

Everyone needs to worry about open government

Sunshine Week came and went last week with little notice in this part of the state.

Be that as it may, the cause is worthy, and the need bears occasional mention.

Sunshine Week celebrates a year-around cause dear to many, and vital to all of us in a free society: open government.

Its backers range from the American Library Association to the League of Women Voters to the Society of Professional Journalists. And while many of this effort's leaders are news people, it's not just a "media" cause.

Sunshine is meant for all of us. Secrecy in government hurts everyone.

Over years of struggle, Sunshine proponents have passed laws in nearly every state requiring government meetings and records to be open to the public. The federal government, too, has such laws.

But that's not the end of the fight. Every year, state legislators and members of Congress, office holders and lobbying groups propose dozens of new exemptions for state and federal laws. Worse yet, many federal agencies simply ignore the law when they choose.

The federal Freedom of Information Act has no enforcement tools, no penalties, no teeth. A bill to create an ombudsman's office to handle citizen complaints passed Congress and was signed into law a couple of years ago, but it's been hamstrung by poor treatment and budget cuts from the Obama administration.

And while the administration pays lip service to openness, or "transparency," as the politicians like to call it today, it too often backs more secrecy, especially in the areas of security, law enforcement and diplomacy.

But even workaday federal agencies sometimes ignore this law. And despite charges by some politicos that open government is just

a "media" issue, it's often an ordinary citizen who's faced with a recalcitrant agency. The taxpayer's choices are few: forget the information he or she needed, or pay big legal fees to sue the government.

And while lawsuits often succeed, they can take years and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Why should anyone, a citizen or a reporter, have to sue the government to get what should be an open record, available to anyone who asks?

"The media" often get involved in this issue because it's our job to ask questions of the government.

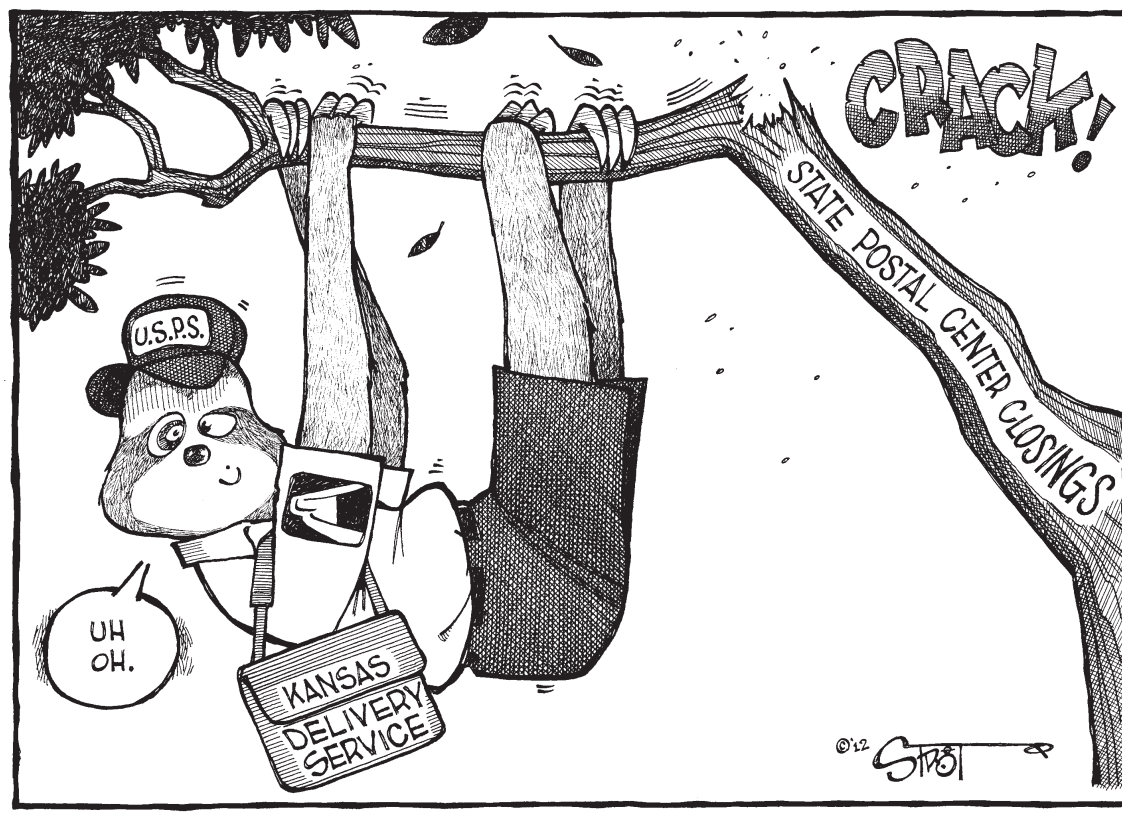
We see the abuses day after day; the average person could go a lifetime and never get turned down on an a request for government records. Until the day comes....

Around here, we find that public officials normally do their best to honor both the open records and open meetings laws. City and county attorneys usually advise officials to comply, and Kansas law does carry penalties: \$500 fines and court orders to take classes on open government.

Still, there are exceptions. Gov. Sam Brownback invited members of the Legislature to meetings at his official mansion, Cedar Crest, which obviously were aimed an influencing legislation this year.

The governor and legislative leaders bobbed and weaved, but it was an ugly move. Mr. Brownback should have known better than to skirt the law.

For what we expect of our leaders is not lip service, but compliance with the letter and spirit of the laws which declare public business to be public. It's our right, and it's the right thing to do. — Steve Haynes



Creepy crawlies showing up

Spring seems to have sprung, and while I love it, I'm getting a little bugged.

You know, bugged, as in ants, wasps, flies and assorted small, multi-legged irritants.

We have a routine around our house. The first Sunday of each month is the day to give the dog her heart-worm medicine "treat" and the cats and dog their rub-on tick and flea medicine.

While the dog gets her treat year around, at \$8 to \$10 a dose, we don't bother with the flea and tick stuff in the winter. So when the first Sunday in March came in like a lion, we decided that the animals could wait until April for their treatments.

Big mistake.

Within a week, the weather turned warm and spring-like. The daffodils started to appear. It was time to clean out the flower beds and the cats, which hadn't stuck their noses outside most of the winter, started going outside, rolling in the dirt and sunning themselves on the back porch.

I haven't seen any fleas or ticks yet, but the season is definitely here.

This morning, while brushing my teeth, I was visited by a little leaf hopper thingee. I don't know how it got into the house, but I'm betting it hopped a ride on a wandering cat. However, it got in, it was not a good



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
c.haynes@nwkansas.com

idea. It hopped around on the edge of the sink as I was brushing my teeth and finally, as I was washing off the toothbrush, it hopped into the sink and joined the toothpaste residue going down the drain.

Then there are the ants. We've had a problem with minuscule ants for years. Some people call them "sugar ants." They come marching into the house from cracks around the window sills, baseboards and goodness only knows where else. They are so small, they are not much more than moving dots, but when I see a swarm of moving dots in the kitchen, I reach for the bug stuff.

This week they found one of the cat-food bowls. We have four—one for each cat.

I looked down at the bowl, and there was the cat food with dots swarming all over it and the sides of the yellow plastic bowl.

I quickly got out an ant pellet. Leaf hoppers don't bother me too much. They mostly stay outside.

But ants can take over the kitchen, and who needs them?

The pet-safe ant pellet soon lured my unwanted guests out of the food. Or maybe the cats ate them; I'm not asking.

Then there was the wolf spider in the kitchen sink, a small one. He was there Saturday morning as I was making the coffee. I let him be. He wasn't hurting me and I had to get to work.

When I got home eight hours later, Steve said I had to see the drama that had played out in our sink.

There in the sink was a bigger spider and the remains—eyes and a couple of legs—of the one I had seen earlier. I guess in the insect world, it's every spider for himself.

I'm not sure where the second spider went, but hopefully, he'll dine on some of the flies that are starting to come in.

Bugs and flowers—yep, spring is definitely here.

Looks like time to do wills

Don't think me morbid, but we have been working on our wills. Perhaps this was brought on by events of last week: Jim had a birthday and I received my Medicare card in the mail.

We have talked about doing a will, but never seemed to get "a roundtuit." Our advancing age and our planned trip to Mexico seemed to be the impetus we needed to get started.

Friends and family kept cautioning us to "be careful down there," and we kept saying, "We're in more danger driving on the highways than we are in Mexico."

However, it did seem the prudent thing to do. You know, "get our affairs in order."

What we're doing may not be legal in the strictest sense of the word. We're just putting some thoughts and instructions on paper. At least it would give the kids a place to start.

First we told the kids where the money is. Split five ways they would each get about \$36 dollars and 27 cents. Then it occurred to Jim that we should tell them what to do with the old cars. Our only admonition was, "Don't call the junk man. They're the only thing we have that is actually worth something."

After that we started in on personal things.



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
cplotts65@gmail.com

We've always told the kids what Jim brought into the marriage goes to his kids and what I had before goes to my kids.

They've seen our hoard, and both sets of kids are praying nothing happens to us so they don't have to deal with it. When we sweep our hand over our property and say, "Some day, my child, this will all be yours," they tremble with fear.

Thinking about a will has been good for us. It has caused us to begin to think about what we need to do to simplify our lives. We both know we need to pare down. And, upon our return, have vowed to get started.

-ob-

Update: At this writing, I am on a lobby computer at a motel in El Paso. This motel overlooks the Rio Grande and has a perfect view of Juarez. Normally.

Today is not a normal day. The wind and dust are blowing so badly we can't even see the city. If it doesn't stop by tomorrow, we'll be

building in it. We've done it before, but it's not fun. Jim just handed me a weather forecast. It's supposed to rain tonight. If it does, that would settle the dust.

The team of volunteers we're meeting just pulled in, so we're off to make new friends.

People ask if we have a GPS device to find our way around. Jim always answers, "Sure do. It's God's Positioning System. And He always knows where we are."

See you on the "flip-flop."

From the Bible

Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, by grace ye are saved: and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

— Ephesians 2: 4-7

Stay safe and watch storms

One of the things the National Weather Service stresses at storm-spotter training is safety. It might seem heroic, but there's really no point in getting yourself in harm's way while watching for severe storms.

You might get diverted from the task at hand if you're hurt, for instance. And it's way easier to spot a tornado from the side or rear of a storm. If you're in front of a storm, you're in the path of whatever it can throw at you — from softball-size hail, 100 mph downdrafts and heavy rain that obscures everything else to an actual tornado.

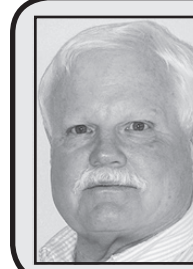
For tornadoes almost always form to the rear of a supercell thunderstorm. All the other stuff comes out the front.

A spotter who gets in front of a storm is in harm's way, and if there is a tornado, he can't see it.

At the Oberlin training class last Wednesday, forecaster Chris Foltz has a couple of "Don't be this guy" videos to make that point.

Another thing you don't want to do, he said, is try to outrun a tornado. They can move pretty quickly, and weather experts say a car is just about the worst place you can be. Tornadoes can pick them up, tumble them, smash them. Anyplace else — in a building, in the basement, even in the ditch with your hands over your head — is better than being in a vehicle.

And if you do get caught in a car where you can't get away from a tornado, Mr. Foltz said, the LAST place you want to go is under an overpass. It may look safer, but he noted that the wind may be 20 percent faster up under the end of a bridge than down on the pavement below.



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
s.haynes@nwkansas.com

People have been sucked right out of "safe" shelter under an underpass, with disastrous results. Dave Floyd, the meteorologist who handles the warning network for the Goodland weather office, made this point last year with several photos of whole buildings stuffed under underpasses. Mr. Foltz has a more poignant picture, a photo of an underpass where an Oklahoma family tried to hide from a tornado.

The storm first flung mud at them, leaving their outlines on the concrete, then blew them right out of their hiding place, leaving the outlines behind.

Spotters learn to position themselves so they can see the "rain-free base" of a supercell, the area at the back where warm air rushes in and is sucked up into the storm's vortex. That's the engine that produces a "wall cloud," a lowering of the base caused by in rushing air, and possibly a tornado.

The best place to be is off to the side or behind the storm where you can see the intake structure. Not out front.

The crowd last week pretty much filled the big meeting room at The Gateway, and the volunteers made a rapt audience for slides of storms, wall clouds and the like. Mr. Foltz noted that this already has been a big year for tornadoes, though we've

only had a couple in the northwest part of the state.

And while Kansas is the second state in tornado frequency per square mile, no one has died in a tornado in northwest Kansas for nearly 70 years — in May 1942, when a huge twister roared past Oberlin, leaving 15 dead. That's remarkable.

One thing forecasters are concerned with: modern forecast and warning systems, why have so many people been killed in tornadoes in the past few years?

Mr. Floyd said part of it may just be chance: the weather service tells people to get out of cars and trailer homes into a solid building, to an interior room or basement.

But, he said, "When an EF5 tornado comes along and wipes the home clear off the foundation, the basement may not be so safe."

The same could be said for big buildings such as the schools and hospital devastated by the Joplin, Mo., tornado and other large storms in recent years. If your shelter blows away, it doesn't do you much good.

Storm spotters, mostly volunteers, work with the weather service to help keep us safe, give us time to take cover. That may not always work, but it's a heck of a lot better than the warning people got back in 1942, which was virtually none.

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Phone: (785) 475-2206 Fax (785) 475-2800
E-mail: oberlin.herald@nwkansas.com

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STAFF

Steve Haynes editor
Kimberly Davis managing editor
Mary Lou Olson society editor
Carolyn Kelley-Plotts proofreader, columnist
Joan Betts historian
Cynthia Haynes business manager
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Crista Sauvage advertising makeup

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