

Why can't commission meet in evening hours?

One of the strongest traditions in American government is the daytime county commission meeting.

No one seems to know why, but custom has a life of its own despite the fact that most voters have to work and can't take time to attend these important public meetings.

Across most of the country, commissioners meet during the day to talk with department heads, decide public business and hear requests from taxpayers. Nearly all these meetings start in the morning, and in some counties, they last all day. In a few, the commissioners meet more than one day a week.

Compare that to city councils and school board, both of which normally meet at night, doing what a county commission does in several days in just one or two sessions a month.

There are other differences. County commissioners usually are paid for their services and expected to put in more time than members of city and school boards. Few counties have a paid manager, while most cities and nearly all school districts have one.

Daytime meetings not only exclude voters interested in attending, they also keep many people from running for commissioner, since the daytime commitment conflicts with most work schedules.

Other than "we've always done it that way," is there any reason to perpetuate this system?

Or would taxpayers be better served by having county meetings in the evening, when more people could attend?

A small but growing movement is pushing counties to larger boards — three is the traditional number — night meetings and more professional administrators. Most change has come in larger counties, but everyone might

benefit from some change.

Why have meetings during the day?

For one thing, it's easier for county employees and department heads to attend during working hours, when they are on the clock. School and city employees have to attend night board meetings, however, and county workers could do the same.

County commissioners, as paid officials of the county, usually have more administrative responsibilities than city or school boards, it's true, but counties could have paid administrators. Many do already.

Some people commissioners meet with — salesmen and dealers, state officials, business people — might prefer daytime meetings. The same people, if they want to do business with the school district, will show up for an evening board meeting, however.

Against that possible advantage — and a century of tradition — put the fact that the taxpayers and voters — the people who hire commissioners and pay the bills — usually find it a lot easier to attend night meetings.

Spectators, while common at city and school meetings, are rare at county sessions. Commissioners work through their agenda mostly with county department heads and sometimes a reporter in attendance.

The cause of democracy might just be served by changing the county schedule, but we won't know until more counties try night meetings.

It's not that a lot of people would attend — people avoid government meetings like the plague unless they're upset — but then they could when something comes up they care about.

That's the advantage. The reason not to change is harder to see.

— Steve Haynes

New hens get busy with eggs

We're back in the egg business.

Remember the baby chicks we had last summer? Those babies are now strutting around their pen, crowing, cackling and laying eggs.

I'd better back up a little, though, because I'm getting ahead of myself. Because you probably also remember that we already had laying hens.

When the chicks got too big for their temporary pen, Jim built a little house for them right beside the chicken coop. He divided the outdoor enclosure so both sets of chickens had room to run and (our theory) get used to each other.

Didn't work out that way. If you have ever been around chickens, you know they can be savage. If one shows a sign of weakness or injury, the others pounce on it unmercifully. "Only the strong survive, law of the wild," that sort of thing. Now you know where the phrase "pecking order" comes from.

The two sets of chickens never did bond. They didn't even try to like each other. If one of the youngsters got close to the dividing fence, the old hens would hit it full force. There was no way we were going to have a blended chicken family.

A kind neighbor agreed to take the older chickens and peace was restored to the Plotts family farm.



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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It takes awhile for pullets to begin laying, but once they started, they have kept up a steady stream of little "cackle berries." And, they keep getting bigger.

Now, our only problem is we have almost as many roosters as we do hens; somebody's gonna have to "take the noodle bath."

We can have only one Main Man, one Top Dog, one Cock of the Walk. The one with the best-looking tail feathers will win.

My brother Bill spent Friday night with us.

He had driven up to visit the old Kelley farmstead, now owned by his son Brian. It was too late to drive home, so he bunked with us. He took us out for pizza and we stayed up way too late talking.

Saturday morning, I made a modified version of my famous Texas Trash breakfast and his plans to "get an early start" disappeared along

with the hash browns. You know how it is — eating, coffee and conversation seem to go together.

Hard to believe, but my mom died 10 years ago this month.

Time has a way of softening memories. But there is scarcely a day goes by that I don't quote her or remind myself of her. She affected my life more than any other person.

I'm who I am because of her. And I'm OK with that.

From the Bible

For not the bearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.

Romans 2:13

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Boston in February? Brrrrr!

Publishers are notoriously cheap.

If you don't believe me, ask any of my staff.

That's why Steve and I found ourselves in Milwaukee and Boston in February. The same logic will send us to Denver this month and Mississippi in June.

Most press conventions are held in great places during off season. Believe me, February is definitely the off season in Boston. It snowed almost the entire time we were there. It wasn't a storm, just constant flurries that turned the great view from our hotel room (we were on the 21st floor) into a sea of sparkling lights in a fog bank.

Still, as I looked out over the cityscape last week, I wasn't worried about the snow. I wasn't going outside anyway. I was happy that my trip to Milwaukee had been the week before.

We had driven, in a rented car, from the Wisconsin Newspaper Association annual convention in Wisconsin Dells into Milwaukee in the same sort of light snow as was falling in Boston. The temperature was in the high 20s and the Wisconsin highway crews were busy plowing and spreading salt and sand.

The highway was slushy but not slick, but we found time to stop at a cheese shop, since it seemed a shame to leave Wisconsin without



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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some of the local flavor. Also, there were cheese shops on every corner, about like expensive coffee shops are in Seattle.

Now, as I looked out over Boston on Friday, I smiled. The trip to Wisconsin had been nice. Last week, however, the Weather Channel on television was giving the Boston temperature as 23 and Milwaukee's as -37.

I figured we might be in an off season, but we'd beaten Old Man Winter on this one.

Besides, our hotel, the Marriott at Copley Place, has raised, covered walkways to several shopping areas. Without ever putting on a coat or going outside, Steve and I were able to cover several miles of shops, restaurants and hotels.

This made for great window shopping. However, since the area is, to say the least, upscale, I wasn't tempted to even go into the stores. I'm just not the type to shop for jewelry at Tiffany or Christian Dior; clothes at Armani, Salvatore

Ferragamo and St. Croix; or shoes at Jimmy Choo, Gucci and Louis Vuitton.

In fact, I was afraid they might charge me for just looking, and as I said before, publishers are notoriously cheap.

We rounded off our visit to Boston and the New England Press Association with a visit to the New England Aquarium, where we were eyeball to eyeball with sharks, rays and tropical fish. I got to pet a starfish while Steve counted lobsters.

Although we had taken a taxi to get to our hotel from the airport, we took the subway to get to the aquarium and on to the airport for the return trip. The taxi costs \$35 but the trip back was \$8, and it was an adventure. It would have been \$4 if we had just gone straight to the airport, so the side trip to the aquarium costs us a whole \$4. Plus \$39 for entry fees, and \$35 for lunch at Legal Seafoods.

Hey! Maybe some publishers aren't so cheap after all.

State too eager on farmers?

The Kansas Corporation Commission put in force a new program in January 2006 aimed at regulating Kansas farm vehicles, mostly large trucks used to transport crops.

However, grain hauled by the producer during harvest to a local elevator or feedlot that will be processed or consumed in Kansas is considered intrastate commerce and meets the requirements of state law for an exemption which allows the farmer to tag that truck and use it "not for hire."

Keep in mind this exemption applies only to the first time that grain is hauled to the bin, elevator or feedlot. If a farmer hauls that same grain back out of the bin, elevator or feedlot, that falls under the interstate rules, and must be hauled in a truck properly tagged under commission regulations.

This is a concern for me, as I know many family farms that use semi-trailer trucks to haul their binned corn to feedlots during the winter. In the next week, I plan to meet with Secretary Deb Miller of the Kansas Department of Transportation, the Kansas Corporation Commission, and U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran to encourage them to extend the deadline on this new regulation and have Congress readdress this issue.

We all agree that the safety of all large vehicles is important, but this law seems a bit harsh, considering it will harm most family farms. These farmers do not truck 365



Letter from Topeka

By Sen. Ralph Ostmeier
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days a year.

Meetings have been scheduled throughout Kansas on this issue, and I encourage all farmers to attend. You all need to voice your concerns in hopes that we can work towards some sort of compromise.

Please feel free to contact me on this issue so I know your thoughts as well.

I have been appointed to a special subcommittee to study virtual schools in Kansas education. Kansas virtual school attendance, where students work online on a computer, has increased from around 60 students during the 1998-1999 school year to over 2,000 last year. Some worry that virtual school students are not getting enough hours of instruction compared to those in public and private schools. The committee wants to know: 1) How many virtual schools are actually operating in Kansas; 2) What requirements are being enforced by the Kansas Department of Education for virtual programs; 3) Any discrepancies in the costs of the

different programs.

The focus will be to ensure a consistent level of quality for students utilizing a virtual program.

The Senate caucused to discuss the Sunflower Electric bill. We will begin hearings next week and my hope is that there is enough compromise in this bill to satisfy all groups. With the many important issues facing the state, I feel we need to resolve this issue and move on.

The proposed Holcomb power plant is no doubt the cleanest and most modern and safe coal-fired plant in the nation, if not the world. This affects five utility cooperatives in my district alone, and without compromise it will result in further rising costs for Kansas power.

I can be reached by writing to Sen. Ralph Ostmeier, State Capitol, 300 SW 10th Street, Room 128-S, Topeka, Kansas, 66612, or call (785) 296-7399. My e-mail address is ostmeier@senate.state.ks.us. Let me know if you would like to be on my mailing list.

Easterner praises our prairie dogs

To the Editor:

I have been following with great interest the stories about the re-introduction of the black footed ferret to Kansas. I applaud the efforts of the ranchers who are trying it and condemn the antiquated and devious efforts of the Logan County government.

The simple fact of nature remains that the more diverse an environment is, the more species alive in an ecosystem, the healthier it is for all species, including man. It's time for the farmers and ranchers all over the world to return to a system of crop rotation, elimination of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, husbandry of varied animals, propagation and utilization of the natural species, and live with a system that nourishes

Mother Earth instead of slowly killing her.

There is ample scientific proof that crops grown without chemicals are healthier, more productive and more nourishing than those grown in a chemically supported monocrop system. If prairie dogs were such a danger to hoofed animals that they really needed to be eliminated, I could support it. I suspect that deer, antelope, bison and elk would not have been native to the prairies of North America if the prairie dogs were so dangerous.

The prairie ecosystem evolved

with all these animal species and more, and was more stable and healthier because of the diversity. If Mother Nature thought the prairie dogs were a detriment to her prairies, she would have eliminated them thousands of years ago.

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