

Compromise could ease way for consolidations

The Kansas Legislature is moving toward a compromise which could ease the way for cities and counties to consolidate, both or rural and urban areas.

The key to this is a decision by the Kansas Farm Bureau to back off a longtime stance against any such bill. One provision of this year's version would allow local residents to decide critical issues about a consolidation plan, including the requirement for a "dual majority" in any vote.

Farm Bureau for years has insisted on a dual majority in any consolidation plan. This usually kills the plan, because it's hard to get a separate majority in the city and rural sections of a county.

And so, the consolidation movement has been stalled for years. A couple have taken place, in tiny Greeley County and urban Wyandotte, but both required a special act of the Legislature.

It's not hard to see why Farm Bureau might want to back off how, however. A proposal this year to consolidate Kansas' 105 counties into 13 megacounties would threaten the very fabric of our rural life.

Filed by Sen. Chris Steineger of Kansas City, Kansas, the bill proposed a state commission to write an actual consolidation plan, but lists possible combinations for 13 supercounties. Fifteen counties in northwest Kansas would be merged into one, for instance. Three nearby counties would disappear into Sedgwick, dominated by Wichita.

Some Kansas conservatives have jumped on this bandwagon, lured perhaps by outrageous claims that the forced consolidation would save the state upwards of three-quarters of a billion dollars.

First, it's unlikely that savings would be anywhere near that. Most government con-

solidations wind up with as many employees and as much expense as before. It's just a way to centralize power.

Second, it's not likely that forming huge counties will make things more efficient, as some have claimed. If size equated with efficiency in government, then the federal government would be the most efficient and the county government the least.

And everyone knows how true that is. What this proposal is about is disenfranchising thousands of people in rural and suburban areas who would no longer have access to their county government. Commissioners often seen in the Main Street coffee shop would be replaced by faceless county council members living dozens, maybe hundreds of miles away.

Courthouses would be closed to save money and services doled out over the Internet or by mail in a soulless "Wal-Mart" approach to government.

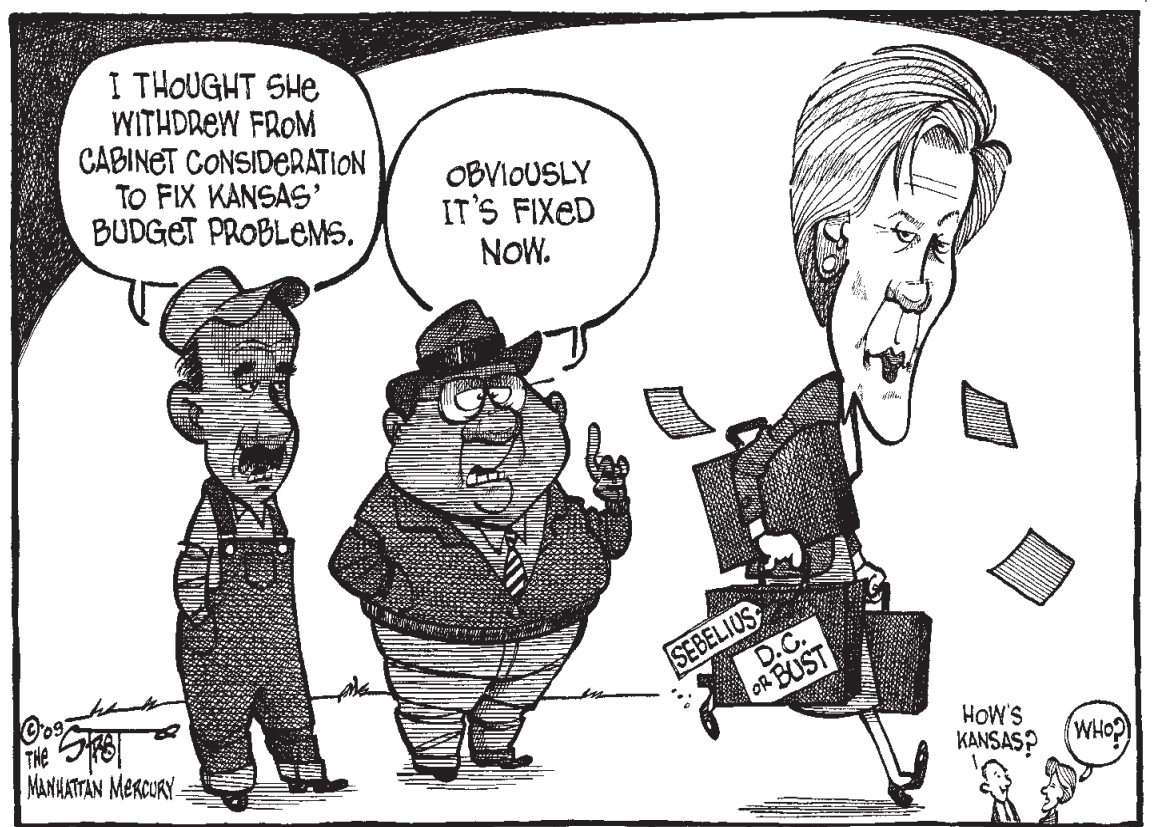
Taxes won't go down, but you won't be able to find anyone to complain to about them.

No, this is not a pleasant future.

Far better to do what the state Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations proposed in the compromise bill this year and allow cities and counties, or adjacent counties, to merge if they wish.

Voluntary mergers, determined by voters in the areas affected, would result in more efficiency while keeping government closer to voters. It would make a lot more sense to consolidate El Dorado and Butler County, for instance, than to merge both into one county with Wichita.

In the end, local voters, not the Legislature, should decide if they want and can afford to keep their cities and counties. We're glad Farm Bureau has seen the light. — *Steve Haynes*



Book distracts her from job

I am easily distracted. This morning I had to drag myself away from a book about the tombstones and graves of famous and infamous men, women and lawmen of the 1800s.

There is info about Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickock and many other lesser-known pioneers. Did you know, for instance, that when Buffalo Bill Cody was buried on Lookout Mountain, the governor of Colorado dispatched a tank to guard the grave?

Like I said, I had to tear myself away, but the introduction is enticing, with promises of stories about pioneers, preachers, gamblers, horse thieves and women of ill repute. Maybe I'll do a book report next week.

Boy! That takes me back. I have always loved to read, but when I was in school, I hated giving an oral book report. While I awaited my turn, my hands would be clammy, my mouth would be dry as cotton and I would break out in a cold sweat. As for listening to the reports of my classmates — forget it. I went deaf. Perhaps my classmates were as terrified as I was, but at that age, all any of us could think of was ourselves and how we felt.

Maturity does have its rewards. Today, public speaking doesn't frighten me. At least not if I know



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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my subject. Give me a microphone and a chance to speak about mission trips to Mexico or prison ministry, and I can wax eloquent with the best of them. I might not be so glib if I had to discuss world trade or global warming/cooling.

Speaking of Mexico, the trip is off. We received a call last Wednesday from the Casas por Cristo ministry in El Paso. The college group we were scheduled to escort canceled their build in Juarez. Instead, they will be working in Acuña, a much safer area. Casas por Cristo has plenty of staff there, so our services weren't needed.

We were willing, but we understand the concerns of the college administration for the young people in their care. Maybe the drug wars will be settled by next year. One thing for sure: Our children and other family members are happy. We called everyone to tell them we weren't going and they were all relieved.

Geraldo Rivera had an interesting analogy of the situation in Juarez, where the drug lords and their gangs are killing each other by the dozens. "It's sort of like a self-cleaning oven," he said. "Eventually, the problem will take care of itself."

We wrapped up our first week with son, James. He appreciates my home cooking and I am doing my best to oblige him. This week's menu includes chicken-fried steak, pork roast and burritos smothered with my green chile gravy.

He has really inspired us to stay busy on the push to finish the last three rooms. He keeps plugging away at moving "stuff" out of the way and taking down the old suspended ceilings. He also completed wiring the upstairs and is ready to move on to ripping out the old lath and plaster. Ah, the vigor of youth. But, his job search is intensifying, so we better take advantage of his enthusiasm while we can.

Bag lady can't handle stock

Red bags, blue bags, green bags, black bags, beige bags.

I have bags brought back from conventions. Bags bought to bring home groceries that I got in Kansas, Colorado, Georgia, Washington, D.C., and Mexico. I even have one Steve brought back with presents from Taiwan.

They are all there for the great effort to save the world.

When the grocery bagger asks that inevitable question, "Paper or plastic," I can smile superiorly and say, "neither, I brought my own recycled canvas bag."

Of course, that never happens, because all those bags are all sitting on the front seat of my car.

In fact, there are bags on the front seat and behind the driver's seat. There are several in Steve's truck. And when we go to the store, we bring out our groceries in paper or plastic 70 percent of the time. Another 20 percent of the time, one of us rushes out to grab the bags and 10 percent of the time, we actually remember to take them with us.

Now, 10 percent isn't very good.

A major league baseball player would be playing in Hoboken for a long time if his batting average was .100.

A surgeon would not do well



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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if he saved only 10 percent of his patients.

A — oh well, you get the idea.

And I'm not the only one. I've been doing an informal survey. I've asked 10 people so far. Eight of them said they have canvas bags that they plan to use at the grocery store. Of those, five said they keep them in their cars and never remember to take them into the store, two said they forget their's at home and one said they're all in the garage full of recyclables.

There has got to be a way to remember to take those dratted bags into the store.

I've tried leaving my purse on top of them. I just grab the purse and hop out of the car.

I've tried putting my grocery list in or on them. Grocery list? Who ever remembers the grocery list?

I've thought of just using one of the bags as my purse and stuffing all the rest inside. However, while

my bag may not be the latest style, a shopping-bag purse sounds really ugly. Unstylish, even.

My final solution is to have the grocer run a "penny" operation. They would all have a rack of bags. If you need one, take it. If you bring two, you leave one, just like they do with pennies.

I'm not sure that this would work, because somebody would fill all the bags with recyclables and leave them in her garage, but it does sound better than the other idea I had. That may be what happens anyway.

There are no more free bags. You bring your own or you pay for a new bag.

I don't like this idea, but one store I visited in Mexico does it — which explains why I have several Mexican shopping bags — and a plan not to visit that store again.

Obit reporter won Pulitzer

You could take Jim Sheeler for an undertaker in his plain black suit, all three buttons buttoned down, if it weren't for the face.

Sheeler looks like a college kid, not the winner of a Pulitzer Prize or one of the most brilliant reporters in the country.

Who else could have turned the obituary beat into a Pulitzer? At most newspapers, reporters run from obituaries like dogs fleeing a bath.

Reporters, especially young reporters, crave action. They see the obit desk as a dead end. They disdain the beat as they once disdained the police station, but then a few years ago a Miami woman, Edna Buchanan, turned the police beat into a Pulitzer, and that into a lucrative career as a crime novelist.

Where others saw tedium, Jim Sheeler just saw stories, story after fascinating story. He started at a little weekly in Boulder, Colo., expanding the spare obits turned in by funeral homes into beautiful little features about someone's life. Pretty soon, he said, people were calling asking him to write obits.

He carried his craft on to *The Denver Post* and then to the late, and much lamented, *Rocky Mountain News*, where he did other stories. It was another obit, though, that propelled him on the road to fame.

The editors sent him out to cover death of a Marine from suburban Denver, the first native son of that state to fall in Iraq. Sheeler, who already knew the grave diggers at Fort Logan National Cemetery, went out in search of another story no one else saw.

Soon, he had burrowed into the Marine Corps burial detail that served families in the Denver region. He followed the Marines as they helped bury their fallen comrades, getting to know the fami-



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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lies of the men, the Marine detail and their commander, Maj. Steve Beck.

The result was a beautifully written, moving series of stories on these fallen Marines that won the Pulitzer for feature writing in 2006 (along with a companion Pulitzer for feature photography). Sheeler now has turned that into a book, "Final Salute." He had left his job and begun teaching at the University of Colorado before the *Rocky* folded last month.

The two brought the count to four Pulitzers harvested by the 150-year-old newspaper in the eight years before it died.

Now sharing his insight into news with students and professionals, Sheeler told how he got such a remarkable insight into the lives and grief of these people — and how he finds stories where others fear to look. Some of his guidelines:

- Everyone has a story.
- Often, they leave you a gift — a quote, some writing, something about their life.
- Treat people as you would your own family. Be human.
- People will give you the gift of their story.
- Keep your eyes and ears open for details, surroundings, little incidents.
- One secret — just being there and listening when you can be that fly on the wall. That's where it's at.
- It's just a matter of being there —

you don't have to ask questions. Sheeler said he stays in touch with all the families he covered during his project. They invite him to their gatherings, include him in their trials and triumphs. Sometimes, he gets choked up talking about them. At one point, he played a video on the project.

"This is the point where I usually have trouble talking," he said as he pushed the button. "If you don't cry at some of these things, well..."

And the war? His view may come through in the stories, he said, but he doesn't talk about it.

"I have my opinion," Sheeler said, "but I don't tell people. I don't think I'm smart enough to tell someone else what to think."

And that makes him pretty smart, compared to most of us.

From the Bible

I have called upon thee, for thou wilt hear me, O God; incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech.

Show thy marvelous loving kindness, O thou that savest by thy right hand them which put their trust in thee from those that rise up against them.

Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings.

Psalms 17:6-8

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