

from our viewpoint...

Feds need to address phone bill cramming

If Congress ever does anything except debate the budget, it needs to change the federal laws which allow unscrupulous scammers access to our phone bills.

Unauthorized charges cost Americans about \$2 billion a year, according to a study by the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-West Virginia), who is leading an effort to change the rules, says these "mystery fees" show up on landline phone bills through a process known as "cramming."

Cramming started after changes in the industry, and federal law, following the breakup of the Bell System monopoly. Sen. Rockefeller blames major phone companies like AT&T (the former Southwestern Bell, or SBC) for not cleaning up the problem.

"It's illegal, it's wrong, it's scamming," he asked at a recent hearing. "Why haven't you cleaned up your act?"

An industry spokesman claimed the companies had made progress, but acknowledged the problem continues.

Scammers get access to the billing system through small firms which supposedly offer some legitimate telecommunications service. They attach bogus bills to home and business accounts, and the phone companies claim they are obligated to include these in your monthly bills. Apparently, they make no effort to scrutinize these charges.

When an odd charge appears on a phone bill, the companies routinely tell people that it's their job to contact the firm making the claim. Services may be described as voicemail, directory service or web hosting, among others.

These firms usually will remove the charge, but it costs the consumer or business time and money to accomplish that. When the charge is small, some people just pay rather than challenge it. One expert described spending 15 hours to straighten out bills for a group of restaurants.

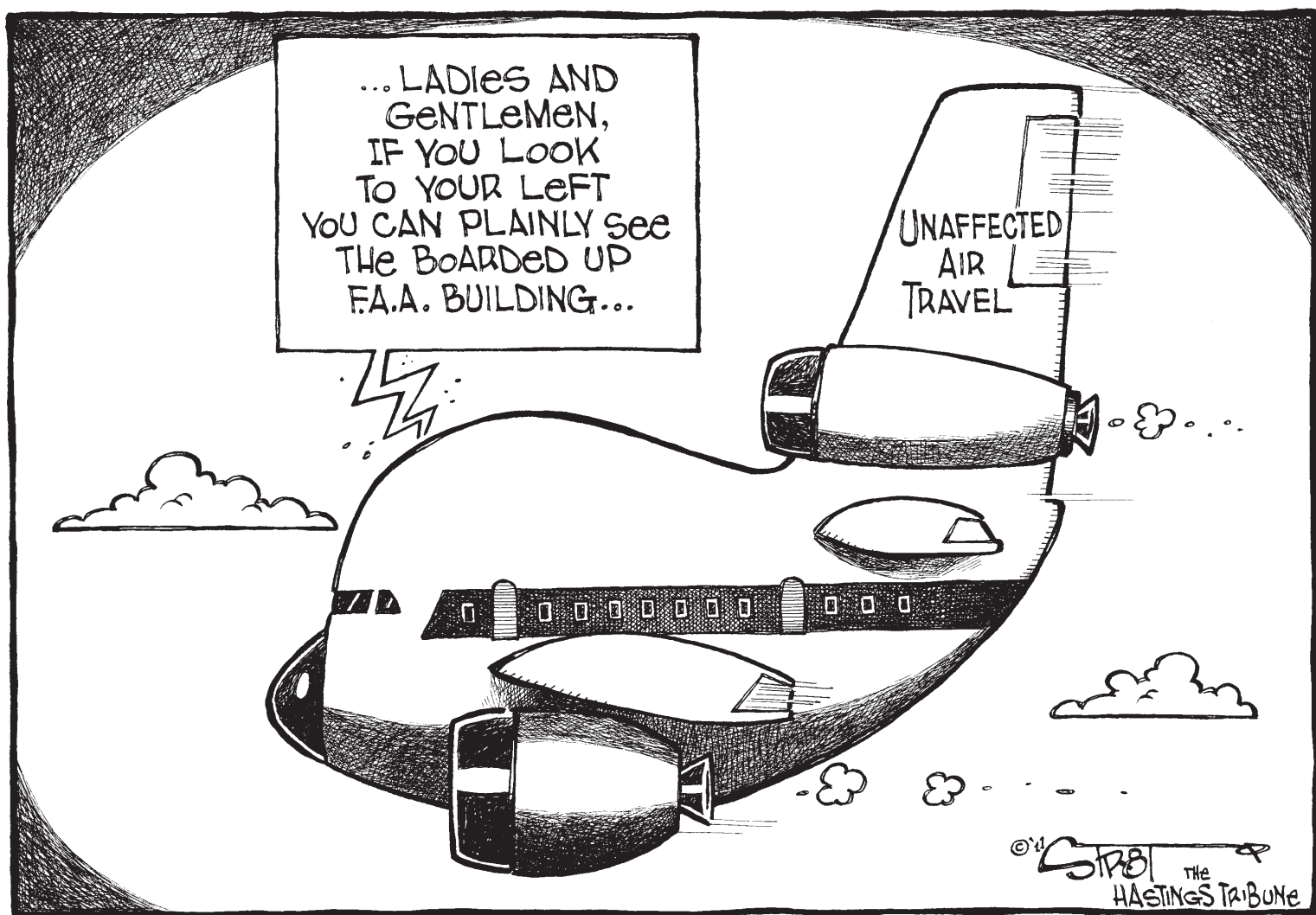
Whatever the case, when people pay, the scammers smile all the way to the bank.

The easy solution, rather than try to make this system work, would be to repeal the law which allows telecoms to piggyback their charges on landline bills. That'd save the big telcos money and save consumers from having to pay for this cumbersome and unworkable system.

Small firms would have to bill people on their own, but the legitimate need appears to be just the tail that wags this big, smelly ol' dog.

Right now, the effort to reform the billing system is bogged down in the general morass of delays in Congress, partisan infighting and the overall budget battle. What's needed, though, is not a reform, but an end to third-party billing on phone statements. It seems that most are bogus, anyway, so "reform" will accomplish nothing.

If you have received a bogus bill and think this system stinks, it's time to write our senators, Jerry Moran and Pat Roberts, and Rep. Tim Huelskamp and ask them to join with Democrats to end this travesty. — Steve Haynes



Residential zoning needs to be preserved

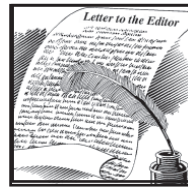
To the Editor:
 We have good neighbors at 803 College. They are independent grain truckers and the best folks to live there in 20 years. They started parking their tractor/trailer on their property along Eighth street.

It's not permitted to park semi's on personal property in areas zoned residential — this is verified. There are zoning codes prohibiting certain commercial businesses in residential areas. Commercial trucking businesses and truck repairing are on the list.

On a Sunday in July, at 8 a.m. the neighbors moved their semi tractor into their driveway 58 feet from our back yard. The tractor engine was running loudly. It wasn't a car across the street or an irrigation engine a half mile away. My neighbor says it didn't happen — it did. Maybe we're talking about different Sundays.

I started calling city commissioners. I got an answer at Annette Fairbanks. I asked if she could hear that (a semi running)? I held the phone over the fence. She said she heard something. I said, if we wanted to live at a truck stop we would have bought a house there. She asked if I talked to Brian James city building and code inspector. I said no this was just a phone call pointing out an issue the city commission needed to handle. I said grain truckers are important to our farm community and we need a location in town where truckers could park other than residential neighborhoods. She said she would talk to Brian James and the city commission. I said I didn't think this was something the commission could handle in 30 to 60 days and alternatives needed to be found before telling truckers to move trucks. John Garcia called me later in the evening and we had a similar conversation. I said my neighbors didn't need to be singled out, but treated like everyone else.

The Aug. 5 edition of The Goodland Star-News said our neighbors were told by the city they could park their truck in our residential neighborhood before they bought the property.



from our readers

• to the editor

This is against zoning ordinances prohibiting commercial use of a residential neighborhood without going through a zoning change. The city website says a zoning change requires 20 days public notice with written notice to all property owners within 300 feet of the property. This wasn't done. Our neighbors bought property based on incorrect advice from the city. We bought our property without a truck stop on the block. It's still zoned residential. We were told it was residential before we bought it and wish it to remain so. Preventing and adjudicating these conflicts is why communities have zoning codes.

I talked to the manager of one of the largest agri-businesses in the community. He said independent truckers hauling for them, are allowed to park behind their agri-business free of charge. They have an electrical plug in. Other agri-businesses may do the same.

These companies may not continue this service long term or provide availability to all truckers needing to park, so the city should consider providing a location. The industrial park near the grain handling businesses is ideal. Great road access, lighted, well traveled and patrolled by law enforcement. This is as secure as trucks all ready parked at Short & Son, multiple sales lots, repair businesses and grain handling companies.

The city granted utility incentives to other businesses in the community and should consider waiving meter charges for plug ins at the new site. This may attract more truckers to the community and should be viewed as an economic development opportunity. Yes they would have to drive to and from the parking site to work like the rest of us, including truck drivers at Short & Son and other agri-business

truckers in that area. Property values, livability and the future progress of Goodland is adversely affected when residential areas are not reserved for residential purposes.

Mike Campbell
 Goodland

To the Editor:
 This letter comes to inform the public of the intended removal of the dioramas from The High Plains Museum.

The Century Family Committee was sent a letter, which I received, stating we had 60 days to respond on our intent of use for the dioramas. After that time the display will be removed from the museum so a car can be put in its place.

In 1987 the dioramas were dedicated after more than a year worth of work, all volunteer labor and lots of money to build. Many people were involved with this project, young and old alike.

The dioramas were built to tell a story of Sherman County. Many teachers and students from Sherman, Thomas, Wallace, Cheyenne and other counties have come to learn of our history from the Kidder Massacre in 1867 to present day farming.

Many of us are trying to find a place to house the structure with no avail. We are afraid it will be destroyed in the removal because of the way it was built at the museum, not to be taken out.

We are trying to save the dioramas and asking you to call our elected city commissioner and or the city manager and express your concern. We need to keep Sherman County History in our museum.

Bill R Wright
 Century Family Representative
 Goodland

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Out of the mouth of babes

Ever have an 11-year-old farmer's daughter give you a tour of their farm?

I did and it was top notch.

Last week I traveled to Dickinson County to meet with Jeff and Charity Bathurst. The young farm/livestock family have six children ranging in ages from 11 to three weeks old — four girls and two boys.

As I pulled up to the farmstead, Jeff and I shook hands and he told me he had to drive to town for parts. He said, I could come with him or his 11-year-old daughter, Emma, would give me a tour of the farm.

I opted for the tour with Emma knowing I'd spend several hours with him in the hay field when he returned. We walked into the house where his wife literally had her hands full with her new baby and five other youngsters.

"Emma, come here and meet John and show him around the farm while I run to town," Jeff says.

Emma and I shook hands and outside we went to tour the Bathurst farm. Tall and slender for her age, Emma sported shoulder length blond hair and blue eyes. "Pretty as a peach," my Grandpa Bert used to say. And bright, articulate and the perfect hostess. I couldn't have asked for a better guide.

As we walked west of their home the first stop on the tour was the rabbit hutch. There I learned more about rabbits than I can write about because of the space constraints of this column.

One highlight Emma shared with me is how to hold a rabbit properly especially when showing them at the fair. She looked me squarely in the eye and they sparkled with enthusiasm, joy and pride as she told me about her family's



Insight this week

• john schlageck

farm.

She demonstrated the proper way to hold a rabbit upside down, snugly while grasping the ears near the base of the bunny's head. Her favorite rabbit was a Blue Dutch breed and gray in color.

"I have three different breeds," Emma says. "I like the different body types, eye colors, lengths of their ears — I especially like to feed, water and care for them."

By the time we finished with the bunny visit, Emma's younger sister, Annie, 9, showed up to talk about their three lambs. Here the girls told me the breed of sheep, age, how much they ate each day and they would one day be used as food for people.

Although I'd never met these youngsters they were as comfortable and at ease with me as if we were old friends or I was a nearby neighbor. Sure, they were still kids, but their manners, hospitality and authenticity was a sight to behold and warmed my heart.

Just a few steps from the lambs we entered the chicken fence where 11 birds were crowing and clucking. By this time, seven-year old Alice had joined the tour and went into the roost and brought out fresh-laid eggs for me to eye ball and handle.

Out of curiosity I asked the girls if they ate these eggs and here's what Emma told me.

"Yes, they're one of my favorite foods," she

says. "My mom thinks there's no difference between our eggs and store-bought eggs, but I think they're better. We know where they come from."

About 45 minutes later when their dad returned we headed for the hay field where their granddad, Tim, was already busy windrowing hay. Jeff fired up the tractor and began baling. By now, two-and-a-half year old Wyatt had joined the farm tour. They all accompanied me as I roamed about the hay field shooting photos and visiting.

All were more than happy to be out in the field where their dad and granddad were working. Not that they didn't want to be home with mom, but what farm kid wouldn't want to be out in the open air and clear blue sky even if the temperature was approaching 100 degrees?

By the way, before we left to go to the hay field, Emma took me inside to meet the latest member of the family, baby Wade. As she took the tiny child from her mother and gently cradled her youngest brother in her arms a smile spread across her face.

"He's pretty fun," Emma told me keeping her eyes glued on little Wade. "I've always liked babies from the time my little sister, Annie, was born. I especially like babies when they have their eyes open because they seem like they're listening."

Out of the mouths of babes come pearls of wisdom.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for more than 25 years. He is the managing editor of "Kansas Living," a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.