

## Despite growing demand, consolidation may falter

A major issue again this year in Topeka is local government consolidation, but progress seems unlikely.

The consolidation idea has been gaining ground in recent years because it seems like a "good idea." The way it works in Kansas today, though, it's almost impossible.

One county, Riley, has a consolidated city-county police department under an appointed chief. That required an act of the Legislature. A handful have consolidated law enforcement under the elected sheriff, which can be done with a city-county contract.

Only one county has consolidated city and county government, Wyandotte, though a couple of small towns continue to function within the overall combined county.

That, too, required an act of the Legislature. And that's the biggest obstacle to consolidation. If we're going to have any meaningful joining, the state needs to set clear, simple rules for local governments to follow, then let the cities and counties have at it. That process works well for school districts. Running a bill for each attempt bogs down the whole process and stifles creative solutions.

Kansas Farm Bureau stands in the way of a solution right now, having vowed that any consolidation bill must include separate votes in cities and rural areas. A plan with that provision was shot down by rural voters in Shawnee County last fall. Consolidation ain't going to happen under those rules.

Part of the problem is that cities and counties are different creatures. Cities run utilities like sewer, water and electric systems. They patch potholes in paved streets and chase dogs. Counties grade roads and spray noxious weeds. They kill prairie dogs and supervise archaic township governments. They run elections and help the state sell license tags and

drivers' licenses.

Some functions, like law enforcement and administration, do overlap, but rural people fear a consolidated government would be a "super city" that ignores the minority out in the hinterlands. They fear that police patrols, road maintenance and other efforts would concentrate in town, leaving them on their own.

Most of all, they think they would be forgotten in a majority rule system. Hence the Farm Bureau stance. And they may be right.

Oddly enough, that hasn't happened with the traditional county system, where city voters usually outnumber the rural block, but perception is everything. County commissioners are seen as responding mostly to rural voters, while a combined board might not.

Political jealousies enter this debate as well, since consolidation schemes might do away with county elected officers in favor of a manager system or appointed department heads. Anything's possible.

Our view is that the majority ought to rule, but gently. It's unlikely we'll have any consolidation with a split vote, so the Legislature ought to craft a compromise that protects rural people from taking on city debt or paying for city services they don't get.

The decision ought to be made on a one-man, one-vote basis, as is required under the federal Constitution. And the law ought to allow the utmost flexibility in crafting a new kind of local government without a lot of interference from Topeka.

One last word of warning: Don't expect consolidation to save money. It won't. Things might run better, but they seldom get less expensive.

That said, let the consolidation begin.

— Steve Haynes

## They were all born in January

January is a big birthday month in our family.

Alexandria, our nearby granddaughter, celebrated her 11th year Saturday. She shares that day with her great-grandmother, Margie, whom she never got to know.

Alex's mom, Jennifer, also has a January birthday, but I value my life too much to tell you how old she will be.

Anyway, Jennifer took Alex and a few of her girlfriends for a weekend excursion to a "slightly larger" city a few hours away. One of the motels in that town has an indoor water park. Judging from the squeals of laughter and general mayhem I heard on my end of the line during a phone conversation with Jennifer, I'm guessing they had a really good time.

Alex is at that stage known as a "tweenager." She's right on the edge of being a teen, but still a little girl in lots of ways. We're already seeing signs of the beauty she's going to become.

—ob—  
This crazy weather we're having is a mixed blessing. Summer-like weather in the middle of January is great for outdoor activities and the heating bill. Unfortunately, trees are starting to bud, and we all know there's still lots of winter left. We're just waiting for the other shoe to



### Out Back

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drop. When it does, those little buds are gonna get stomped on.

The word among local farmers is almost the same, "We need some moisture." Snow is predicted, so I hope the farmers get what they want, and then it warms right back up.

—ob—  
My next-to-the-youngest brother, Dick, had hip replacement surgery last week. He's home from the hospital now, and according to his family, doing just fine.

Jim's dad had a knee replaced a few months ago at the same hospital. These surgeries are so commonplace that soon we'll all be going in for our 100,000 mile tune-up and overhaul.

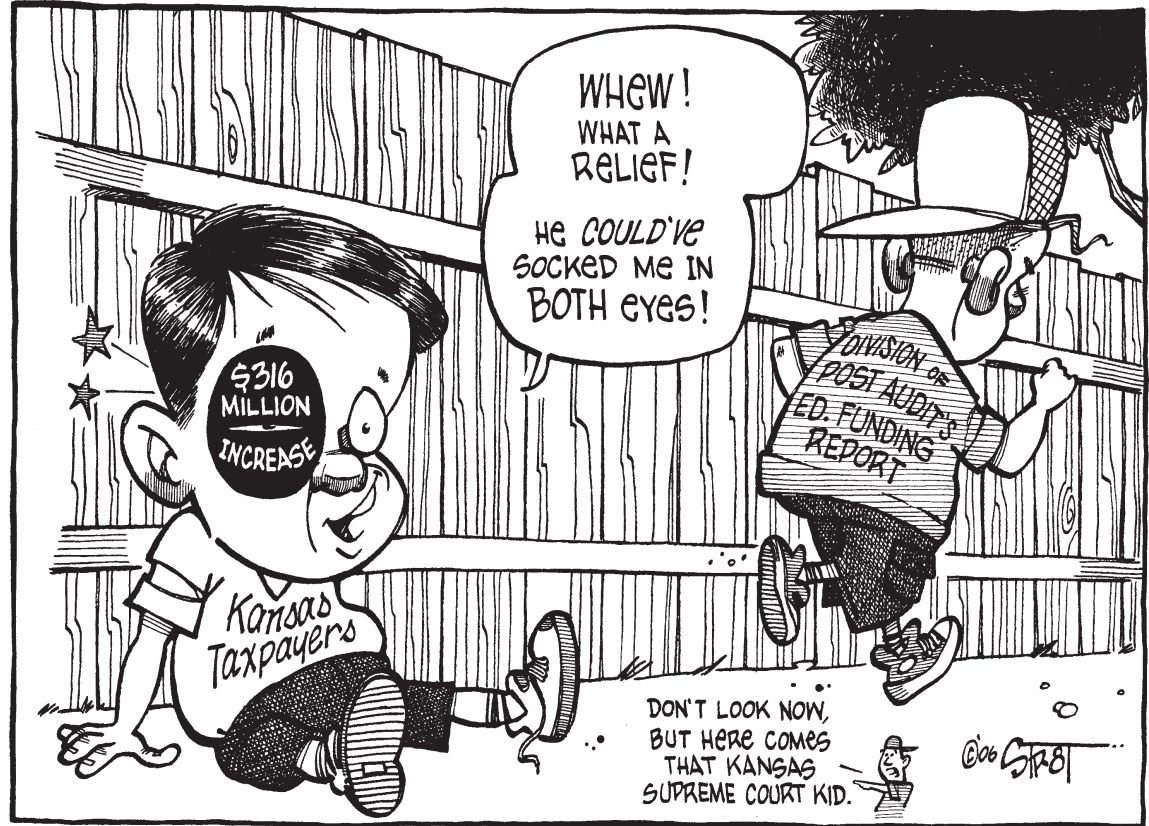
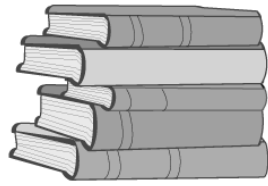
What once could only be imagined is now routine procedure.

—ob—  
Football fever is running rampant at our house. Jim's team is still winning, and as long as they do, emotions will be pretty high.

We have an agreement, though. As long as he doesn't yell too loud, and lets me take a nap, I promise to rouse up long enough to watch the end of the game with him.

### From the Bible

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock....  
Matthew 7:24



## Farm filled with cats, dogs, fun

Stephen's sister has a farm, E-I-E-I-O.

And on that farm she has some dogs, E-I-E-I-O.

And so on and so forth, with horses and cats and what have you.

We visited the Blaylock household in rural Emporia over the weekend.

The trip was billed as a hunting expedition to give our dog, Annie, the opportunity to try her nose on quail, since she seems to do better with them than the pheasants we have out here.

The boys — Steve, brother-in-law Daryl and nephew Andy — took off for a day in the field while Barb, Steve's baby sister, and I did farm chores.

The Blaylocks live on a "gentleman's farm" of a few acres with creek, trees and a renovated farmhouse only a few miles outside of Emporia.

They raise quality quarter horses and have eight in the pastures.

They also have a pair of Vizslas, red Hungarian hunting dogs. Their dogs prefer sleeping on the couch and scaring off burglars to hunting, however.

Then there are the cats, or as Steve put it,

"Barb has two dogs, eight horses, eight cats and an envious sister-in-law," Steve said.

He's right, of course. They have more cats than I do. I'm jealous, and



### Open Season

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neither Barb nor Steve would let me sneak one of the half-grown kittens home. You'd think someone with that many cats wouldn't notice one missing.

That's not true, however. Daryl and Barb know each of their animals by name and pedigree, even when that pedigree is Snowball and some visiting tom.

On the farm, the felines are divided into house cats and barn cats. Two cats live in the house. Both would prefer to be outside all day and have to be caught each night and dragged into the house.

The barn cats spend the day scampering all over the farm — except for a couple of half-grown kittens, which spend their days in the house pretending to be housecats from a litter Barb hand-raised after their mother disappeared. (It's one of those that I tried to kittennap.)

As evening approaches, Daryl or Barb will go into the barn yelling, "kitty, kitty, kitty."

Soon six to eight cats are scamper-

ing after them with the sure knowledge that the next step is the haphazard scattering of dry cat food on the floor. Barb says if you scatter the food, you have fewer fights over the bowl.

If the inside cats respond to the call, they are hauled to the house. Otherwise, they are hunted down and the barn door is closed for the night.

Since the cats have been shut up in the barn each night, sis reports, a lot fewer have gone missing at the Blaylocks.

When they first moved to the farm, they lost a lot of cats to coyotes, bobcats, foxes and other things that go burp in the night.

I sure don't want eight horses and two more dogs so I'll let Barb and Daryl have their farm and their pets and I'll keep mine. Especially since I didn't do so well trying to have garage cats when my son visited — we lost one, which was a 50 percent decrease in his cat population.

## Overhaul needed in Congress

A report from Washington complains that the Senate's failure to extend the Patriot Act means "another setback for efforts to curb methamphetamine abuse."

Huh? What does that have to do with the Patriot Act?

It turns out that two senators, Jim Tallent of Missouri and Dianne Feinstein of California, had tacked a meth bill onto the Patriot Act, assuming it was in for a fast ride through Congress.

And that illustrates a couple of things wrong with the system in Washington:

- There are no rules. Pretty much anything can be slipped into any bill on the floor, even an appropriations bill which supposedly deals only with money.

Unlike some state legislatures, Congress had no rule requiring amendments to be "germane," that is, have something to do with the original bill.

- Congress wants to make everything a federal case.

In this instance, the Tallent-Feinstein amendment would have made it federal law that cold remedies containing pseudoephedrine, known as Sudafed, must be kept behind a pharmacy counter.

Sudafed, the most common over-the-counter remedy for sniffles, happens to be a key ingredient in home "cooking" of meth. It used to be available on grocery and pharmacy counters and on display racks out in the store. With the growing meth problem, many states (starting in Oklahoma and including Kansas) have banned easy sales.

People have to ask a pharmacist for the drug now, and they have to sign for it, showing identification. States that have the law say it's cut meth production 40 to 80 percent, but users just switch to imported drugs.



### Along the Sappa

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This kind of lawmaking is wrong for two reasons:

First, it's not a federal issue. States have shown they can and will act. There's no reason for the federal government to be involved. It's not fair to people in states outside the Midwest where meth is not such a big issue to ban sales there, and it's a disservice to states which have their ducks in a row.

In fact, you could argue that the only real purpose of this bill is to make its sponsors look good at re-election time. They will have "done something" about the drug problem.

Worse, maybe, for the Republic is the fact that non-germane amendments bypass the regular process of Congress, including sometimes the committee hearings where citizens actually have a chance to affect the process.

They usually stem from middle-of-the-night floor deals that send major changes to the law winging through both Houses with little or no

debate. In a system where debate, compromise and fairness are value above all else, they should be anathema.

But often, these deals are the only way a bill will get through, so the sponsors and supporters buy in.

Sometimes, it may be for the right reasons, but the result almost always is bad law.

Congress needs to take a long look at itself. The federal government has plenty of problems of its own without trying to solve state issues that, largely, the states have addressed. This is just grandstanding.

And some of these treasured, archaic rules are due for an overhaul. Bills ought to get a committee hearing, citizen input, a floor debate and an up-or-down vote, all on the record.

Each and every one of them.

### Letter to the Editor

## Send cookies to soldiers

To the Editor:

Our 4-H group, the Harvesters 4-H Club of Selden, is baking cookies for active-duty soldiers who have ties to northwest Kansas, and we are trying to get addresses for these soldiers.

If anyone has any addresses, please e-mail them to me. It would be greatly appreciated.

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