

## Elected officials need open meetings seminar

We'd like to urge every elected official in this area to take time out for a seminar on open-government laws being presented by the Kansas attorney general's office from 9 a.m. to noon Tuesday, July 23, in Colby.

Most city, county and school boards and commissions in our area do their best to follow state Open Meetings and Open Records laws. We think they do a darned good job, but it never hurts to learn more.

The seminar is part of a series the attorney general puts on across the state, and it may be awhile before we have another session in our area. It'd be great if each and every elected official would go to this one, and if the room fills up (reservations are required), maybe the attorney general could schedule an afternoon class.

The Kansas Open Meetings Act requires public meetings — state, county, city and school district — to be open to the public unless a given topic falls under one of several exemptions. Even then, the board or council has to take a vote and state why and how long it'll be in closed session. No binding action can be taken behind closed doors, either.

And while our officials have been pretty good about this, there have been some notable problems, especially when the governor invited whole committees of the Legislature to his mansion for evening discussions. Both he and the legislators should have known better.

The Open Records Act is more mysterious. Many agencies have trouble following it, because it makes most records open to public

inspection. That means they are supposed to be handed over to anyone who asks for them when the office is open, without questions or delay.

Often, officials are unsure what records they should release or want to talk "to the boss" before giving someone a document. Sheriff's departments seem to be suspicious of everyone, asking for identification and demanding to know why people want documents. None of that is allowed, but it happens all too often. Sheriffs, of all people, should want to follow the law.

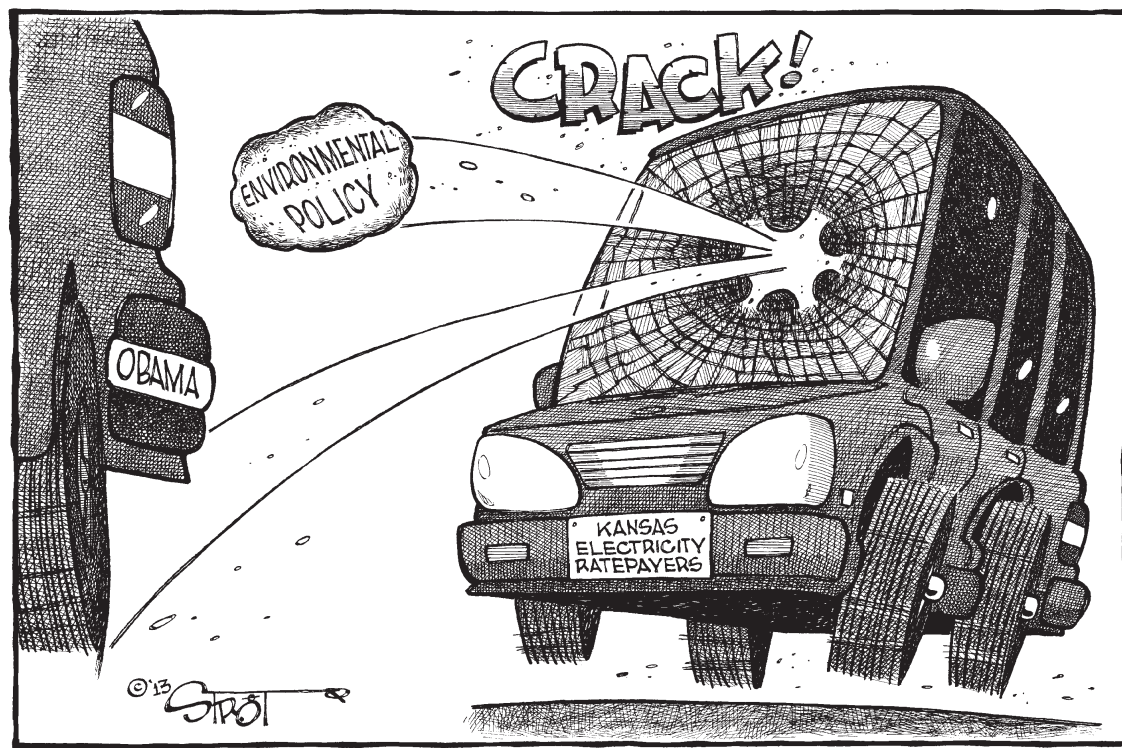
The proper response to a document request — unless the item falls into an exemption in the laws is a polite, "Sure. Let me get that." No questions asked, no delays, no obfuscation. And employees should be trained how to handle these request.

A little training wouldn't hurt anyone who deals with open records requests, and here's a great chance for officials and their employees to get that. It's a way to help serve the public better, not a nuisance or a problem.

The seminar will run from 9 a.m. to noon July 23 at the student union at Colby Community College. Everyone — public officials, reporters, private citizens — can and should go. This law is for the people, not just one special group or two. To sign up, go to [www.ag.ks.gov](http://www.ag.ks.gov) or call (785) 296-2215.

And remember, please, that meetings and document files of all kinds are open to the public because they belong to the public, except for those narrow exemptions. That's the law, and that's the way things should be.

— Steve Haynes



## Comedy over simple question

I learned the hard way that it's not what you say, but how you say it.

Don't tell him I said this, but my nephew Kirk is a very intelligent man. He was the first in the family to receive a doctorate, and we all admire him a great deal.

He and I were talking at a family get-together and the subject of genealogy research came up. I told him about Jim and I having our DNA tested through a genealogy website and learning the results.

That topic led us to discussing our own families and then, more specifically, our particular blood types. I shared with him that my children's father and I had what was called the Rh factor. Kirk knew about this condition, where antibodies in the mother's blood can harm the baby. He was drawing graphs and charts on the back of the paper placemat and came to the point where he asked the blood types of my girls, Halley and Kara.

I was embarrassed to admit I didn't know, but I knew a quick text message would bring an answer. My first text was to Halley. It read, "With Kirk. What is your blood type?"

Her answer came immediately. "Type A+. Is Kirk OK? Does he need a transfusion?"

Kirk and I had to laugh. I hadn't thought how my message must have appeared to Halley. I wrote back, "No emergency. Just talking about family genealogy and blood types."



### Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts  
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One good thing that came of our inadvertent alarm was for Kirk to learn he has a cousin who is ready and willing to donate blood should he ever need it.

—ob-

During this same conversation, Kirk laughingly commented on one of my recent columns, the one where I threatened to wring the rooster's neck, but had Jim do it instead.

He said, "If some member of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) had read that column, you would have had picketers in the streets."

True. But I doubt they would have had any support from the locals. Everyone who lives here knows what it's like to be "flogged" by a mad rooster. And they know the only solution.

—ob-

One of my writing assignments at the newspaper office was to do a story on the history of an old bank building in town. The museum's file on the building was slim and a computer search produced no results.

I expressed my concern to one of my workmates, who nonchalantly said, "My sister graduated from high school the year the bank was built, so it was in 1948."

Thank you, Mary Lou. Wish I had just asked her in the first place. I would have saved a lot of time.

I pulled out the hardcover book containing the newspapers from 1948 and began flipping pages looking for information on the bank. Eventually I found what I was looking for, but not before I came across some of my mother's columns. This was before "Out With the Hillbillies" appeared on the editorial page. It was randomly placed along with the country correspondence.

One column was particularly amusing. It read, "We're training the baby in more ways than one. If the boys tell her to dance, she does a little jig." It was amusing because "the baby" was me. In 1948, I was a year old.

The other "training" must have worked, and as for dancing, I still love to do a jig.

## Improvised cooler saves day

You'd think I'd learn to take a cooler with me everywhere I go. So often when I leave the house on an overnight expedition, though, it just doesn't seem like I'll need one. I have nothing that needs refrigeration and I don't plan to buy anything that will need to stay cool.

Even those times I think about it, I often dismiss the need. So there I stood with a styrofoam container of delicious leftovers, and the cooler was back at home.

It was a chilly night, and I left the food in the truck with the windows down, but in the morning the sun was starting to heat things up and we weren't ready to leave yet.

Our friend Mary, with whom we had spent the night, offered to put the leftovers in her fridge. That would work until we left, but it was a good two-to-three-hour trip home and that food needed to be kept cool if we were going to eat it later.

Mary rummaged around in her back room and came up with a couple of little lunch box-type bags but none of them was big enough to hold the large styrofoam container. The instructions on them said that they should be put in the freezer for several hours before use anyway. We didn't have a few hours, and Mary's freezer didn't have any extra space.

Finally she offered us an insulated grocery bag. That would work.

But, wait. There was no need to



### Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes  
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borrow hers. We had one of our own in the truck, under the seat with all the other reusable bags we habitually forget to take into the store with us.

The only problem now was how to keep the food inside cool. The insulation would keep it cool if we had something cold to put in with it.

Mary had the ideal solution: a recycled peanut butter jar full of ice. She said that she always keeps one or two in the freezer for just this sort of thing. Then when she gets where she is going, she said, she can either refreeze the jar or toss it.

The peanut butter jar is now in my freezer and Mary can either retrieve it when she comes to visit us or it'll end up in the trash on my next trip.

Actually, I use a similar idea, but with vegetables.

I buy a couple of bags of cheap frozen corn or peas and toss them in with the items I need to keep cool. When we arrive, if the vegetables are still mostly frozen, we eat them. If they are way thawed,

we toss them.

Another trick is to use bottles of water. This is similar to Mary's peanut butter jar but the water bottles are only partly full of ice. The rest is water, and if you get thirsty on the trip, you can drink your cooling agent.

Or you can just take the dang cooler along. Of course, you still need something to cool it, so don't throw out the empty peanut butter jar.

### From the Bible

I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love. For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

— II Corinthians 8: 8-9

## Fire burns economy as well

Since arriving in Colorado last Wednesday evening, we've eaten a lot of smoke, but the most danger we've faced has been on the road coming out here from Kansas.

Neither our house nor the town of Creede is threatened. Both are separated from the fire by large expanses of open space, and fire fighters should be able to keep the flames away from them as they have from homes and businesses both up river and down — so far.

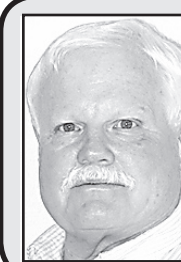
After three weeks, the West Fork Complex of fires has grown from a few trees hit by lightning near Pagosa Springs, Colo., to three fires in more than 94,000 acres of spruce forest, most of which had been devastated by a beetle epidemic over the last 10 years. The fire, especially when driven by the wind, has been explosive at times in standing dead, tinder dry trees, keeping fire fighters out on the fringes.

The crew has grown to more than 1,500 fire fighters of all stripe, from professional government crews and contract fire fighters, many of them volunteer firemen the rest of the time, to local volunteers. At least 30 of the 20-man government fire crews are on the line, along with professional and volunteer fire companies from all over Colorado. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service crews have come from all over the west.

Resources continue to pour in, and some crews are sent home as others arrive. The team now includes 20 helicopters and two fixed-wing tankers. Two of the helicopters are based at the airport near our home, and we see a lot of them when they run back here for fuel.

The fire crews have around 80 engines of all kinds, from city pumps to specialized wildfire rigs, and smaller brush trucks and forest rigs of many types. The count topped out at 102 a couple of days ago. "Hot-shot" crews arrive in special Forest Service and Land Management trucks which can carry eight to nine men and women and their gear.

Fire rigs of all kinds run up and down the highways. In the evening, most of the rigs go home to one of at least five camps established to fight the fire, but a night shift goes out to keep an eye on things. Helicopters buzz back and forth, buckets of water or fire retardant mixture slung underneath.



### Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes  
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**SMOKE RISES** from a small fire on the fringe of the burned area west of Creede, Colo., showing the stark outlines of burned spruce along the ridgeline above.

— Herald photo by Cynthia Haynes

Fire fighters are spending much of their time clearing trees and brush around houses and buildings near the blaze and setting up portable drop tanks filled with water in case the fire comes down. Others are building dozer and land lines at critical points, protecting the town of South Fork down river and the Rio Grande Reservoir up river.

Most evacuations have been lifted as protection work is completed and the wind has kept the fire at bay, but especially to the west, the blaze remains out of control. After more than three weeks, containment is estimated as just 4 percent. Huge, angry plumes of smoke rose from the wilderness on Monday.

And while the towns are safe for now and the highways opened up this weekend, the area's economy may not recover for years. Most businesses here have to make

a year's income in two or three months, and the Fourth of July is the biggest week of the year.

Tourists are starting to move back into RV parks and some resorts, while others remain closed. The streets are mostly deserted and the noted Creede Repertory Theater is half empty, if that.

Even if the blaze stays away from houses and stores — not one has been lost so far — the smoke is nearly unbearable some days, while others, it clears out as the wind shifts. That can happen two or three times a day, and the same wind can fan the fire up on the mountain.

Meantime, tourists are staying away in droves, and the season promises to be a poor one no matter what happens from here on out. Plus, many square miles of prime forest have been lost. It's not a pretty picture, any way you look at it.

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