

from our viewpoint...

Don't ignore local and state elections

This year, America chooses a president, but the hype created by the Republican primary season – and the hype that will be created by the general – has overshadowed the fact that there are local and statewide elections to consider.

This isn't new. The presidential election always drowns out everything else. You need only look at CNN's website to figure that out. Throughout the primary season and well into last year that page has had a standing election section at the top, which rarely – if ever – gets bumped for anything else.

However, we shouldn't forget that we have every county position up for election this year along with two county commissioners. We also have our state representative and senator up for re-election as well as U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp.

Both State Sen. Ralph Ostmeier and State Rep. Rick Billinger have filed for this year's election. Ostmeier already has a challenger in the form of Norton County Commissioner John Miller. It's hard to say at this point how much of a challenger Miller will be to Ostmeier, an established name running for his third term.

Billinger's been a fine representative so far, but he was not elected by the district as a whole. He was elected by a majority of the Republican Committees from all four counties. We recall how that vote went, with the initial count in favor of Colby City Councilman Dave Voss. When Brenda McCants and Brian Baalman dropped out after the second and third ballots, all their support swung to Billinger. It's a good sign that he picked up most of the support from the other counties (except Thomas), but when he runs this time, he will face a completely different dynamic.

He also faces a challenge of the redistricting process. He told the Rotary Club a couple weeks ago that he might lose Sheridan and Graham counties but pick up Wallace, Logan and Gove. That could completely shake things up. For all we know there could be a young up-and-comer lurking in Sharon Springs just waiting to take Billinger on.

As for the U.S. House of Representatives, no one has filed for that position yet. It's assumed that Huelskamp will run again. He's young and was elected by a landslide last time. In 2010 he also had a huge victory in the primary – despite many pre-election polls that suggested a tighter race – so that could mean no one will dare challenge him for the Republican nod.

We think it's likely that Democrat and former Salina Mayor Alan Jilka will challenge Huelskamp again. He's been shopping his column around the district, which could be an attempt to retain name recognition. Still, it's tough for any Democrat in the Big 1st. That's just how it is.

What we need now are more candidates. We need more people to take an interest in the decisions that affect us. Presidents are important, so are senators and congressman, but so often the things they debate and decide are abstract when you get all the way down the ladder to Goodland. The decisions that most affect our daily lives are those made by our local leaders.

Maybe we have good incumbents, but that's no reason not to run. If you have an idea. If you think you can do a better job. If you don't like the direction the county or the state or the country is going in, the best way to make your voice heard is to get on the ballot.

There are more than enough smart, qualified people in Sherman County, in the legislative districts and in the state to make it a race for each position. The people benefit from those races because when there are two or more serious candidates it gives voters a real choice, and isn't that what democracy is all about?

–Kevin Bottrell

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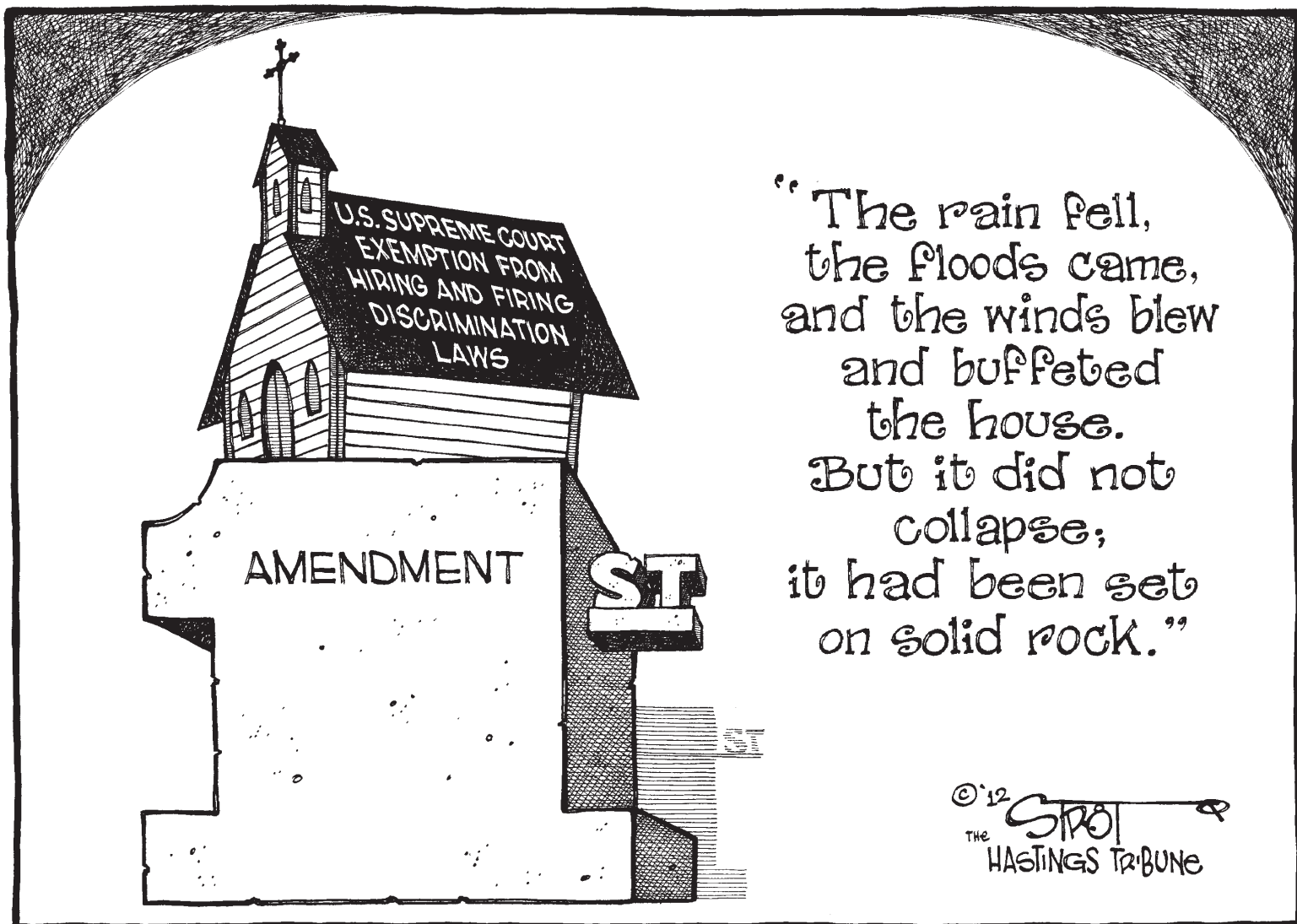
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Preserving rural values and traditions

During the holiday season, I was reminded of how blessed I am to live in a rural state where family values and community traditions run deep. No tradition runs deeper from generation to generation than the tradition of working on a family farm.

However, these rural traditions are under attack in Washington, DC. In September, the U.S. Department of Labor proposed a new rule banning youth under the age of 16 from participating in many common farm-related tasks, like rounding up cattle on horseback, operating a tractor, or cleaning out stalls with a shovel and wheelbarrow. To most young Kansans growing up on a farm, these jobs are just part of their daily routine.

According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, about 98 percent of our country's two million farms are family owned. By working alongside their parents, grandparents and neighbors, young people learn important life skills and values like hard work, personal responsibility and perseverance. They learn how to problem solve and work on a team to get things done. Agriculture is a way of life; but now the federal government wants to change that way of life.

Until recently, farms jointly owned and operated by multiple family members had discretion over the responsibilities they gave their children on the farm. But this new rule would do away with that freedom. The government is proposing to tell farmers and ranchers: "We know what's best for your children, and what they should and should not be doing."

The Department of Labor is trying to do away with successful farm safety training and certification programs. Organizations like cooperative extension, 4-H, and FFA play a



jerry moran

• in Congress

critical role in training and certifying young people to safely carry out farm activities. But the Department has ignored research showing such programs improve safety habits of young people and instead criticizes these training programs for being too locally driven and lacking federal direction.

One would assume before making such drastic changes to farm labor rules, the Department would identify reliable evidence and data showing a need for these changes. But quite the opposite is true. In fact, the Department of Labor admits it lacks the data to justify many of its suggested changes. Furthermore, according to the National Farm Medicine Center, youth-related injuries from farm accidents have declined by nearly 60 percent from 1998 to 2009.

If you ask any farmer or rancher about the importance of safety – they would tell you safety is one of their top concerns. But they would also tell you critical to the rural way of life is being able to train the next generation to safely and successfully begin a career in agriculture. If today's young people are not given the chance to learn at a young age what it takes to operate a farm – we put at risk the future of agriculture in our nation.

If these changes go into effect, not only will the shrinking rural workforce be further reduced, and our nation's youth be deprived of valuable career training opportunities, but

most importantly – a way of life will begin to disappear.

I recently met a student named Audrey Green from Stockton who is the president of her school's FFA chapter. Audrey didn't grow up on a farm, but recognizes the importance of agriculture to the rural way of life in Kansas. She recently participated in a district-wide FFA speech contest and said this about the new regulations: "If the proposed rules do go into effect, the amount of kids involved in agriculture would decrease. I know our one stoplight, two convenience store town would become even more obsolete without the youth who are the future of agriculture."

Our country cannot afford to lose the next generation of farmers and ranchers. Parents and communities should be allowed to look after the best interests of their families and citizens. And local experts should be the ones conducting safety training programs to educate our nation's young people. The future of agriculture depends on stopping this vast overreach of executive authority and protecting individual rights. I have shared my concerns and the concerns of many of Kansas farmers and ranchers with the Secretary of Labor now on two separate occasions.

We know rural America's values are not Washington's values. In the weeks ahead, I will continue to work with my colleagues to make certain this destructive rule does not move forward, so we can protect and preserve our values for the next generation of American farmers and ranchers.

Sen. Jerry Moran is a member of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies.

Experimental program not good

To the Editor:

At this time of year, it is normal to look at what we are doing in our lives and make changes to improve our situation. New Year's resolutions, at their core, are good and intentions to improve our health, our relationships, etc., are usually a step in the right direction.

Change, however, is not always as good as it is intended to be. I am compelled to comment on one: the proposed implementation of Managed Care for Kansas Medicaid programs. I am supportive finding the most efficient ways of doing things; however, I believe including our locally managed long term care services into the State's Managed Care Model will have a negative impact on the lives of people with developmental disabilities.

The State's proposal to move Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas's services for persons with disabilities into an experimental managed care model called KanCare is planned to take effect in January 2013, but it will begin long before that, and the time is now. National insurance companies are currently in Kansas today working with the Administration to bid for these KanCare contracts. Under KanCare, Kansas will shift responsibilities and resources from state and community oversight into private health insurance companies.

Roughly one third of the State's entire budget, under this plan, will be handed over to private health insurance companies to manage and oversee. That includes Community developmental disabilities services such as those offered by the Northwest Kansas group. I am concerned by this. The core purpose of this new approach is to save money, but will it?

Not only do these national companies have little or no experience in serving long term needs of persons with disabilities, they acknowledge there is little to no anticipated savings to be found by including community services under the Managed Care model. Why?



from our readers

• to the editor

Because Kansas has been ahead of this issue for many years, and our current State/Local management model is effective.

In the mid-'90s, Kansas passed the Developmental Disability Reform Act which incorporated many managed care principles into the community service system (capitated rates, quality measurement, service access, eligibility determination and on and on). Under that system, local – mostly not-for-profit organizations like Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas partnered with Kansas to administer long term services for persons with disabilities. Under the current Kansas model, this community system has effectively managed program costs for persons with developmental disabilities and their services.

Here is an interesting perspective:

Nationally, the average cost per person spending (for persons in community services) went up nearly 18 percent (for the period 1993 to 2009). In sharp contrast, the average cost per person spending (for persons in Kansas

in community services) went down nearly 18 percent since 1993.

The Northwest Kansas group and its State and Local partners have worked hard to be good stewards of the resources we have and we oppose and will continue to oppose handing off effective State/Local partnerships into the management of Insurance companies with no experience in our field.

Our group does support and will continue to support the use of those contractors to improve the outcomes for all persons who receive Medicaid medical services. We believe this lies within their area of expertise, and we will work with the Administration to enable that to happen.

Shifting oversight of long term services for persons with developmental disabilities into an experimental program like KanCare in our opinion will place our most vulnerable population at risk, and is therefore not the right thing to do. The right thing to do, for Kansans, would be to urge the Administration to reconsider the direction it is planning, regarding the inclusion of developmental disabilities long term care services under KanCare, and avoid a misstep which could have adverse consequences for many years to come.

Jerry Michaud
DSNWK President

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