

Legislators, newspapers pushing for right to know

Legislative leaders from all three sides of the aisle, the attorney general and governor have joined Kansas newspapers pushing for a new constitutional right — the right of voters and citizens to know what their government is doing.

Open government sounds as simple as it does obvious. In a democracy, don't the people always have a right to know what their officials are up to?

Sadly, many officials don't agree. Once elected, they think they should know things that "the people" shouldn't hear or see.

Kansas has an Open Meetings and Open Records laws, but they are violated daily, sometimes right in our own county, by officials who either don't know or don't care about or don't understand the public's rights.

And while the laws have been toughened some, it's difficult and expensive to enforce them. One newspaper spent more than \$13,000 in legal fees to get the state's list of dangerous railroad crossings. The Department of Transportation lost the suit — why it wanted to keep the information a secret is beyond us — but spent thousands more in tax money to keep its files closed.

Many times, citizen requests are met with a stonewall by public officials who just don't understand the laws. Most people just can't afford to sue.

Other times, officials meet behind closed doors and discuss things they know are not legal. Since no one hears what they say, who can challenge the secrecy?

The legislative push includes a constitutional amendment which will let voters decide the issue.

It would create an Office of Public Integrity

under the attorney general to enforce the public's rights, and change one exemption to the records law to be certain that all compensation of public employees, and not just cash pay, is open to the public. (A lawsuit last year cleared up that exemption, at a cost of more than \$75,000, but the University of Kansas chose not to appeal, so the state Supreme Court did not get to make a definitive ruling.)

The program, created by the Kansas Press Association, would expand the definition of a public agency to include private firms that contract to run state programs, an increasingly popular dodge.

All this may sound great, but there will be opposition. Many officials feel the public really doesn't need to know what government is up to.

Some will support the amendment and the accompanying bills publicly, but drag their feet in hopes that the effort will go away.

There is little in state, county, city or school files that should *not* be open to public inspection. Current exemptions to the laws would remain to protect those few things, such as personnel and student records, that should be closed.

But it will take a lot of work and strong support from taxpayers and voters to get a two-thirds vote in both houses of the state Legislature. An affirmative vote by the people in 2006 is more certain, because Kansans understand that they're entitled to this information.

This plan, enshrining a basic right in the Constitution and creating an agency to enforce it, deserves our support. It's important to our freedom to know what government does.

Here's hoping that the Legislature gets with the program. — Steve Haynes

Should all roads have names?

Decatur County commissioners keep coming back to the idea that the feds are going to make them mark or name county roads.

While there's no evidence that is going to happen — the Postal Service would like to see rural addressing, but has no power to require it — it's something to think about.

Probably the most flexible system is the one the county uses today.

Grid roads, those on the section lines, are numbered by mileage east, west, north or south from the U.S. 36-U.S. 83 junction in Oberlin.

Knowing where to start, it's pretty easy to find any road in the county — if you can find the signs.

The county crew put signs up along the two main highways a few years back, but they're tiny and easy to miss, day or night. There are few signs once you're off the highways, though, so there's no way to know for sure where you are except to count miles.

If the county wants to keep this system, and make it work for emergency crews and travelers, it needs to buy larger signs and post every rural intersection.

There are alternatives. Some counties number all their roads, with low numbers running one way and a higher series, 50 and up say, going the other. Still others name north-south roads and number east-west roads.

Some of the names they come up



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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with are kind of entertaining, though they tend to me arbitrary and a little stale. Usually, the names are alphabetical, but the typical Kansas county needs more than 26 names.

That leads to titles like "Day Dream" in Logan County, always one of my favorites.

Then there is the question of addressees. Naming or numbering the roads is only half the battle. The Postal Service wants everyone to have a unique street number. They can abandon the old "route-and-box" system and just use addresses for rural customers. These usually run into five digits.

Emergency management officials like addresses also, since it's more certain to send a fire or ambulance crew to a specific location than to "the first house south of the old Jones place."

I kind of like the "2 North" or "3E" system we have now, but it can cause confusion. Any system can. In an emergency, people get in a hurry. They'll say they're on Road 3 North

when they mean Road 3 South. Even dispatchers can make that mistake.

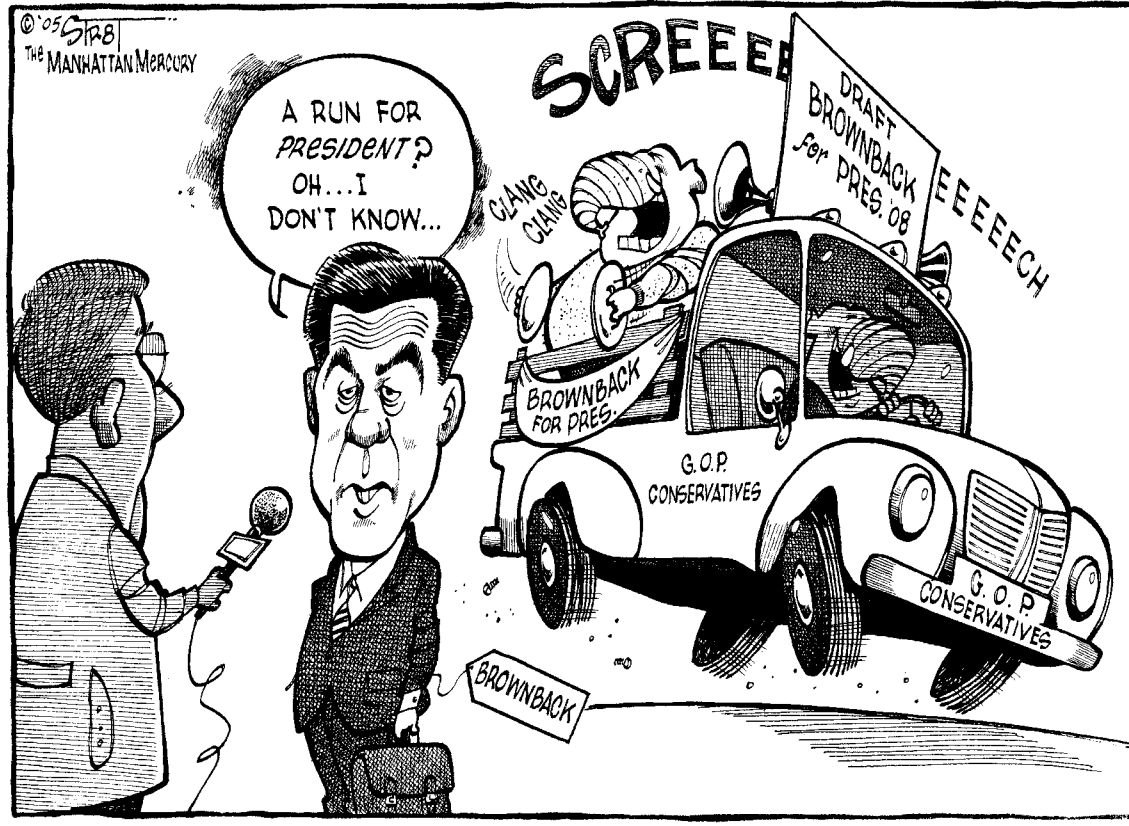
Address numbers are fine, of course, if you happen to know them. People get those wrong, too.

Commissioners will have to decide. They could just leave things as they are. They could post signs. They could draw up an addressing plan. They can do whatever they want. The federal bogeyman, apparently, is not at the door, at least not yet.

Among other things, they'll have to decide what to do about the present county highway numbers and the names people use for the county roads. The numbers are posted on the roads, but if you ask anyone, they'll usually tell you to go out the Creek Road.

Anyone tell me the highway number — without looking?

Whatever the county decides will work. The main thing is to spend some money on signs people can see, so we'll be able to find the road we need — whatever that is.



Sometimes it's a matter of planning

Our family has had a series of triumphs in misplanning.

It started with my husband getting unhappy with our television provider. We have one of those little dishes on the side of the house and the folks that make the programs go from the satellite into the dish raised the fees.

To lower the cost, Steve dropped CBS and FOX, among others. This didn't bother either of us, since we never watched those channels.

Actually, about the only thing we "watch" is a couple of music channels. These show you a white box on a black screen. The title of the song, artist and album scrolls along across the box.

Occasionally, I'll watch an old movie while folding clothes and two to three times a year we'll order a pay-per-view feature.

I have no idea when Steve dropped part of the service. The first I heard of it was a complaint from our son at Christmas. He was home and glued to the tube but couldn't get a sports program he wanted to watch on CBS.

His father explained what had happened and suggested that the Christmas lights needed to be put up, at which time our son became very engrossed in something on another channel.

The subject was dropped until



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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Saturday when we were discussing watching the Super Bowl, which was shown exclusively on FOX.

We didn't really want to watch the game, but we were looking forward to the commercials.

We ended up watching neither.

Instead we looked up the Internet site our daughter and son-in-law had spent the last month building.

Felicia and Nik were planning to go on vacation to Mexico with us the last week of January until they realized that the Super Bowl was being held in Jacksonville, Fla., where the company they work for owns the newspaper.

They had already been told that they needed to set up a super website for the big game. So instead of lying in the sun in Mexico, the kids sat hunched over computer screens in Jacksonville.

Another triumph to planning, although it really wasn't their fault that the Super Bowl was when or

where it was.

The third triumph was in Mexico.

Youngest daughter was able to make the trip and had a great time. She also tried to burn the place down.

She was making sticky rice by putting the rice in a plastic colander on top of a pot of boiling water. The rice was almost done when I decided to go to the clubhouse for lunch. Daughter decided that was a great idea.

An hour later, we arrived back to a smoke-filled villa. The plastic colander was melted into the pot, which had gone dry.

The windows were all open and the ceiling fans turned on. It still took most of two hours to get the smoke out of the place, and it smelled faintly of burned plastic for two days thereafter.

Planning, they say, makes all the difference.

She cheers for the underdog

That's another one for the history books. SuperBowl Whatever is over.

Before the kickoff, Jim asked me what team I was cheering for. I gave him some lame answer about cheering for the underdog, but also reasoned there might be something to this "dynasty" thing. It wasn't until the final minutes of the fourth quarter that I officially pledged my allegiance. I didn't want to commit too early. Besides, he had to keep reminding me who the teams were.

During the game, we had ourselves a "carpet picnic," except we didn't actually sit on the floor. We've discovered it's too hard to get back up. We laid out our little spread on the TV tray between our recliners. We had cheese, chips, crackers, salsa and salami. I even drank a carbonated soft drink. I mention that only because I haven't had one since before Thanksgiving. No special reason, except I think I feel better for not drinking soda pop.

And maybe a little because I hear my mother's voice somewhere in my subconscious saying, "You wouldn't be broke if you didn't drink all that pop." She was convinced that the country's financial problems could be solved if everyone would quit drinking soda. Who



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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knows, she may have been right. Take the cost of two cans of pop a day (I'm using a low figure of 50 cents a can), multiply that by 365, times 72 years for an average life span and what do you get? My word! That's over \$26,000. She was right!

—ob—

This part of the country got hit pretty hard over the weekend. And it was so typically Kansas. Saturday was shirt-sleeve weather; Sunday we were in a blizzard. The windshield wipers on the car couldn't keep up. Ice would build up and I would have to reach out the window, catch the blade on the upsweep, and give it a "thunk" against the glass in an attempt to dislodge the ice. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

Seems like the perfect time to head back to Mexico. A week from now, we'll be in Juarez building a house. It may not be sunny, but I am

trusting it will be warmer than here.

—ob—

The reason a dog has so many friends is that he wags his tail instead of his tongue. I don't know who said that, but it's good advice.

From the Bible

Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble. The LORD will preserve him, and keep him alive; and he shall be blessed upon the earth: and thou wilt not deliver him unto the will of his enemies.

Psalm 41: 1, 2

Let's keep Kansas kids safe, alive

To the Editor:

The week of Feb. 13-20 is National Child Safety Awareness Week. During this week, Kansas Highway Patrol troopers and other officers will be conducting child safety seat installations, enforcement lanes and programs across the state. Our aim is to promote and improve the travelling safety of children.

Letter to the Editor

Motor vehicle crashes are still the leading cause of death for children. Since 1993, you and I have improved the compliance rate in child restraint use by 6 percent. While this is an improvement, we can do better.

Be a leader. Lead by example and protect our future, our children. Buckle up.

2nd Lt. Doug Griffiths
Kansas Highway Patrol
Troop D, Norton

Photo Policy

The Oberlin Herald wants to emphasize photos of people doing things in the community. If you know of an event or news happening that we should attend, please call 475-2206.

Please be sure to allow a couple of days' notice so we can arrange to be there.

Space in the paper is limited and so is the time of our staff, so we may not be able to get to every event, but

we will try.

Because space is so limited, we cannot run team or group photos, any pictures of people lined up or of people passing checks, certificates and the like. (We will always try to make room for a story about any of these events, however.)

We do run wedding and engagement pictures and "mug" shots with stories and obituaries, when they are provided to us. Please remember

that we need a clear, sharp picture. Dark or fuzzy prints will not work.

We cannot return photos unless you submit a self-addressed, stamped envelope with clear instructions for return.

Other photos submitted may be picked up at our office within two weeks. After that, they will be disposed of.

Laser proofs of photos which have run in The Herald are available

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