

from our viewpoint...

Area needs plants to bring back people

The decision to deny power plant permits for Sunflower Electric in Holcomb has a ripple effect across western Kansas.

Those plants would have brought more people to western Kansas during the construction phase and added more people as far north as Goodland while the intricate transmission lines were built to carry power from the plants through our area into eastern Colorado.

Western Kansas has a growing employment problem that does not show up on any of the Topeka political radars. Without the stimulus of things like the power plants, there are not enough people to fill the existing jobs in our community.

We suffer from dreaded low unemployment. That sounds like a contradiction in terms, but in September, Sherman County had the lowest unemployment rate at 2.8 percent in all of northwest Kansas, and most of the surrounding counties were all under 3 percent. In fact most of western Kansas was well below the 4.2 percent state average.

Those low numbers mean there are not enough people looking for work to fill the good jobs that are open in our county. It is great for those who are looking to move from their existing job to another job that may pay better or have better benefits or even less working hours, but not so good for employers.

Without a good labor pool, one business or organization will find itself looking around and trying to hire good people away from another business to fill openings. It becomes quite a whirlwind pool.

In some cases, the people moving from job to job are not the best candidates. A shortage of good qualified people and the trading of people around can mean the businesses find themselves in the labor market trying to fill the same position again and again.

The idea of growing our own businesses and plants is good, but at some point the community needs to have the influx of an outside force such as what happened to Garden City and Holcomb when Iowa Beef (now owned by Tyson Foods) located a packing plant there more than 25 years ago.

At the time the decision was made, Garden City did not have a large labor pool, but when news of the new plant got out across the state and nation, people began flocking to the area and the unemployment went up almost as fast as the plant. A large number of Vietnamese refugees moved into the area and have become an integral part of the work force and business community.

We hope that is the kind of impact the Goodland Energy Center will have here when the plants are up and running.

A stable economy is good, but without the influx of new people to fill jobs and to add to the labor pool, that economy can become stagnate and slowly turn inward trying to compete within itself. Meanwhile, those can find ways out of the pool — like our young people — leave to find better jobs elsewhere. The outflow reduces the number of potential workers even further.

We need to build more power plants in this country, and putting them out on the plains makes more sense, with all the farm plants growing here that use carbon dioxide — than putting them near the inner city, where they are already adding to the growing pollution problems of the metropolitan areas.

Besides, the people in western Kansas can find better ways to use the bi-products and the people who come with the expansion. — Tom Betz



Fascinated by electronics vending machine

Cynthia was fascinated by the vending machine, and she's not that much for gadgets.

No soda. No snacks. No airline insurance. No tickets.

In a space smaller than one of those closet-type sandwich stands so popular at airports today, this little machine was selling electronics.

Not the cheap stuff, either. Sony headphones for \$50.

Apple iPods for \$300.

Not to worry about exact change. The machines take only credit cards.

You swipe your card, push a button and a new iPod drops out the bottom, all wrapped in plastic.

Just choose your color. I can remember when buying a \$300 piece of equipment was a serious decision, to be talked over with a knowledgeable clerk at the electronics counter.

Now, apparently, people buy an iPod on the way to Seattle.

I'm not sure where you get music to stock it. From your computer, I guess. Transfer the tunes in flight. You could be listening to the



steve haynes

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Beatles over Boise.

We were marveling at this ingenious little beauty when I notice the woman standing next to us. She was even more perplexed by the electronic age that we were.

Cynthia and I were merely bemused. She was kinda lost.

She was, in fact, trying to stick a phone card into the automatic teller machine next to us.

When the machine rejected her card, she turned to us for help.

"Where do you put the card in this phone?" she asked.

It dawned on my what she was trying to do. We had to explain that you just don't find many pay phones in America these day, now that every teenager and grandmother carries as cell phone.

Her English was pretty good, far better than my Danish, which is, even though I am genetically half Danish, not so good. My mother was a full-blooded Dane, but third generation, born in Kansas and the genes alone don't help me much with language.

It turned out our friend and her husband were on the way to Florida to visit her daughter, who works for one of the Danish cruise lines there. She missed her connection and Delta thoughtfully given her a couple of five-minute phone cards to call her daughter.

They just failed to tell her where to find a phone. And despite the terminal's electronic advances, there was no sign of one nearby.

I just offered her my cell phone. I have so many minutes, I'll never notice. From Atlanta, the call itself would be free.

Call complete, she smiles and thanked us. Her daughter made arrangements to meet a later flight. She and her husband were off to their gate, and we headed for our connection.

I never did see a pay phone in that airport, either. But I almost — almost — bought an iPod just to try out that machine.

Bullies, technology and bullets

Bullying isn't like it used to be.

Contemporary bullies are also using technology. They're making nasty cell-phone calls, sending e-mails and text messages and posting embarrassing things on the Internet.

The anonymous cowards.

When I was a kid in the '70s, at least bullies had to put some effort into their work. They were still cowards — they picked on kids who were small and defenseless — but they had to do most of their work face to face.

It's not possible to give a wedgie over the Internet.

That made the bullies vulnerable. There were lots of older kids in our neighborhood who protected us. A bully who roughed us up was likely to get roughed up himself. And bullies feared nobody as they did my sister Kris.

I'm certain one guy still regrets the day he decided to bust up my go-kart. He was a big, fat kid and he laughed and taunted me as he kicked my handcrafted vehicle into pieces — until Kris appeared out of nowhere.

She tackled him from behind and down he went. As he lay on his belly, Kris clenched her fists and pounded with abandon. He blubbered like a baby, forever humiliated in front of the other neighborhood kids. Bullies are generally not as tough as they appear to be.

But now, thanks to technology, anybody can bully.

"Traditional bullying was about boys intimidating other boys by physical force," says Carleton Kendrick, a family therapist and author of "Take Out Your Nose Ring, Honey, We're Going to Grandma's." "But technology has enabled people to bully who otherwise might not have before. One of the biggest trends is a significant increase in bullying by girls."

At the same time the opportunities to bully have increased, the kids who are bullied are more isolated. Families are smaller, neighborhoods are emptier and latchkey kids often find themselves alone.

A lot of kids aren't handling the trend well. "According to various studies, one in three kids is either bullied or a bully," says Kendrick. "And on any given day 160,000 kids are so traumatized by fear and intimidation they're afraid to go to school."

Or worse. A common thread in school shootings during the past decade -- both in high school and college -- is that the shooter or shooters had been bullied.

So what to do? There are no easy answers.

When I was a kid, the prevailing wisdom was to teach kids to fight back. If a bigger kid



tom purcell

• commentary

bullied you, your dad showed you techniques on how to handle him. Even if you lost the fight, the bully generally would earn a respect for you and back down.

But in these nutty times, that might not work. The bully could be packing heat. Or, if a bully is humiliated by the kid he was bullying, the bully's parent might have his lawyer sue.

It's no wonder numerous government and private organizations are promoting anti-bullying campaigns. It's no wonder 27 states have passed anti-bullying laws and nine more are considering them. Or that school districts across America are implementing anti-bullying measures to defuse situations before they

get out of hand.

Nobody knows who or when the next teen powder keg will be set off, but we do know that bullying may be an ingredient that sets the kid off. In our rapidly changing culture, something that used to be dealt with by kids on playgrounds has blossomed into a problem with all kinds of disastrous consequences.

Though even when I was a kid the consequences were sometimes disastrous.

In 1972, a great tragedy shocked our community. A kid who'd been bullied cracked. When the bully showed up at his house one afternoon, the kid opened his bedroom window and shot and killed him with a .22-caliber rifle.

"That's the difference," says Kendrick. "The landscape has changed so radically that if such a thing happened today, nobody would be that surprised."

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