

from our viewpoint...

# Orange bracelets fit open government

The Sunshine movement is gathering steam, in Congress and across the nation.

Congressman Jerry Moran of Hays signed up in March as the first House co-sponsor of the Open Government Act, a bill to strengthen the federal Freedom of Information Act.

From a meeting in Washington where the new orange "Govern in Sunshine" bracelets were unveiled, a couple of bags were delivered to *The Goodland Star-News* for us to present to city and county officials.

We were proud to say that everyone we asked to accept a bracelet did so, and on the page you will find the photos of the Sherman County commissioners, plus County Clerk Janet Rumpel, and the Goodland city commissioners plus City Manger Ron Pickman, all wearing their orange bracelets.

Open meetings and open records are vital in a democracy. We all should encourage the most open discussion of public business possible. Every time someone wants to close a meeting, someone should ask if the reason fits the few exceptions in the Kansas Open Meetings Law.

There is some confusion that when editors and others talk about open meetings, they are saying that all the decisions have to be made in front of the public. That is half the answer, but it is more important to allow the public to hear and see how the decisions are reached.

As the Kansas attorney General's office says, "when the discussion begins, you have a meeting."

"If all you see are the decisions, you have not been to a meeting," was the opinion of the Colorado Supreme Court nearly 30 years ago when reviewing a court case where a city council was meeting before the regular session, and making all their discussions, with the votes being recorded later at the "open" meeting.

The county commissioners pointed out a "sunshine" error that the Sherman County Convention and Visitor Bureau made in February when they went into closed session to approve a pay raise for the executive director.

Some of the board members objected to having to do things in public. That is the point of the Open Meetings Law, though, to have the public's business done in the open. Salaries are a big part of the open records law.

Open government should be something we can all agree on. This is about the right of taxpayers, citizens and voters to know what their government is doing. Sure, there are exceptions. They are, for the most part, reasonable.

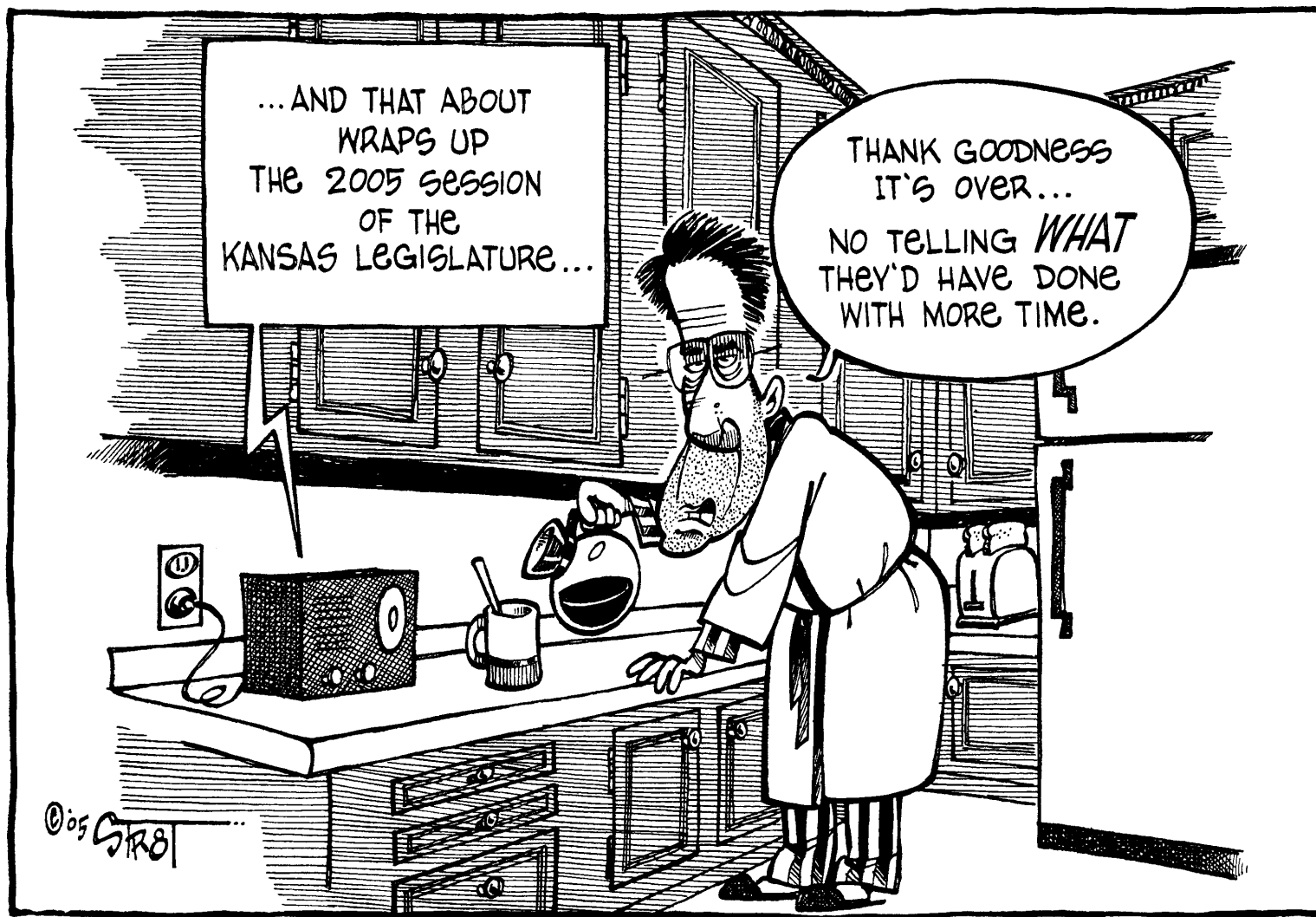
The bottom line is, taxpayers are the stockholders, the owners of our democratic government. The government shouldn't have many secrets from them.

While the press often is seen as the main backer of open government, this is not a reporter's or editor's right. The reporters know the rules and know how to get government information. Ordinary citizens often are the ones shut out by secrecy.

When the average person goes to a government agency and asks for information, they're sometimes met with lack of cooperation, refusal, hostility or questions about "why" they want the documents. Sometimes it's ignorance of the law on the part of a poorly trained clerk. Sometimes, the government has something to hide.

But it just shouldn't happen. That's what Sunshine laws and the Open Government Act are about. That's why we have no reservations about boosting open government.

This is a basic right in a democracy, something we should all believe in. — Tom Betz



## County, city support 'Govern in Sunshine'



Sherman County Commissioners Chuck Thomas, Mitch Tiede and Kevin Rasure showed off their orange bracelets along with County Clerk Janet Rumpel. The commissioners and clerk wore the orange bracelets in support of "Govern in Sunshine."

### The Goodland Star-News

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City Commissioners Josh Dechant, Dave Daniels, Annette Fairbanks, JOHN Garcia and Mayor Rick Billinger showed off their orange bracelets along with City Manager Ron Pickman. The commissioners were presented the "Govern in Sunshine" bracelets by Tom Betz, editor of The Goodland Star-News after the two new commissioners were sworn in on April 18.

### garfield

