

Changing the speed limit will not help any of us

The Kansas Legislature hasn't done much so far this year, but sometimes that's for the best.

The Legislature, so far, can't agree on school finance or gambling or a budget. It's saving those for the final minutes, when the worst laws are passed without much question.

Right now, the Legislature is stalled on a bill to raise the 70-mile-an-hour speed limit on Kansas freeways. It's a bad idea, but there's some danger they will pass it anyway.

This plan is being pushed by shadowy forces who claim that the difference between driving 70 in Kansas and 75 in Nebraska is keeping business away from our state.

One sponsor, Sen. Robert Tyson, a Parker Republican, claims there is twice as much truck traffic on I-80 in Nebraska as there is on I-70 in Kansas. He's probably right, by the way, and we'd suggest that if he likes that, he go drive around in Nebraska on weekends.

If you've been there, you know what we mean. The road is rough and pitted, traffic is awful and a person in a small car is fearful. Do we want that for I-70, I-35, U.S. 81 and K-10?

More road damage, higher taxes, more accidents, big repair bills?

Never mind that truckers and tourism offi-

cials, when someone asks, say they don't mind the slightly lower limit. Never mind that travel-center workers say almost no one calls to ask about the speed limit here when planning a trip. Never mind that many, especially those with green-and-white tags, already drive well past 70 on our freeways today.

Never mind that the Kansas Highway Patrol says all raising the speed limit will do is cause more and more severe accidents.

But do mind this: The 70 m.p.h. limit was written with rural Kansas in mind. Legislators wanted to keep the differential between two-lane roads at 65 m.p.h. and the Interstates at 70 to a minimum to encourage people to spread out and put some of the traffic back on the blue highways.

There may be some pressure to drive faster and burn more gas on the freeways, but we don't see it out here.

So do we want more and faster trucks tearing up I-70 and frightening our tourists anyway? Or do we want the safe and responsible drivers we have now, running 70 m.p.h. clear across the state?

Like we said, sometimes that Legislature is best that does the least. With any luck, this turkey is done for the year. — *Steve Haynes*

She's got Costa Rica on her mind

This year, I want to go to Costa Rica.

Each year, I visit an embassy while I am in Washington. And each year, I get indoctrinated. These places are great.

This year we visited the Costa Rican embassy, met Ambassador Jaime Daramblum, and were blown away by the friendliness of the embassy staff and the descriptions of their homeland.

The country is about the size of West Virginia, with between 25 and 30 percent of the land set aside in 75 national parks and preserves. In these protected areas are rain forests, swamps, mangroves, lowland jungles, dry forests and volcanoes and beaches for sea turtles to nest.

There is incredible biodiversity, with over 500,000 species living in the preserves. One of the preserves is an artificial reef — the Barra del Colorado — which protects mammals, marine life and more than 400 species of birds.

Costa Rica is where the movie Jurassic Park was filmed, but we were assured, there are no dinosaurs, not any more.

Costa Rica has a stable democratic government with a constitution dating to 1949. There are no restrictions on foreigners owning property in the country and many Americans retire there, we were told.

For those who want to retire,



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
chaynes@nwkansas.com

Costa Rica requires an income of \$600 a month to be changed into the local currency, the colones, and you must live in the country at least four months a year. There are about 140,000 Americans living permanently in the country, which has a population of about 4 million.

There are more Americans living in Costa Rica than there are Costa Ricans living in the U.S., the ambassador said, estimating that there are about 60,000 of his countrymen living here.

But not everyone wants to stay; most folks just want to visit the beautiful beaches, see the rain forests and volcanoes and enjoy the excitement of whitewater rafting, bungee jumping and sky diving.

In all, 1.2 million visitors a year, 60 percent of them from the U.S., enjoy the mountains, forests and beaches of Costa Rica and tourism is the second largest segment of the economy.

The climate is mild, there is no army and little of the unrest some-

times found in Central America. It is a two-hour plane ride from Miami to the Juan Santamaria Airport, 29 miles out of San Jose in the city of Alajuela.

While tourism is important, Costa Rica's biggest economic factor is exporting textiles, medical products, bananas and coffee, mostly to the United States.

The country is the largest supplier of coffee for Starbucks in the world. Costa Rica means rich coast in Spanish, and it's a coast I'd sure like to visit someday.

From the Bible

For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven. Thy faithfulness is unto all generations: thou hast established the earth, and it abideth. They continue this day according to thine ordinances: for all are thy servants. Psalm 119: 89-91

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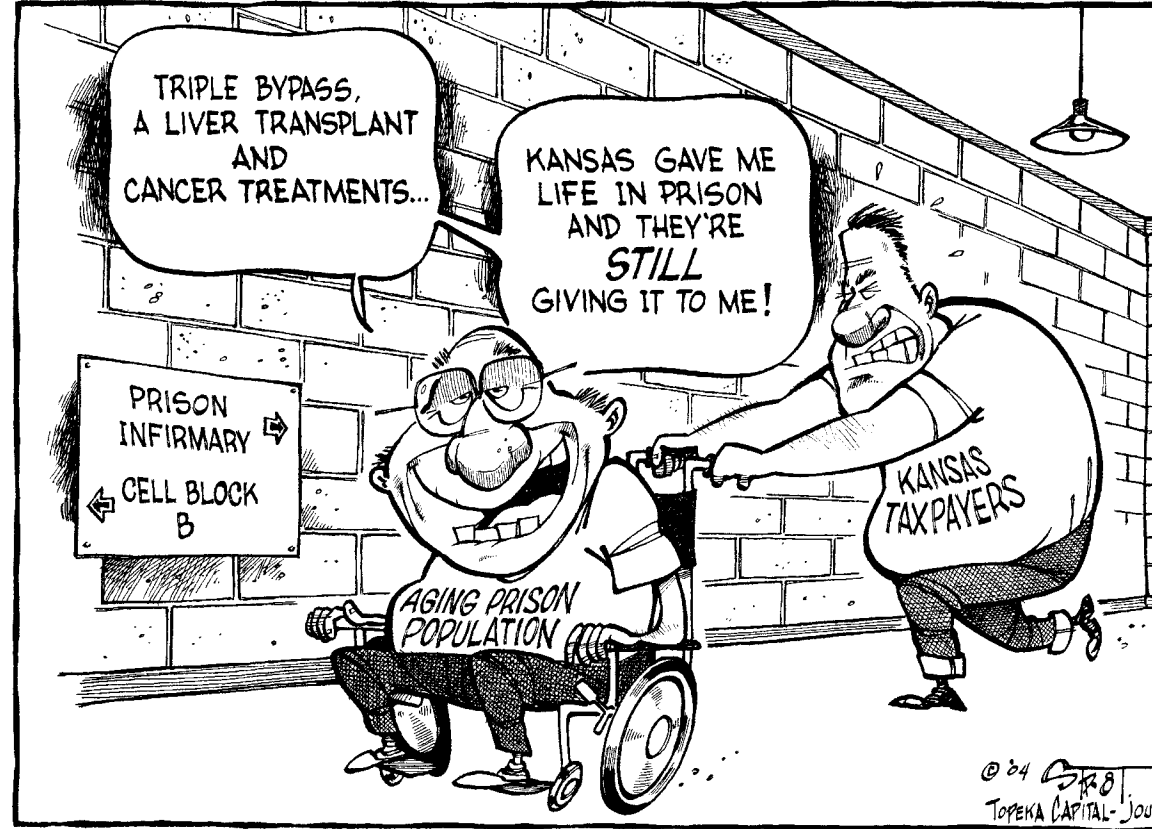
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Bird outwits homeowners

If you looked up "persistence" in the dictionary, you would find a picture of the mama robin that is now living above our front door.

Last week I began noticing grass and twigs and what looked like shreds of material from one of Jim's blue tarps on the steps in front of the door. Not giving it much thought, I attributed it to debris being blown in by the wind.

But every day it got worse, wind or not. Then I saw a bird fly from under the porch eaves. I looked up and, sure enough, twigs, grass and more shreds of blue material were dangling over the edge of the two inch-wide cornice board above the door, where Mrs. Robin was trying, vainly, to construct a nest.

"We can't have this," was our first thought. Right above the door to our home is no place for a bird's nest. So, we swept away all the mess on the front porch, thinking that would persuade her to go elsewhere. Wrong. Next day, more debris. Swept that away. Next day, more debris. We were getting nowhere.

Her God-given instinct to build a nest was working just fine. Judgment on where to build it was all she



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
cplotts@nwkansas.com

lacked.

I suggested to Jim that if she had a birdhouse to live in, she would abandon her attempts. We had the pieces of a birdhouse left over from last summer when Jim made several kits for the granddaughters. He assembled one and nailed it, rather precariously, above the door. She began piling her nest-making material on top of the birdhouse. If twigs and grass wouldn't stay on a flat surface, I don't know why she thought they would do any better on a steeply pitched birdhouse roof.

Now we were getting desperate, and this bird with a brain the size of a pea was outsmarting us.

Finally admitting defeat, Jim pulled down the birdhouse; nailed up a flat, square piece of plywood; and piled her raw resources on it. Then all we had to do was wait.

It didn't take long. But I guess we finally got it right, because Madame Robin has woven a very respectable nest with her twigs, grass and yes, those were shreds from one of Jim's blue tarps.

We haven't checked yet to see if she's laid any eggs. But when she does, I suppose we'll try to respect that and use the back door for a while.

Moral of the story: When Mama wants a home, she wants a home. And she wants it where she wants it. Better just give it to her.

Could we go on without farmers?

Other Ideas

"Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." — Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia"

By DEBORAH E. POPPER and FRANK J. POPPER
Prairie Writers Circle

In 1801, when Jefferson became president, 95 percent of Americans made their full-time living from agriculture. By the turn of the 20th century, it was 45 percent, and by the turn of the 21st less than 2 percent.

In 1993 the Census Bureau stopped counting the number of Americans who live on farms.

"Farm residence," it reported, "is no longer a reliable indication of whether or not someone is involved in farming.... The cost of collecting and publishing statistics on farm residents and farmers in separate reports could no longer be justified."

Over the past two centuries, the nation became urban, then suburban, and now increasingly exurban. Farmers, especially those who are small-scale, full-time and living on their farms, have become politically and culturally distant to most Americans. We still have agriculture, but it is mostly large-scale agribusiness. There is little Jeffersonian farming, almost no "labor in the earth."

The desertion of the small family farm constitutes the largest population movement in American history. The small-farmer diaspora, here and abroad, partly or wholly underlies other storied American population shifts: the development of cities and suburbs, the settlement of the West, the late 19th and early 20th century European immigrations to the United States, the post-1965 Latin American and Asian ones, the black

migration from the rural South to the Northern ghetto, the rise of the Sunbelt, and even the growth of military bases around the country.

The family farm is one of the last homes of old-school American ethnicity and beliefs. In 1993 the Census Bureau found, for example, that farm residents were almost all white, half lived in the Midwest, and their households were 25 percent less likely than non-farm ones to be headed by a single woman. These differences from the rest of the nation have intensified over the past decade.

Many family farmers encourage their offspring to leave that life, and these perhaps unusually deferential children listen. Why they should move on is obvious. The United States is a nation whose metropolitan areas, despite all their evident problems, offer better pay and more opportunity than most of its countryside. This imbalance has existed for the nation's entire life. But it was nowhere near as large or visible in, say, 1960, much less 1880 or earlier pioneer periods.

American small farmers are victims of the same impersonal national and international economics that wipe out small banks, railroads, airlines, newspapers and stores here and elsewhere. Farmers, like the others, have responded to continued pressures for large-scale, homogenized production — in farming's case, high per-acre output. Having only this aim, their success brings about the demise of most of them and their communities. American small farmers now appear to be at the far end of a vast economic shift

that gives every promise of eliminating them.

A momentous transition looms. Although the United States and other First World nations have been heading toward it since at least the late 18th century, no nation of even modest size has ever explicitly chosen to navigate it. No one knows the full implications of a farmerless America — or a farmerless France or Japan.

Are there really the links Jefferson suggests between farming and virtue? Does a domestic population working the soil ensure a nation's social and physical health? What are the international and security consequences of the near-total disappearance of the farmer? What happens when the world's most powerful country no longer has those who work their own land?

These are at least nation-scale questions, ones whose answers turn the hinges of history. They obsess many farmers, their political representatives and their intellectual interpreters in this country and abroad. The suburban-exurban America hardly notices. In its Information Age world, the farmer has been gone for generations.

Deborah and Frank Popper are authors of "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust" and "The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method." Deborah Popper teaches at the College of Staten Island-City University of New York. Frank Popper teaches at Rutgers University. Both are members of the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle, based in Salina.

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170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749-2243

Phone: (785) 475-2206 Fax (785) 475-2800

E-mail: obherald@nwkansas.com

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