

Agency will come back to close more rural offices

The state office of the U.S. Farm Service Agency, after suffering a bloody nose last year with a plan to close more than half its county offices, has come back with a plan to close 11 in some of the state's smallest counties.

In northwest Kansas, only the office in Gove, the state's smallest county seat, population 103, would close. It would merge with the Logan County office in Oakley. Farmers could go to any office, with many expected to gravitate to nearby Hoxie, in Sheridan County.

The state's Agriculture Department twin, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, announced that it will close offices in the same 11 counties.

Under the first plan, offices in Oberlin, St. Francis and Sharon Springs would have closed, but for the present, all those are safe.

So, with our offices to remain open, we should go on about our business and ignore this little government reorganization?

Only if we want to be next.

Eleven offices is just a foot in the door. Given their way, eventually the bureaucrats will return for another bite. And another.

Today, Farm Service and Conservation offices typically are small, three or four workers in a county, all "co-located" in the same building.

If you want to see the future, though, look to the largest agency in the Agriculture Department, the Forest Service. Once run by rangers stationed out in the woods, in small towns and mining camps, the service averaged three to four employees per district in the 1950s.

In the last 25 years, though, the service

closed most of its rural offices, concentrating employees at stations with 20-25 employees.

Few, if any, lost their jobs, mind you. Employee numbers stayed fairly constant. But the layers of bureaucracy thickened as workers began to specialize in one area or another, grazing, timber, recreation, law enforcement. Little money was saved on payroll, but expenses for vehicles and travel soared.

The management model is a lot like the one adopted a couple of years ago by the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, which closed many of its county offices in favor of new regional offices serving several counties.

The result, as usual, was little or no savings, but a big disconnect between clients and those supposed to serve them.

These consolidations aren't about saving money. They're not about good management or specialization. They're about gathering the troops in one place and creating a warm nest for them.

They represent the state and federal governments abandoning towns that get too small, too dull for officials to want to work in.

In rural America, we shouldn't tolerate that, not from the Department of Agriculture, the state or any other government agency designed to serve us.

If the agency is going to have the same employees and the same expenses, why not spend some money in towns like Gove?

In Rural America, we need to fight this kind of thinking, whenever it appears.

— Steve Haynes

Open government needs you

Don't care about openness in government? Don't get hot and bothered when public officials do public business in secret?

You should.

Open government is essential to our democracy. It's the only way citizens can monitor the workings of their city, county, state and national officials.

Open government brings accountability to police departments, courts, city halls and school boards. Our very way of life demands that our democratic institutions be open.

But many citizens see this powerful cause to be little more than an excuse for media to abuse its First Amendment rights in the rush to build circulation and ratings. Or, even worse, just don't care.

And, though most public officials say they embrace open government, they often don't act like it. Rather than living by the clear and overriding policy of the Kansas Open Records Act — that public records should be open to the public — many officials work to find reasons to keep them closed — and to close even more in the law.

In recent years, the Kansas Legislature has turned down a number of common-sense initiatives for openness and accountability. One striking recent example: School districts in Wichita and Topeka spend tens of millions of dollars of our tax money every year to bus our children to and from school. Yet the school districts are not required by law to make public even the names



Let Sunshine In

By Randy Brown

of their bus drivers because the districts contract with a private company for school transportation. This is a blatant slap at public safety and accountability for tax dollars. It would be illegal in the case of any "official" school employee.

Lawmakers also blocked attempts to require that closed, or executive, sessions of public bodies be recorded, and they have rejected efforts to fix the oppressive Kansas law that keeps secret probable cause affidavits in criminal arrests.

In these cases, legislators are not just missing opportunities to make state government more open and accountable. They are missing opportunities to build public trust in an era in which citizens are increasingly suspicious of "government," as if it were some alien entity.

Of course, citizens are missing opportunities, as well. Apathy doesn't work in a democracy. And until many more of us are willing to get involved, and until we tell public officials to do public business in the daylight, we will get what we deserve: too many leaders who feel that the ideal of open government is little more than a messy and incon-

venient thing to be avoided.

Open government is not about politicians or the media. It's about you.

It is the nonpartisan issue of our time, drawing supporters across the political spectrum. Recent winners of the Sunshine Coalition's Friends of Open Government Award include such political opposites as Kansas Sens. Tim Huelskamp, R-Fowler, and Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka.

The patriots who helped create our nation knew the power of honest and open government because they faced so much venal and closed government. Thomas Jefferson said, "Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their government." Patrick Henry said liberty is never secure as long as government does business in secret.

Those are two sides of the same coin of freedom.

Randy Brown, a senior fellow in the Elliott School of Communication at Wichita State University and veteran editorial writer, is executive director of the Kansas Sunshine Coalition for Open Government.



Chicken lovers peck back

Young reader pens new song

To the Editor:

I like the idea that Mrs. Bartels has, to put the issue to song, so here's my version.

Oh, give me a home
Where my chickens can roam
And the roosters may crow
Night and day

Where often is heard
From the small barnyard herd
The "moo," "baa," "cluck,"
"oink"
And the "neigh."

What, what
Can we do
To pass the new
Ordinance through?

With everyone's help
And a "thank you" to Mom
Our girls will come
Home once again.

Our five chickens were pets and I miss them. And as far as I know they never caused any harm.

I don't think people will run out and get a barnyard animal just because the ordinance passes.

Thanks, Mom, for setting the standard.

Chloe Enfield, 13, Oberlin

Letters to the Editor

Owner gives history lesson

To the Editor:

Let's take a stroll down memory lane.

Back in November, I received a letter from the city stating that there had been several complaints about my chickens and because I didn't have the required acre of land, I needed to immediately relocate them.

I was concerned that my five hens had caused some type of damage to a neighbor's garden or presented a nuisance in some way. So I telephoned Gary Shike and explained that none of my neighbors had complained directly to me, and asked if he could give me some ideas as to the nature of the complaints that the letter spoke of. As a caring neighbor, I wanted to make it right with whom-ever my hens had offended, even paying for the damage.

Mr. Shike informed me that there were no actual complaints — just a "situation." Evidently, according to Mr. Shike, complaints were received about another person's chickens and when confronted, the chicken owner asked why she couldn't keep her chickens if the

lady on the highway could (meaning me).

"So there were no complaints about my chickens?" I asked.

"No, not about yours directly," confirmed Mr. Shike.

Nevertheless, I had been presented with the city ordinance about the keeping of animals as well as a request to relocate them (get rid of them) to outside of city limits.

So on Nov. 17, after free-ranging [the chickens] for over a year in our yard, we accepted an offer from a caring bird-lover nearby. That day we drove Little Hen, Spring, Flash, Autumn and Beautiful to a farm and said a long, tearful good-bye. It was more than I could bear to look in the rearview mirror at the long faces in the back seat.

I remind all Oberlin residents that under the current ordinance, I could have kept my chickens had I owned an acre of land. An acre of land... for 5 chickens... pardon me while I shake my head trying to figure out that one.

Melinda Enfield
(city council candidate)
Oberlin

Writers enjoys mild controversy

Woman enjoys paper

To the Editor:

I really enjoy getting *The Oberlin Herald* every week.

I know each time I open it, I will not only get news but the Opinion Page by Steve, Cynthia and Carolyn Sue, and the letters, etc., have a combination of "Say it like it is in plain language" and fun, laughs, and family things shared.

Resident feels we're lucky

To the Editor:

The citizens of Oberlin do not realize how lucky they are.

Were it not for Ms. Enfield's chickens, the "anti-chicken

people" would have become the "anti-something actually important" people.

Arthur Loyd Shelton
Oberlin

If your town politicians' greatest worries are a few chickens and a miniature horse... (you're lucky)!! Love the headline, "Voters will decide on chickens in city." Will

send a copy of that to friends in Hawaii.

Elsie Bryan
Atwood

Couple says thank you

To the Editor:

We wish to thank the people of Oberlin for being so kind and helpful while we were there to bring home our daughter Cathy Reiken and our 9-year-old granddaughter Sadie. We cannot remember all of the names of those who helped but thank you so much.

Police Chief Wade Lockhart, the folks at the funeral home, Jody and the neighbors, Father Henry Saw

Lone and the Oberlin Sacred Heart Catholic Church and the boys at the home, just to name a few.

We found so many who loved and cared for Sadie. She will miss her classmates and her church friends. She sends her love.

Roger and Catherine Wyatt
16272 Hollingsworth Road
Basehor, Kan., 66007
rwyattbasher@earthlink.net

Write

The Oberlin Herald encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of public interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

Mail letters to 170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan., 67749, or by e-mail to oberald@nwkans.com.

We do not publish anonymous letters or form letters.

Old auto gets them to Mexico, again

Our friends worry that our old car won't last much longer, but we just tacked on another 720 miles. The old girl already has over 218,000 miles on the odometer but we made the trip to El Paso, Texas, without a hiccup.

Hey, it's paid for. And I'm not willing to make car payments while there are still a few miles left in her.

Besides, some would say she's just "broke in."

-ob-

We're in El Paso to cross the border on Sunday. We'll be building our 16th house next week with Casas por Cristo (Houses for Christ).

We wanted a sneak peek at our building location, so we crossed the border a day early. We also stopped at the *mercado* (market) where we ate chile rellenos and tacos, and bought a case of vanilla.

We drove all over Juarez locating houses we have helped build over the years. What a thrill to see how the help we were able to give has



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
cplotts@nwkans.com

improved the lives of these families.

Without fail, the families have improved on the houses; maybe a coat of paint, maybe a fence of cinder blocks, or perhaps another room has been added on.

We found two families at home and the reception we received was the equivalent of "red carpet" treatment. Our Spanish is still not where we would like it to be, but hugs and kisses and tears need no interpretation.

-ob-

This installment of Outback will be short. Daylight Saving Time has cut into my morning. We have to get

ready for church and pack out of our room — and I'm already an hour behind schedule.

Dios de vindiga. God bless you.

From the Bible

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.

Psalm 119: 1, 2

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

E-mail: oberlinherald@nwkans.com

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STAFF

Steve Haynes editor
Kimberly Davis managing editor
Mary Lou Olson society editor
Judy Jordan proofreader
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David Bergling advertising manager
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