

One size does not fit all for school consolidation

Consolidation. The issue is dead in the Legislature this year. With any luck, though, school consolidation will be well down the road before those guys get around to cramming it down our throats, and just as well.

A lot of the state's worst thinking has gone into the consolidation debate. One bill would reduce the state's 300-some school districts to just 40, and two others would have required that there be no more than one district per county.

None of that one-size-fits-all stuff makes any sense when you apply it to the real world. In Johnson County, where there are at least three districts with Class 6A high schools, the results of one county, one district would be something like 75,000 students in one school district. Fact is, the state consultant report two years ago recommended splitting the existing Blue Valley and Shawnee Mission districts into smaller, more manageable units.

At the other end of the state, Wallace County with 1,700 people is the state's second smallest, and it has two class 1A high schools just 12 miles apart. People in Weskan will argue all day long that they should keep their school, and we won't disagree.

But can they, or the state, afford to keep two separate school districts going in a county that size?

In rural Kansas, we are liable to wind up with one school district per county, roughly, just because that is what will make sense in the 21st

Century. There are darned few counties out here where more than one district will have enough students to survive the next decade.

And that is the answer for school consolidation. It's coming. All the state has to do is make it simple and easy.

Ten years ago, the talk among small schools was how to save them. Today, chances for survival are slipping away with the student base these schools once served. Many are below an enrollment of 80, slipping below the level where it's even possible to run a decent high school.

That may not be a good thing, but it's come. Unless someone can find a way to get young families to move back to towns like Jennings and Herndon, Brewster and Winona, there is no force on earth that will keep most of the small high schools open.

We are just going to have to deal with that. The Legislature won't have to. It should spend more time worrying about how it's going to pay for the schools that survive. Once again this month, the state did not have the cash to make the regular school payment.

The next two years will be stressful for Kansas, as for many states that have come to depend on the sales and income taxes for all their income. As the economy recovers, so will the state budget.

And the flow of money to schools. By the time the Legislature gets done studying consolidation, it'll have happened. That is just as well. — Steve Haynes

Keep prairie dog problem local

There's much chatter about the prairie dog bill. A lot of farmers would like to feed it a poison peanut, and maybe slip a few to the people backing the bill, too.

Why, asks Sen. Stan Clark, would a respectable farm organization support a bill like this, which would allow people to let prairie dogs live?

The answer is simple: Supporters want to keep control of the pesky little rodents in state hands, rather than letting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service take over.

And that probably is a good idea, nutty as it may seem for the state to cuddle up to a colony of plague-infested prairie dogs.

This train has been coming down the tracks for years. Environmentalists, pointing out that prairie dogs have been run out of more than 95 percent of their native habitat, are pushing to have the squirrels listed as endangered.

That would mean, roughly, that no one in Kansas would be allowed to harm a hair on their furry little bodies for the foreseeable future.

And that would be a disaster for stockmen, who have enough troubles to deal with today.

I know, there are a lot of people who fervently believe that the only good prairie dog is a dead prairie dog, but more than a century of eradication has failed to eliminate them.

(It's worked better than our master plan to eliminate coyotes, but that is another story.)

Prairie dogs are with us to stay, and that's not such a bad thing. They are, after all, one of God's creatures, and there must be some place on



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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earth for them.

And unless we want the feds out counting furry little noses in our pastures, there had best be a state management plan.

There. I heard a couple of senators and three cattlemen choke and turn blue, but that's the way it is.

Anyway, that's why a respectable farm organization would back a bill allowing your neighbors to have a few prairie dogs on their land.

☆☆☆☆

Can you say enough good things about schools right now?

Education seems to be rampant, as evidenced the winning scholar bowl, music and speech squads. Sports teams, if not exactly triumphant, are solid, and you couldn't say that a couple of years ago.

The wrestlers sent nine men to

state, the boys basketball team has a shot at a trip and the girls team, once a perennial loser, is a contender.

Programs are inventive, innovative and interesting, and the kids are doing well.

Just what is wrong with smaller schools, anyway?

From the Bible

I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he pruneth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. John 15:1,2

Write

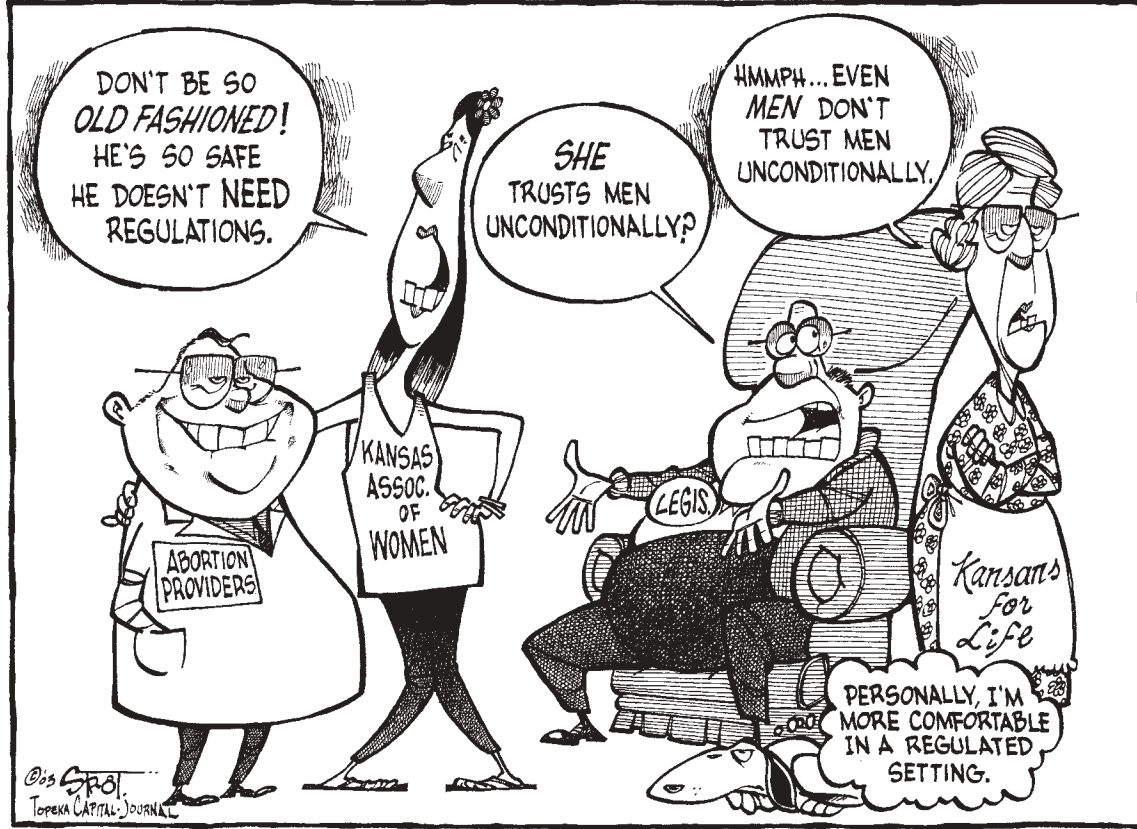
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So that's where Santa vacations

Our guide called him Joe and said that he was the real Santa Claus.

We were in the heart of the lower end of the Baja peninsula. Our tour had taken us up the mountains to see the flora and fauna, visit a cool mountain stream and inspect a spider called the "deer killer," because it is so poisonous that one bite can. We inspected the spider at a respectful distance.

Back at the ranch, we were greeted by our hostess, Luz, who was making our lunch — tortillas made by hand and baked on the griddle of a wood stove in her kitchen. Her kitchen was the stove, a propane-powered refrigerator and a tub of water for washing. All of this was under a palm-thatch roof with no sides.

A couple of cats and the family's pet chicken wandered around the perimeter and on a chair in the sun sat an old man — the family patriarch, we assumed.

We were wrong. This was Joe, an American, our guide told us.

Joe had lived and worked in the Baja for many years. He's now in his 80s and his mind wanders. But he had been rich once and he had been Santa Claus.

Our guide, Caesar, was born in the mountains, and when he was about 8 his grandfather took him to town. It was Christmas and all the children were lined up waiting for Santa Claus.



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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They had to wait a long time, Caesar remembers, but when he came, Santa was dressed just right and he gave every child a new store-bought toy. Caesar had never had a store-bought toy. Everything on the ranch had been hand made.

For many years, Caesar said, Joe played Santa to all the children for miles around. He became friends with the folks who owned the ranch.

In his generosity, he helped the father build a cement-block house. It was called the Refuge, and when the hurricanes came, everyone from the other ranches in the area would come to the Refuge until the storm passed and then go home to try to rebuild their thatch homes.

Now most homes in the Baja are of cement block and people don't come to the Refuge anymore to escape the storms.

Joe is the only refugee these days. As he grew older and unable to care for himself, his old friends took him in. They care for him and honor him as the oldest person there. Of the 18

people who live in the little four-room cement-block house, he's the only one with his own bed, Caesar said.

Luz smiles as she works beside her daughter and daughter-in-law. The children are at school and her husband and sons are working in the many gardens that produce most of the family's food. The tourist company, which brought us here, provides a little money and the propane refrigerator.

Joe sat in the sun and smiled. Luz kept making tortillas on the stove. Her daughter started bringing out the clothes for Monday's laundry. There's a lot of laundry when you have 18 people living in a household.

They sent us on our way with four grapefruit fresh picked from the orchard.

The grapefruit were delicious, maybe the best we'd ever had. I left a big tip on the table. These things have a way of coming back to you. Just ask Joe.

Students had to learn back then

I feel so inadequate! I couldn't pass an eighth-grade test.

Someone sent me (via e-mail) a copy of the competency test given to Salina eighth-graders in 1895. That's correct, 1895. It was divided into five categories: grammar, arithmetic, U.S. history, orthography (I don't even know what that is) and geography.

There were no multiple choice, true or false or fill-in-the-blanks. You had to know the subject.

The exam was mostly essay and students were expected to write complete sentences with correct spelling and punctuation. That, alone, would stump most of us today.

For example: name the parts of speech and define those that have no modification. Huh?

In the math category, the questions were farm oriented.

"A wagon box is two feet deep, 10 feet long and three feet wide. How many bushels of wheat will it hold?"

Could you define the epochs into



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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which U.S. history is divided? What's an "epoch," Lord? Or, describe three of the most prominent battles of the Rebellion.

Please define alphabet, phonetic, orthography, etymology and syllabication. And substantiating my theory that English must be one of the most difficult languages to learn: use the following correctly in sentences; cite, sight, site; fane, fain, feign; vain, vane, vein; and rays, raze, raise.

Finally, name all the Republics of Europe and give the capital of each. Gives whole new meaning to "he just had an eighth-grade education,"

doesn't it.

—ob—

It was sort of a "busman's holiday" for Jim. He has been hanging sheetrock for the last two weeks in the house he's building. This weekend, he brought his tools home and insulated and drywalled the family room in our addition. We haven't touched it much this winter, but with spring right around the corner, I think we'll get inspired again.

How do I know spring is near? The other day, I found daffodils, or maybe they're crocus, popping through the ground on the south side of the house. I'm ready.

Sign maker says city doing right thing

To the Editor:

It isn't necessary that you should feel badly about the information contained herein. After all, no one man can know everything about everything despite his best (or worst) intentions. I am writing in response to your remarks regarding the "unfortunate decision" by the council to purchase embossed street signs.

1. Cheap — Embossed signs are not "cheaper" than reflectorized aluminum signs. Costs are roughly the same for both. The big savings realized by the city is in not having to replace approximately 500 sets of mounting brackets and hardware at an added cost of \$7,000 to \$8,000.

2. Don't last — The signs currently in use have been in place for many years. Many of them for 25-30 years. The new embossed signs use newer steel treating and powder coating technologies and boast an expected life span of up to 50 years!

3. "Biggest advantage of reflective signs is that they can be seen at night"-TRUE "but they will last years longer than steel"-FALSE. 3M guarantees their Engineer Grade reflective sheeting to perform for 5-7 years. A great example of reflective sheeting longevity can be seen

Letters to the Editor

in the 40-plus stop signs the city has recently had to replace, and which have been the subject of some of your previous ramblings.

These stop signs are constructed of the same materials you view as being so vastly superior and yet have been in place a much shorter time than have your street signs. While it is required that stop signs (all traffic signs) be reflectorized for obvious reasons, it does not mean that

they are superior in terms of longevity.

As a supplier, I'm on your side. I would much rather see cities buy reflective signs. There is a good deal more potential for me to sell them replacements before I grow old and die. If I were still a taxpayer in Oberlin, I would commend the council for making such a cost effective decision.

Jim Fall, Concordia

Writer likes prayer service

To the Editor: It was very inspiring and uplifting to be able to attend the "pray for rain" gathering of the Decatur County Ministerial Association on Sunday at the United Church.

There were many dedicated people from different denominations. It was so great to see the different religions be able to communicate and relate to the needs of the community of Oberlin and the world situations.

There was a sense of peace and tranquility to see these various pastors bind together as one. They set an example and precedent for all of us. It was surely enjoyed.

Praise be to God!

Elsie Wolters Oberlin



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