

How can rural Kansans fend off consolidations?

What can people in rural Kansas do to fend off the uncaring bean counters back east who would have us drive 50 to 90 miles to get a set of tags for the pickup, confer with the tax assessor or protest to the commissioners?

How can we keep them from forcing our kids to ride a bus for an hour or more to get to an "efficient" school in a town big enough to have a McDonalds and a Wal-Mart?

This is a scary prospect if you live off the Interstate, where distance is measured in time, not miles. Proposals for massive consolidations for both counties and school districts may make sense in the urban east, but not out here where we and our kids would suffer.

Most state officials and even most legislators today have never lived in a small town. They have no idea how life is like west of Salina, which they view as the edge of civilization. If it costs more to run a school out here, they say, consolidate. If counties are small or inefficient, put a few together.

Even if they stopped to consider the realities, it's doubtful most would understand.

In Johnson County, with nearly half a million people, they get by with one courthouse in Olathe. All the counties in this corner of the state don't have a tenth of the people — in nine counties, we have about 37,000 — but maintain nine courthouses with nine sets of elected and appointed officials. And city government of nine county-seat towns.

So, consolidation proponents maintain, just merge a bunch of counties — one proposal calls for 36 in place of 105 — and save nearly \$1 billion a year.

First of all, the savings are dubious. No one really knows how much the state might save by consolidating counties. Many of the "savings" would be paid for by people who would have to drive 50 to 90 miles out of their way to get to the courthouse instead of just going downtown.

Branch offices in the old courthouses? Ah,

there go the "savings." Besides, they'd never last past the first budget crunch.

And schools? With one high school serving up to nine counties, some kids are going to be on a bus for nearly two hours each way. With activity routes, their bus might not get them home until 9-10 p.m. after practice.

We're supposed to cheer this?

So what do we do?

Consolidate. Do it ourselves, but do it our way.

We all need to keep a close eye on Greeley County, where voters agreed to merge the county and the city of Tribune — named for 19th century editor Horace Greeley and his newspaper — into one unified government to serve 1,500 people.

That's one route we might take, combining city and county government to keep decisions close to home while still saving some money. Some counties might like this idea, others might not.

The Legislature should let the people decide. School districts are already doing that.

As it has with school districts, the state should make it easy to consolidate any government units. Today, it's next to impossible because each merger takes an act of the Legislature.

And while the state should not finance gross inefficiency, it should not force every county and school district into a one-size-fits-all mold. It should trust people to make their own decisions about what they can afford and are willing to pay for.

We think most rural Kansans are willing to pay for good local schools and local government within an easy drive.

We must answer the call and look for ways to cut our own costs, but the state must give us the freedom to do that. It's us, not those back east, who will be driving all over if they do not.

— Steve Haynes

Rain makes everything green

The rain last week has caused an explosion of green in the yard and fields.

As we drove across Kansas and Nebraska over the weekend, all we could see was endless fields of green wheat and alfalfa, with some fallow wheat and mud brown waiting to be planted.

Out in the yard the grass is greening up and growing after a long, dry winter. The daffodils and grape hyacinths are blooming. Here and there, you can even see a tulip opening up its bright red or yellow blossom.

Down by the creek, every frog in western Kansas seemed to be singing its heart out. Life is short and tough when you're a frog. You gotta get out there and find your lady love right away if there is going to be a good crop of tadpoles later in the spring.

The migrating birds soar in huge flocks and settle in the cedar-tree fence rows at night. If you go up and clap or shout late at night, you can hear a huge rustle of wings and watch birds dart in and out of the tops of the evergreens.

The bird feeders out back are being drained at a great rate and



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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the corn on the cob that Steve has had out by the alley all winter has suddenly become a cornless cob. Either the squirrels or a pair of blue jays have found us. Either way, he replaced the corn with the hope of seeing our guests.

Spring is definitely in the air.

Out in the street as the rain came down, you could see people dart from car to building. As they entered, they would shake the water off themselves and smile. No one was complaining about the miraculous water from the sky. Most of us were just glad it was rain and not a couple of feet of snow.

I got down on my hands and knees and studied my garden. The little lettuce and spinach plants are just starting to emerge, as are the radishes on the side of the house.

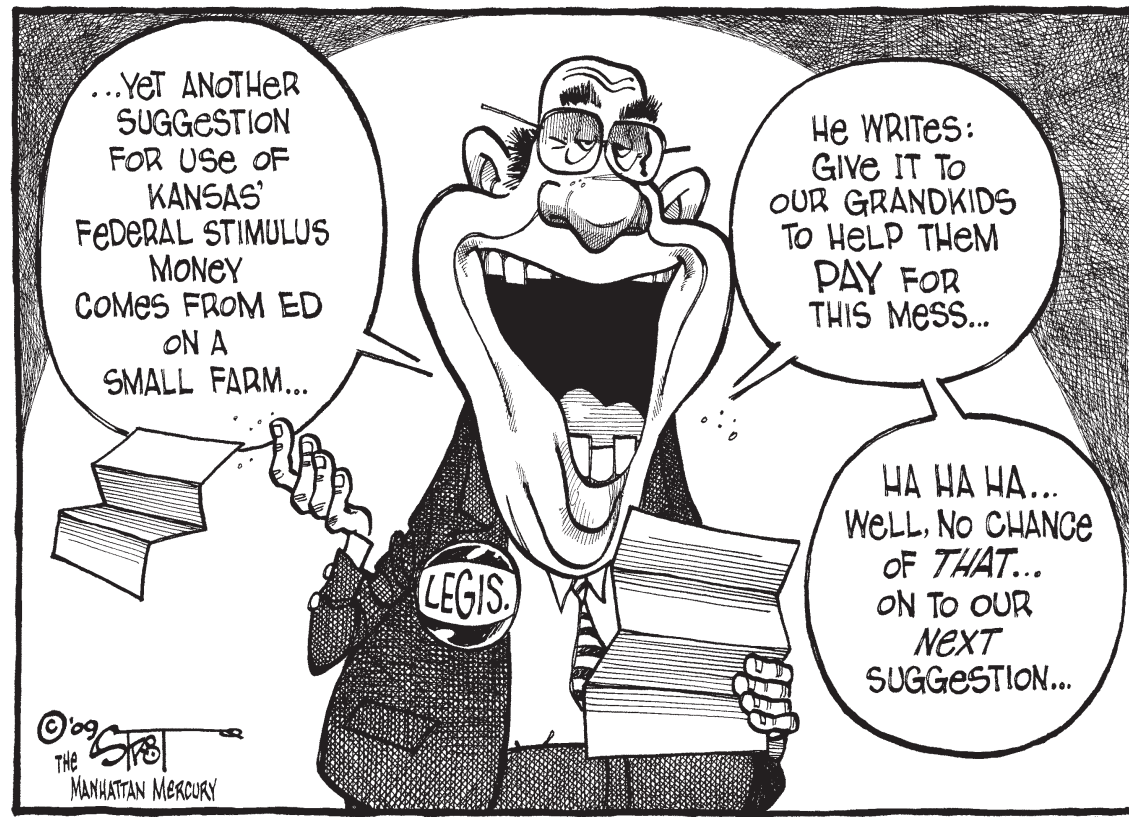
I found several earthworms on the patio. I moved them over to the garden, where they could work their magic on the soil.

I love gardening, but I got carried away buying seeds. I have enough seeds to plant a garden about six times the size of mine.

The sun was shining today, and I made the most of it by pulling weeds and getting grass out of the garden.

Tomorrow, I'll probably be hobbling off to work. That seems to happen every year when the rain and sun come and send me out to play in the dirt.

And it's worth every groan and moan tomorrow to get out in the sunshine with the birds, frogs, flowers and worms.



Does God have a day off?

Sunday, a little girl stayed home from church because she wasn't feeling well. She asked her mother, "Does God have the day off?"

Her mother answered, "God works every day."

Puzzled, the little girl said, "I thought God rested on the seventh day."

Funny how child-like faith cuts right to the heart of the issue.

Our Bible study group is getting into a deep topic: Heaven. We might need a child's perspective. Everyone has their own ideas about what it will be like, who will be there, who won't be there and most importantly, how we get there.

We're finding that a lot of our ideas are preconceived notions we're carrying over from childhood or ideas planted from books we have read. At any rate, it's going to be an interesting study.

— ob —

I met my first midwife this weekend.

Now, that I'm "retired," I get to pick and choose stories that I want to write. When I was given the choice between midwives in western Kansas and something about hospitals, I jumped at the opportunity.

Birthing babies is fascinating to almost everyone, especially those of us who have had babies. Everyone's birth experience is unique.

I talked to midwife Sara Sowers on the phone and got to meet her in person at the home of one of her patients. The two women have



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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their "professional" relationship as well as a personal one. While Sara, the midwife, conducted a monthly exam of the mother-to-be, their families were visiting upstairs, preparing to share a meal together. Children wandered in and out, comfortable in their own home, seeing what Mommy and Sara were doing and listening to their potential brother or sister's heartbeat. It was a cool experience.

Almost makes me want to have another baby. Almost.

— ob —

To cheer or not to cheer is the debate in a neighboring town. The school board has decided to cancel the high school cheerleading squad for next year due to a lack of interest and because of some undisclosed issues.

The superintendent wrote a "Letter to the Editor" explaining the board's position and the mother of a girl who has dreamed of being a high school cheerleader wrote a letter also. Both sounded disappointed.

Back when I was in school, there were no sports for girls. Cheerleading was as close to athletics as a girl

could get. Then Title 9 took effect and suddenly girls had as many chances to benefit from all the advantages of sports as boys did. They could learn good sportsmanship, earn scholarships and learn about team effort.

I'm not sure how this school chooses its cheerleaders. In some schools, a panel of teachers make the choice. In others, the student body decides, which makes it more of a popularity contest.

Surely, there could be an equitable answer to the problem. Perhaps they should limit the number of cheerleaders to a more manageable number, like six or eight; assign a teacher (not a parent) to be the group's sponsor; insist on at least a C grade in all classes, not send cheerleaders to every single sporting event, and insist that a cheerleader's behavior must represent, at all times, the best of what the school stands for.

It's a tough call, one I'm not prepared to make. Besides, no one would want me for a cheerleading sponsor. The first thing I would do is put those girls back into long skirts.

Press secretary briefs editors

Robert Gibbs is a busy guy these days. He comes to work in the wee hours and often stays well past dark.

Still, the president's press secretary makes time to "brief" a group of country editors who've come to Washington for a conference. The group clears security and is escorted into the Old Executive Office building. The structure — just west of the White House — first housed the departments of State, War and the Navy in a day when the government was much smaller.

The editors wait 20, 25 minutes, then hear that Gibbs is meeting with the president, who's just back from a brief vacation. An aide comes in, says Gibbs is delayed. Deputy Press Secretary Bill Burton will come in his place.

About that time, Gibbs, looking cool and collected, strides in. He apologizes for keeping the group waiting.

"It's hard to separate all the challenges we've faced in the first 60 days," Gibbs said. "Our big focus has been on getting this economy turned around."

He reels off a list of other pressing issues: the budget, the G-20 economic summit, financial aid package, "seeing that what's been on the news hopefully doesn't happen again."

An editor asks about a postal labor provision the White House supposedly put in the budget, then took out when unions objected. It's an idea planted earlier by a Republican senator, and Gibbs obviously has no clue. He says he'll check and get



Along the Sappa

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an answer. (So far, though, none is forthcoming.)

Asked about Iraq and Afghanistan, the press secretary says the administration plans to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq over 18 to 19 months while slowly giving more responsibility to the Iraqis.

"And to do so in a way that represents a safe and responsible strategy for the coming day that will build on this decision," he adds.

In Afghanistan, he says, while sending more troops, "the president believes the situation can't be solved by military means alone."

Gibbs, a quiet Alabamian, says he looks at five to six newspapers each morning, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and the White House has a clipping service that surveys papers across the country.

"There's not a lot of people where I'm from who read the *Washington Post*," he said. "To find out what's going on, you need to look at what's in other papers."

The White House gets up to 40,000 letters and messages a day, he said, and the president sees about 10 a day to get a sense of the causes and concerns people have on their minds.

"He responds to about half of those letters each day," Gibbs added.

President Obama, he said, sees four to five newspapers a day or more.

Though he's taken on some big-shot television critics, Gibbs said he sees his job as to provide as much information to the media as possible.

"I look at it as how can we best serve the customer," he said.

The president, he said, "has an amazing confidence in the American people."

Then he takes his leave, off to finish arrangements and prep for an Obama interview with "60 Minutes."

It may be there's no rest for the wicked, but at the White House, it seems, there's no time to rest.

From the Bible

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Romans 9:28

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