

from our viewpoint...

State has a good highway system

Kansas is blessed with a good highway system these days. It's the work of many people, but a couple of governors deserve special credit: Mike Hayden, who gave us the first comprehensive transportation plan, though it may have cost him his job, and Bill Graves, who kicked off the second, current plan.

Hayden inherited a rapidly declining highway system in the 1980s, and set about saving it. The result was an eight-year plan which put Kansas back on top of the transportation world.

He also brought a professional focus to the new Department of Transportation. No longer run by a politically appointed commission, the department was free to focus on facts.

And that has brought Kansas a very good road system. Spending decisions are based on traffic flows and road condition, and our highways are in as good a shape as they've ever been.

Try driving in any adjacent state if you don't believe this. Visitors, from other states, and from around the world, praise Kansas highways.

There is a tradeoff in this focus on engineering, however. It means that the highway system, outside the major metro areas at least, is pretty much frozen as is.

Money goes to maintenance first, and upgrading primary routes second. There is precious little left over to expand the system or promote the economy of any Kansas town. Competition was fierce for the \$100 million a year or so in "enhancement" projects.

This means the status quo reigns. And many towns are on the outside, looking in.

Kansas blessed a small slice of the state when it chose the routes for the Interstate system back in the 1950s. Did anyone then appreciate how much the new freeways would concentrate traffic?

In the years since, roadside businesses and industry both have flocked to the Interstate corridors. The areas along other, once-busy east-west routes have withered. Few new motels and restaurants, fewer plants, have been built.

The Robert Bennett era of the 1970s produced a grand plan for a Kansas freeway system serving all parts of the state, especially the hard-to-drive-to regions of the southeast and northeast.

Some of these roads were actually begun. Isolated segments exist on U.S. 75, U.S. 69, U.S. 169 and even U.S. 36, marked by expensive concrete pavement, four-lane rights-of-way and soaring bridges that carry county roads over nothing much.

With the Bennett freeway plan died the idea of building roads to draw business to poor parts of the state. We traded that for good, basic, solid two-lanes.

In most areas, that's what we need.

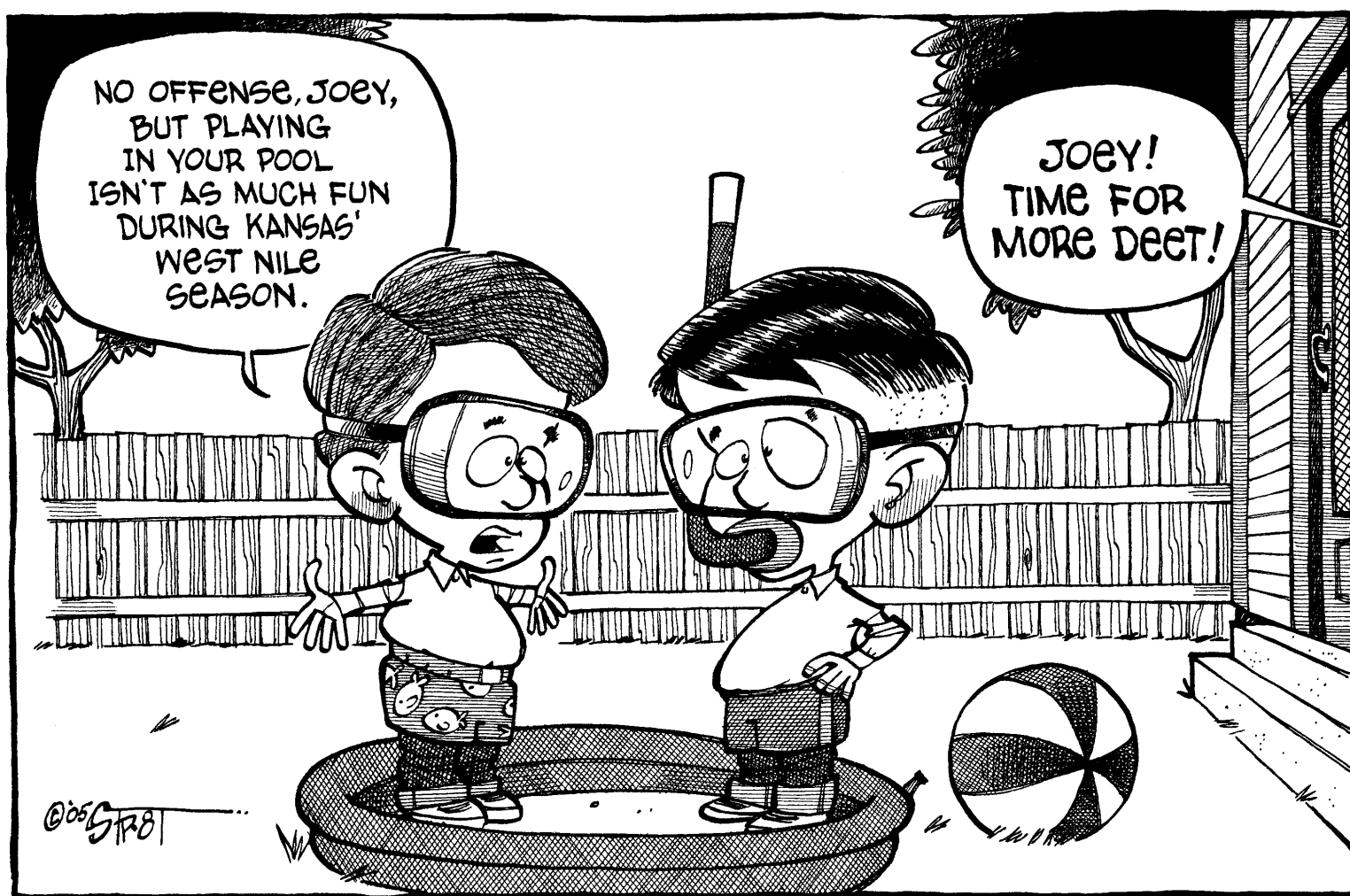
There are opportunities, though, and there are prospects for economic development. U.S. 81 is an example; it's four lanes to the Nebraska border today because of political influence, not traffic. It was built to draw business, and improve safety, pushed by powerful interests along the road.

And that may not be a bad idea. There's evidence that if you build it, they will come.

The rest of the state is watching the U.S. 81 experiment, because there are a lot of places which could use better roads, especially southeast Kansas, where Independence, Parsons and Pittsburg struggle with two-lane access while southwest Missouri has a freeway to Kansas City.

The northern tier of counties along U.S. 36 falls into this category, too, underserved and underdeveloped.

The state could change that. — *Steve Haynes*



Let's talk about Valentine's Day

I don't know about you, but according to my calendar, Valentine's Day has passed.

Oh, well. With all my work, it was really just another day. I even had a meeting that night.

But, to many people, it is a holiday filled with thoughts of love and romance. A friend did send me a card and another friend included a box of candy, all of which I sincerely appreciated. That's really more than I did.

As I get older it is harder and harder to keep up with all the relatives and all the holidays.

So who cares if we talk about Valentine's Day in June.

Valentine's Day. A day to honor your loved ones.

Did you know it began many years ago — probably during the Roman Empire? There are various claims about its origin, but it seems to have been linked to a problem Rome was having.

Men didn't want to go to war and leave their families. So the emperor cancelled all marriages and engagements.

However, that didn't solve the problem.

A few priests, like Valentine (later to be



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named a saint) secretly performed marriages and helped struggling Christian martyrs. For his compassion, Valentine was arrested and sentenced to death by clubbing.

His martyrdom occurred on February 14th, which was the holiday to honor Juno, the Queen of the Roman gods and goddesses. Juno was known as the goddess of women and marriage.

So our holiday honoring love is a combination of compassion, daring and paganism. It isn't a Christian holiday, but our society celebrates it with gestures of love.

So I'll end with a quote about love:

"Love deeply. Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply. You might be afraid of the pain that deep love can cause. When those you love deeply reject you, leave you or die, your heart

will be broken. But that should not hold you back from loving deeply. The pain that comes from deep love makes your love ever more fruitful. It is like a plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to take root and grow into a strong plant. Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence or death, you are faced with a choice. You can become bitter and decide not to love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds.

"The more you have loved and have allowed yourself to suffer because of your love, the more you will be able to let your heart grow wider and deeper. When your love is truly giving and receiving, those whom you love will not leave your heart, even when they depart from you. Those you have loved deeply become a part of you..." (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*).

Don't be afraid to love. And don't be afraid to express your love. God is love. And love is what makes all of life worthwhile.

Turn off the spigots



prairie
writers circle

• julene bair

It is no mystery why Great Plains farmers irrigate. My farming father and grandfathers struggled against the weather odds in our dry western end of Kansas their whole lives. It seldom rained enough, and each year they took a gut-wrenching gamble planting their wheat.

In the late 1960s, technology came to the rescue. My father put in his first irrigation well. With well water, he could engineer his own rainfall and also grow more lucrative crops such as corn and soybeans. When his old heart finally failed him 30 years after he began irrigating, he owned five wells.

Our farm's original well happens to be among those monitored by the Kansas Geological Survey. I visited the agency's Web site recently and was as dismayed by a graph there as I had been watching my father's failing vital signs on the hospital monitor. Both tracked the approach of death — with one significant difference. My father died naturally at the end of a normal human lifespan. We are killing much of the Ogallala Aquifer, draining water that took thousands of years to accumulate.

Without this waste, the water would sustain life for many generations to come.

During his evolution from dryland to irrigated farming, my father became part of a system that can't be sustained, because it depends on burning nonrenewable energy to pump nonrenewable water from this ancient aquifer, which stretches from South Dakota to Texas. Most of this energy and water goes into producing corn that is then fed to cattle.

To grow corn, farmers plowed up more of their grass.

"How else could we feed the world?" my father would say when I lamented the loss.

But he could have fed the world more healthfully and less wastefully if he had skipped the corn and shipped beef directly from his grass to the table. Compared with grain-fattened feedlot beef, grass-fed beef is much lower in artery-clogging saturated fat and contains more omega-3 fatty acids, which are thought to aid cardiovascular health. When we eat meat from grass-fed animals, we profit from their ability to convert protein from a self-renewing resource, the grasses that grew here in the first place.

I used to accuse my father of being environmentally insensitive. He knew that the aquifer was finite and allowed that "they will have to stop us eventually" — they being the government.

"Until they do, though," he said, "I got mine!"

He loved to infuriate me with that response.

I especially hated that the federal farm program underwrote the waste by offering price supports for corn.

But as one of my father's profiteering heirs, now I too am part of the entrenched and inefficient system. Turning off the spigots would reduce the flow of cash land rent into my pocket by two-thirds.

That prospect troubles me, but not as much as other numbers. There are more than 880 irrigation wells in our county. Out of our five alone we have pumped more than 6 billion gallons of water. That's enough to keep the 5,000 people of Goodland, the town nearest our farm, in water for more than 10 years. An aquarium covering a football field would need walls over 2.5 miles high to hold that much water.

Our farm recently signed up for a government conservation program that is helping us cut our water use by 50 percent. But even at this rate, we are wasting water.

The time has come for "them" to stop us — all of us. Instead of price supports for corn, Plains farmers need help switching back to dryland crops or grass-fed livestock. Among the dryland crops may be seed sources of oil that could be turned into biodiesel, reducing our nation's dependence on fossil fuels.

I would vote for any legislator who pushes to end irrigation out of the Ogallala. I believe that I am not the only farmer or farm heir who would. We grew up on this land drinking this water, and know its real value can't be measured in money. We will rally behind leaders who will argue their own consciences and awaken ours.

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