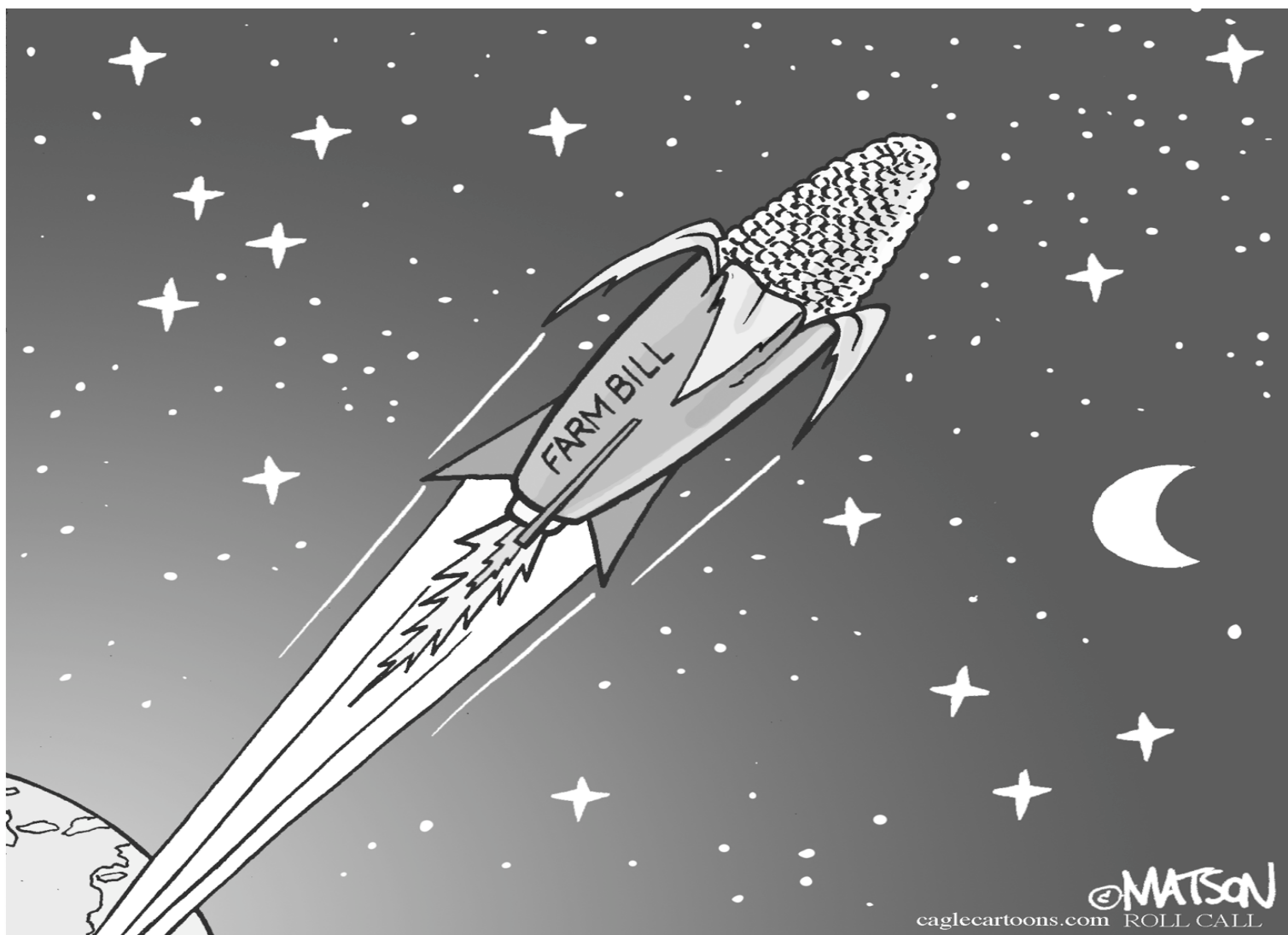
Among the jobs on the list is replacement of all the curb and gutter along both sides of Main from Eighth to 17th. Commissioner John Garcia said he hopes when that project is bid out, property owners along Main will be interested in a partnership with the city to replace broken and cracked sidewalks.

Mayor Rick Billinger said he feels the street improvements are worth moving forward, and he is only disappointed that much of the work in this project will not be done before winter hits again.

The deep snows and blizzards of the last winter put a strain on the city streets, and Billinger said he feels the next winter could produce the same kind of weather.

We comment the commission for continuing the effort to improve the city infrastructure begun about five years ago with the replacement of the brick intersections at Sixth, Seventh and Eighth on Main.

The steps taken so far are showing great results. As we drive the streets to enjoy the fair — even with some rain — we can be proud as citizens of Goodland and Sherman County we have taken initiative to improve our community. — Tom Betz



Boss Dick



will durst

● raging moderate

Alright, I have a message for the American public, and the message is this: leave Dick Cheney alone. He's not answerable to you. Get off his big white furry butt.

You are not the boss of him. Nobody is the boss of him. Dick Cheney is the boss. Of you, me, Bush, Nouri al-Maliki. Gitmo. All of us. He's Boss Dick. And the only reason you're out to get him is because when he smiles he looks like he swallowed a small black child.

And that is just prejudiced people. Doesn't matter that he's keeping this country safe. And the only two ways to do it are his way and the highway. Well, actually, under the highway. Sometimes as part of the highway. Mixed in with the rebar.

Face it: he's better than you. And if you had half a brain in your head, you'd get down on your bony knees, kiss his feet and thank God he's doing us the huge ginormous favor of running this country instead of letting Dyslexic Boy screw things up worse than a dumpster full of coat hangers made out of copper barbed wire.

As for breaking the law, you could not empanel a jury that would find Dick Cheney guilty. Of anything. Because he has no peers. I'm not saying Dick Cheney is above the law. I'm saying Dick Cheney is the law and the least we can do is leave him and his buddies at Halliburton alone to do what they're good at. Making money and burying bodies.

So he's not part of the executive branch of the government. So what? Hey, he doesn't want to belong to the executive branch of the government, he shouldn't have to belong to the executive branch of the government. You've seen the executive branch of our government; would you want to belong to it? It's less effective than spitting tobacco juice at the moon from a skateboard on ice. I got your checks and balances right here. Well, right there, under Dick Cheney's foot, holding hands with individual liberties, writhing in their death throes.

If Dick Cheney wants to be his own branch of government, he's his own branch of government. What's wrong with that? It's his government. So we got an extra branch now. Four is better than three, right?

And the vice president should be able to call it whatever he wants to. The Cheneystatute branch. Who's going to tell him he can't? You? Yeah, you and what Army? The Supreme Court? Ha. Don't make me laugh.

And get those Congressmen to stop bother-

ing Dick Cheney with those silly subpoenas, for crum's sake. He doesn't have to tell you who he's meeting with. You seriously do not want to know who he's meeting with.

Or what they're planning. Or where they're planning on doing it. You'll find out soon enough. Can't you get it through your tiny little heads? If he wanted us to know, he'd tell us. He doesn't want to talk to you or Henry Waxman or Angelina Jolie. He doesn't want to talk to anybody. Why do you think he's always at an undisclosed location?

You want to know the truth? YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH. We need his lies. We cherish his lies. Because his lies are comforting; they allow us to believe what we want to believe. Not to mention being essential to a covert operation. And this whole administration is one big covert operation. And there's no real need for anyone to know what's going on. And that includes me and you and especially George W., who doesn't want to be part of the executive branch of our government either.

Comic, writer, actor, former radio talk show host and mall janitor, Will Durst, knows he doesn't even know how much he doesn't know.

Will Durst is a political comedian who has performed around the world. He is a familiar pundit on television and radio. E-mail Durst at durst@caglecartoons.com.

What is the shape or our airline industry?

How much does Vaughn Cordle know about the state of the U.S. airline industry? Well, the CEO and chief analyst of AirlineForecasts — who has 25 years-plus of experience as a pilot for a major airline — makes a large part of his living selling what he knows about airline finances and economics to hedge funds, government agencies and consulting groups. At the end of a week of airplane horror tales that included raw sewage flowing down the center aisle of Continental trans-Atlantic Flight 1970, I caught up to Cordle by telephone just after he landed in San Francisco — where earlier in the week 400 people on a Cathay Pacific Airways jet had been stuck on a runway for seven hours:

Q: Is this summer going to be as hellish for air travelers as we're being told it will be?

A: I don't think so. The benchmark everyone is referring this summer to is the summer of 2000, "The summer of hell," as some call it. That was about labor issues. This summer we don't have labor issues. Traffic is back up pretty much to where it was in 2000. Fares are much lower. Load factors are at historic levels. So it's much more crowded on planes and less convenient and there are more travel hassles because of security concerns and TSA security checks. So it's a very uncomfortable summer but delays won't be as bad.

Q: What's the airline industry's biggest problem right now — and who or what is to blame for it?

A: The U.S. airline industry is the least-profitable in the world. I believe there are too many competitors. We've been crunching numbers on all the passenger-carrying airlines in the country and there are 34 airlines that produce more than \$100 million in revenue. So it's highly fragmented and hyper-competitive. We estimate that those 34 airlines in the domestic market are coming up about \$8 billion short from earning their cost of capital.

The big 12 airlines account for about 96 percent of passenger capacity. They're doing quite well internationally but it's the domestic market that is not doing so well. The airlines have to crowd more people into their aircraft. Load factors (percentage of a plane's seats that are sold) have gone from about 65 percent a decade ago to in the low 80s and this summer some airlines probably will have 90 percent load fac-



bill steigerwald

● newsmakers

tors. So this means effectively some flights have too many people and they have to turn people away.

Q: Has the airline industry finally figured out how to make profits?

A: No. They're still losing money. This year we estimate that the major 12 or 15 airlines will earn about \$3.5 billion. Now that's better than the cumulative \$35 billion they've lost since 2000, so it is a turnaround year. But the airlines — the money-losing, over-leveraged network airlines (United, American, Delta, etc.) — have had to pull back significant domestic capacity to force those load factors up so they could offset the lower real yields (revenue per passenger carried for one mile). Unit revenue is still about 14 percent lower than it was in 2000 — that's the revenue per available seat mile. But the yields are still 25 percent lower. So the higher load factors mask the real weakness in the airline industry, which is low yields.

Q: The Economist magazine recently said that the best thing governments can do to help the airline industry become more efficient and more profitable is to get out of the way. Do you know what The Economist was talking about?

A: Yes I do. I believe that the airline industry could naturally evolve into a more efficient industry if the government just gets out of the way, lets certain airlines fail and lets mergers and acquisitions occur. It is highly fragmented, hyper-competitive, and there are destructive fare wars. Today there was an article in USA Today that said average fares were 2 percent lower than they were last year. Yet we have 80 or 90 percent load factors this summer. So traffic is back up but average fares are at levels that are not healthy for the industry, hence the financial distress and the exceptionally high load factors.

Q: Can you name a specific airline that really has gotten its act together and is making money and serving passengers well?

A: Oh yeah. We have to distinguish between good airlines and good investments. Most of these airlines are very poor investments, including JetBlue and Southwest, the airlines that do provide high-value service, so that people are generally happy. JetBlue was recently ranked No. 1 in customer service by a couple rating services and Southwest has always been near or at the top in customer service. These are great quality airlines that provide reasonably priced transportation and they do it in a very good way.

Q: Is what Air Canada's experimenting with — offering annual flight passes and charging for specific services — something that more airlines will be doing?

A: You mean the "debundling" of various charges and services? That's a unique strategy which I think more and more airlines are going to have to move towards. The extreme airline model is the Ryan airline model based over in Ireland. That airline, interestingly enough, is the most profitable airline in the world and the most valuable publicly traded airline in the world. Ryan debundles everything and they have very low fares, but they charge passengers for everything. It's the extreme low-cost airline.

Q: Is the future of the airline industry — and therefore air travel for the masses — going to be better or worse?

A: It's going to get worse as long as we have a highly fragmented airline industry. The big major airlines as of the first quarter produced 64 percent of all capacity. They are only viable as long as they have strong international routes to subsidize their domestic operations, which are losing money. I'll give you an example. Continental last year lost half-a-billion dollars in their domestic operations but they made a lot of money in their Latin America, Atlantic and Pacific markets. They made over half-a-billion dollars in operating profits in the Atlantic market alone. Continental's losing a lot of money in the domestic markets, and so are they other airlines, but they need the domestic markets to feed the international routes.

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