

Study could be a threat to rural Kansas courts

A study of the state's judicial system announced this month by Lawton R. Nuss, chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court, is the kind that never bodes well for rural Kansas, especially western Kansas.

Chief Nuss said the 24-member "Blue Ribbon Panel," made up of judges, lawyers, legislators, court workers and a few citizens, will look for ways to improve the way courts serve Kansas. What he really means is ways to handle the growing caseload without any more state money.

Kansas courts have increased fees to keep up with their budget, but still had to enforce unpaid furloughs last year to make ends meet, closing court offices for days at a time. With the state budget already facing a \$550 million shortfall next year, there's little prospect of getting more from the Legislature this year.

The panel will use figures from a "weighted" caseload study initiated by the courts last summer to come up with its recommendations, the chief said. Whatever those are, and the group has not yet begun its work, we might expect cuts in court services, judge positions and coverage for our area.

The chief justice said the panel "is authorized to consider such issues as the number of court locations needed to provide Kansans access to justice, the services to be provided in each court location, hours of operation, appropriate use of technology, cost containment or reductions and flexibility in the use of human resources."

Since court unification in the 1970s did away with county courts, with an elected county judge in each county, Kansas by law has maintained at least one judge in each county. Some counties have a district judge, others a district magistrate judge who may or may not

be a lawyer.

Judges are elected in rural areas, but appointed in most urban counties. They serve 31 judicial districts across the state, with from one to 26 district judges.

When courts look to cut costs elsewhere and focus on the growing caseload in urban counties, one of the answers often suggested is to cut back on services, employees and judicial positions in rural counties. So far, that has not happened, but it's clear the new commission could take another look at the "one judge, one county" promise.

Rural Kansas does not make for efficiency. With 105 counties, the state has a widely dispersed local government system. Yet the state expects, even requires, more of counties each year.

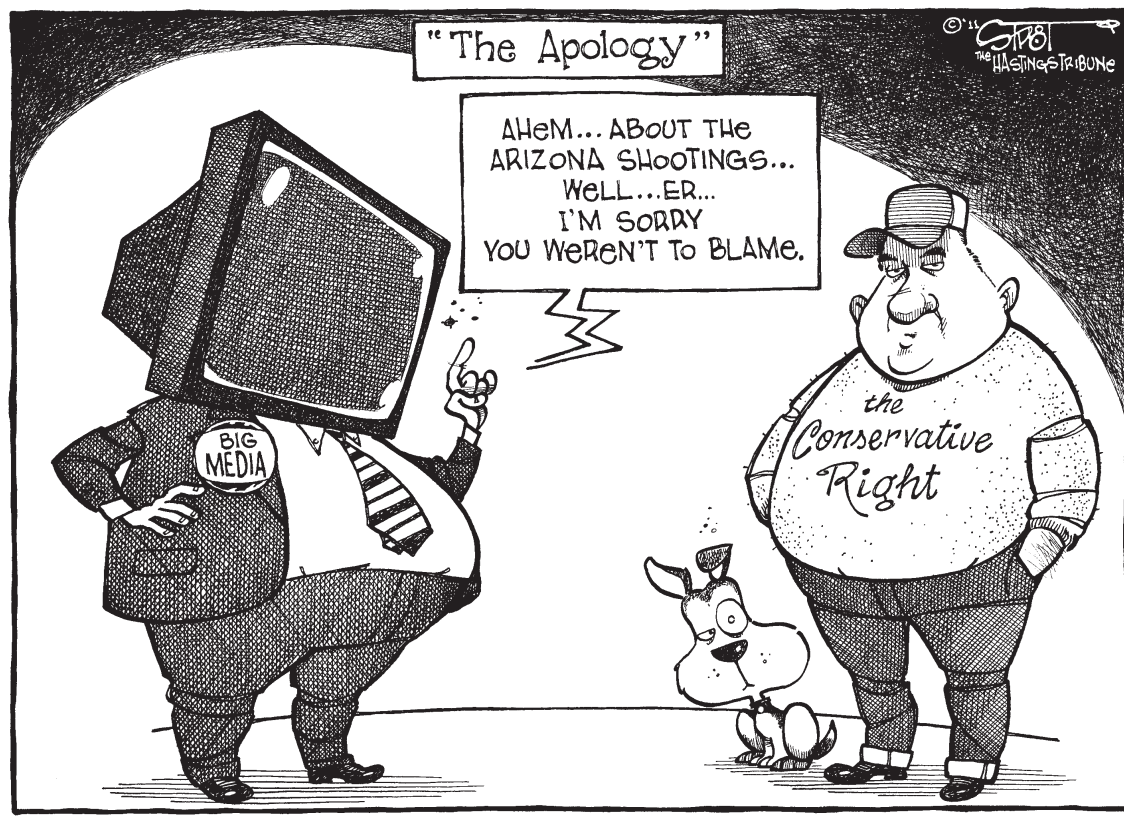
If there's pressure to cut court services in rural areas and shift resources to the cities, we'd like to know how people in rural Kansas will continue to receive the kind of service they are used to, and deserve.

Will defendants be hauled across two or three counties to see a judge? Will people have to drive half a day to see judicial records? Will filing court documents become an all-day trip for some?

Who knows? Judicial slots allocated to small counties are coveted by the cities. There's no money to grow the system, so something has to give.

All of rural Kansas needs to watch the progress of this effort by the courts. The panel includes several rural residents, some from western Kansas, but pressure will be great to shift resources to the cities.

We will have to fight for our courts and services. — *Steve Haynes*



Headline sparks memories

The story started out on the back page of the regional daily, just a small piece about unrest in the Arab world. Nothing new there.

But wait. This wasn't happening in Iran or Iraq or even Egypt. It was in Tunisia.

Tunisia! I've been there. I've talked to these people. I've eaten with them, had my picture taken with them and enjoyed this moderate Islamic country.

This is the country I visited in 2007 with other publishers from across the country.

It was a government-sponsored trip, and since the Tunisians were paying, I tried to look at the good in this beautiful little country on the edge of the Mediterranean. I even dipped my feet in this almost-mythical sea.

We were shown the university, a research station, a couple of small businesses, mosques and a school. We looked at ruins of buildings and monuments put up by the Romans.

We met with members of both houses of the parliament and were shown some of their most sacred places.

I saw a lot that was good in Tunisia. There is universal suffrage. Women are not required to wear anything special while out in public and can serve in public office. In fact, many of the government officials we met were women.

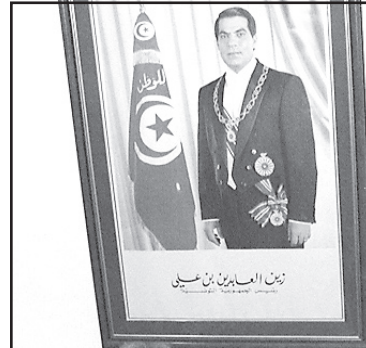
Although the people are mostly Islamic and mosques are everywhere, we were told that plural marriage was forbidden.

Islamic scholars in Tunisia explain the Koran's passages on the issue this way: when God said men could have more than one wife if he treated them equally, it was a joke.



Open Season

By *Cynthia Haynes*
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CYNTHIA HAYNES stood in front of a photo of former Tunisian President Ben Ali.

see the problems, some were admitted openly and some glossed over.

While the population is well educated, unemployment is high and the country tends to export its young people because they can't find jobs at home.

Then there was the government. Everyone praised President Ben Ali, who seemed to be a benevolent dictator. Tunisia had seen, at that time, only had two presidents since independence from France in 1957. And photos of Ben Ali were everywhere.

Back in 2007, the leader of our group gave us what he called Tunisia 101:

1. Universal education.
2. Equality for women. Equality for all.
3. Struggle against fundamentalism.
4. Commitment to dialogue instead of confrontation.
5. Moderation in all things.

But everyone wants a job and eventually people do get tired of a dictator. So for now, Tunisia is in the headlines as confrontation takes over where dialogue failed.

These are still good people who want what we want — freedom, justice and a job.

I hope they get it.

No man, they said, could treat all women in his life equally.

Tunisia has universal free education through university level. It's a well-educated country, although the school we visited would seem very primitive by U.S. standards.

But even five years ago, we could

Snow makes for a lazy day

I don't know what kids nowadays call it but, "back in my time," we called having a totally lazy day "vegging out".

A week ago, that's exactly what Jim and I did — all day. We vegged out, chilled out, checked out.

It had snowed all day the day before, and during the night, too. There would be no outside working for Jim, and we knew it the night before.

We popped popcorn and stayed up way too late watching old movies. We slept in the next morning, and spent the day doing absolutely nothing. I didn't cook, clean, do laundry or dress. Jim was more productive than I because at least he did some research on the Internet for a Bible study he was preparing.

I read some magazines that had been piling up, worked a Sudoku puzzle and read a couple of chapters in a book I'm working on. It's the biography of Satchel Page, the black baseball player who, by some accounts, was the best pitcher who ever lived.

And you know what? I didn't feel even a glimmer of guilt. That's the benefit of having a few years under your belt. I don't think I'm going to Hell because I wasted a day. I know, I know... "idle hands are the devil's workshop." But, the Lord also wants us to rest our bodies and minds, every now and again.



Out Back

By *Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts*
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Normally, Jim and I set a pretty fast pace. We have a lot of irons in the fire. We both know how to relax, but the opportunity to do it at the same time was what made the day memorable. The next day it was business as usual, but what a fun day our play day was. In fact, I'm paying a little closer attention to the weather forecast in hopes we might have another snow day real soon.

Two of our Texas granddaughters celebrated birthdays last week. Taylor turned 12 and Alexandria 16. They both have friends out here. Taylor made friends with kids from our church when she stayed with us, and Alex lived here for three years, so she has old classmates she knows.

I pay attention to the activities of their friends here as a way of knowing what our grandchildren might be interested in. When I showed Alex's picture to one of her old friends, he said, "Wow! She's changed." I'll say she's changed. She left western

Kansas a gangly 12 year old and is now a stunning young woman with her sights set on college and a career in forensic science.

Taylor's friend, John, used to be her height, but he's since shot up. I mentioned to him that Taylor was still on the short side and that I needed to put a brick on his head to slow his growth. He, of course, wants to get even taller. I think he has basketball in his future.

Taylor is 12 going on 21. She is a poised, confident girl who loves to read and is into cooking. I'm sure she gets that from me.

From the Bible

Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord: This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter.

Psalms 118: 19-20

Signs of spring begin to show

The garden is starting to appear out in the back yard, though some winters the snow doesn't really melt — or the ground thaw in the shadow of the neighbor's fence — until almost time to plow it up in March.

Snow cover is good, both because it delivers moisture to everything during the dry months, and because it holds down the mulch of chopped grass and leaves we cover the whole patch with in the fall.

As the mix becomes more dry leaves and less green grass, it doesn't adhere as well to the garden soil. The leaves tend to blow away or clump up. Snow holds them down and they get good and wet. That binds them together, and to the garden.

In the spring, they get plowed under and join the rest of the compost from 17 seasons. Many garden experts advise plowing the mulch under in the fall, but the spring schedule has worked for us. Our garden started out as hard, lifeless yard soil, but today it's full of organic matter — and worms and grubs.

I'm not sure how the garden will get plowed up this spring. The friend who always did it died suddenly last year. He owed us a tilling, too, since last spring, he talked both of us into paying him on separate days.



Along the Sappa

By *Steve Haynes*
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I may have to rent a tiller this year, but I hope not.

When we were kids, my brothers and I had the duty of tilling Dad's garden. He believed us doing it in the old-fashioned way, by hand with a potato fork. He always grew marvelous vegetables, mostly tomatoes and cucumbers.

He ate the tomatoes about any way you could think of — sliced, in salads, you name it. The cucumbers he sliced up with fresh onions, then slathered with homemade oil and vinegar dressing.

I couldn't abide the cucumbers, but I still make the dressing.

After Cynthia and I got married, I bought a potato fork. Still have it. But later, we learned you could rent a rototiller. Just getting it in and out of the car was a chore, but it made quick work of any garden.

Then someone offered to bring

his tiller and do the garden for about the same price. We gave up tilling and started specializing in growing. Sort of like farmers hire out chores today, we hired out tillage.

I guess I could start digging up the garden when it thaws, but that does sound like work. Maybe there's somebody out there who wants to make a buck. Or we'll rent a tiller.

Anyway, the tilling will be followed quickly by seeds for lettuce and spinach, which need to grow and be harvested before it gets hot. Then we'll follow with corn, unless Cynthia has her way and we give up on it as a crop. Then, in May, the bedding plants.

By then we'll have plenty of mulch to retard the weeds and the summer will be in full swing.

But first the ground has to thaw. Can't wait for spring.

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Seniors get resolutions into gear

To the Editor:

Is it time for you to implement those New Year's resolutions? We invite each of you over the age of 60 to join us in an easygoing and fun adult exercise class. The name of our class is STEPS, which stands for Seniors Together Enjoy Physical Success. We meet at the Golden Age Center at 9 a.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The class is for both men and women; we especially invite men to join us. Each class lasts an hour, and includes a warm-up, cardiovascular training, weight training and a cool-down period.

Letter to the Editor

We work on the development of strength, coordination, balance and flexibility in every class. The weight training we do slows and even reverses the effects of osteoporosis. Class members report that they have a more positive outlook on life, sleep more soundly and enjoy other physical activity more as a result of our class. Members also say they can tell that their balance has improved.

The class is free, and we are now enrolling members for the first

quarter. money for the class comes from a grant from the Sunflower Foundation through the Kansas Department on Aging. So, do some good for somebody — your body! It will thank you.

Call Rhonda at 475-1500 with questions, or join us at 9 a.m. on any class day. Come on, take STEPS with us.

Rhonda J. May,
Norma Anderson, Oberlin
instructors