

OPINION

THE HUTCHINSON
NEWS

Editorial Board

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EDITORIAL

Overflowing classrooms

Large class sizes good reason for USD 308 to rethink building plan

Hutchinson USD 308 Superintendent David Flowers sounded the call last week for school board members to re-examine construction plans at Wiley Elementary, which is teeming with students again this school year – and likely will deal with high enrollment numbers for years to come.

Initially, in the wake of voters' approval of a \$78.8 million bond issue, improvements at Wiley included new classrooms, a media center and a multipurpose room. But it was obvious even before last November's bond election that the school in northwest Hutchinson might require more resources than originally thought.

Last school year, Wiley officials moved the school's library to the gymnasium stage and used the modular building that once housed the library for classrooms.

This school year, Wiley's burgeoning enrollment – specifically the kindergarten population – underscores the need for school board members to re-examine Wiley's needs and possibly reallocate bond money to address those needs.

A big portion of the bond money will go to much-needed new construction and improvements at Hutchinson High School. But each of the district's eight elementary

schools also will see improvements.

Wiley's enrollment, though, forces re-examination of elementary school needs. Board members now will reassess if some money allocated for schools with declining enrollments should be shifted to Wiley, where enrollment is rocketing.

And Wiley is not the only elementary school with large classroom counts, so the board should be open to other adjustments to the bond-issue building plan.

Flowers noted that the 60 students enrolled in Wiley kindergarten classes provide a glimpse of the school's future. Additionally, Wiley absorbed a number of students several years ago when the district closed Roosevelt Elementary. And a couple of housing developments, likely home to young families with children, have sprung up in and around the Wiley area.

This year, class sizes at Wiley average 25 students a teacher, which makes teaching and learning difficult. At Wiley and other elementaries where class sizes are exceeding 20 students, the board should be taking a close look at building enough classrooms to lower that student-teacher ratio.

Flowers and the board will take the next several weeks to reassess bond money improvements for Hutchinson elementary schools. That is a wise move.

Constitution Day

Public school students today study importance of Constitution

Today is a little-known but important holiday. It is a relatively new holiday, established just three years ago.

And, no, we generally don't get the day off from work or school.

It is Constitution Day, recognized by federal legislation as a day to remember the history and importance of the U.S. Constitution, the seminal document that was the foundation for our civil society.

Not only is today a regular workday for Americans, Constitution Day prescribes a little work. The 2004 law establishing Constitution Day mandated that all public schools provide educational programming about the Constitution. That goes for Hutchinson-area and Kansas schools.

The document is 220 years old today, having been signed by representatives of 12 states on Sept. 17, 1787. The power of its words is reflected by the fact that it has been such an enduring document, changed little in its lifetime and still the backbone of our government.

Among the issues that required agreement of the new states was how much power to allow the central government, how many representa-

tives in Congress should represent each state and how these representatives should be elected. Completing the document required much debate and, in the end, compromise.

The core of the Constitution is the first 10 amendments, called the Bill of Rights.

Among the freedoms the Bill of Rights established was one important to us, the freedom of the press. This freedom, like the others, keeps the power of government in check and protects citizens' individual rights.

In the spirit of the role of the press to educate and exercise its freedom, The Hutchinson News' Newspaper in Education program is distributing extra copies of today's editions free to participating school classrooms, where today students are learning about the Constitution. The NIE program, which likewise provides free newspapers to teachers throughout the school year for educational purposes, could not be possible without the support of readers and businesses that support this valuable program. We thank them.

But, then, the Constitution is something all Americans hold dear. On this day and every day, it protects our freedoms and ensures stability and security and the blessings of living in this great nation.

WESTERN FRONT

Excessive punishment

The Greensburg city government has decided to enforce the mowing ordinance and to increase fines for unmowed lots to \$400. It had been \$50. That's \$400 for every law not mowed, when 98 percent of Greensburg is an empty flat pasture due to the May tornado. This is a serious mistake.

Though there may have been the best of intentions, this decision has the appearance of being excessive and mean-spirited. Further, it looks like a blatant attempt by the city to extort money from absentee owners. Most of the landowners in Greensburg are now absentee owners. I was lucky; I found someone to mow our lot for \$40. The city needs 10 times that amount to do the same thing?

Appearances often count more than intentions. Greensburg has no infrastructure, no population, no jobs and no businesses. How is it to compete with the intact cities of the area? By relying on its good name. If the city loses that, the city is doomed. This wrongheaded decision goes a long way toward bringing about Greensburg's doom.

Revoking this policy can solve the situation. If this is not possible, charge owners only the actual costs of mowing their lots.

This is just the latest in a series of mistakes by the city government. They need to do a better job than this if they want Greensburg to survive.

**R. P. BIRD
Hutchinson**

Harsh judgment

How many citizens of Reno County have found themselves before our esteemed 27th judicial district? How many of you have had one of our 'guardians of justice' place bald-faced lies about your supposed courtroom conduct in public record. How many of you have read sworn court transcripts listing you as present in court, when you were home in bed? I have.

All of our jurists are of the highest character; or are they? I guess the question is have enough citizens of Reno County seen the dark side of our legal/judicial system as it works on an everyday basis? If you haven't, you may be in for a surprise.

Here is good news. We don't need a revolution or revolt to change this system. The founders of our nation have given us all the tools we need to effect change. Go to the polls and vote. With a little involvement we can make our community a better place to live.

**GREG BONTRAGER
Hutchinson**

WESTERN FRONT POLICY

The News accepts Western Front letters from readers who want to share an opinion.

Please sign your name and include your phone number and address. We call to verify all letters before publication and strive to publish them within

one week of verification. Please limit letters to 500 words. No poems, consumer complaints, business testimonials or group petitions will be accepted. All letters are subject to editing for space considerations and libel concerns.



COLUMNISTS

Further muddying up the issue

Welcome to Local Government 101. I'm your teacher, Mr. Knauer. Today's topic is the intangibles tax. It's one of the most controversial taxes out there.

Is everyone familiar with it? Mr. Jones? I know that it's unfair because it's a tax on savings, and I shouldn't have to pay it. It discourages investment. It should be repealed, without a corresponding increase in my real estate taxes. They should just reduce government expenses by that much.

Mr. Jones, the tax is on the income from the investment, not the investment itself. Do you understand that? What's the difference? It's still a tax, and I don't want to pay taxes.

OK, we'll get into the difference. So that we are all on the same page, the intangibles tax is a local tax on interest and dividend income, but the tax doesn't apply to such earnings originating in retirement accounts, or from municipal bonds. Each taxpayer with this type of income is to file a Form 200 with their state income tax return. The form is then forwarded to the county, and the county prepares a tax bill which is mailed out in November.

Almost half of the counties in the state don't charge an intangibles tax within any taxing district. Thirty counties, including Reno County, charge a tax of .75 percent to all county residents. Townships and smaller cities charge the tax in over 50 different counties, normally at a rate of 2.25 percent.

Within Reno County, the tax is charged at a rate of 2.25 percent by Partridge, Plevna, Pretty Prairie, Sylvia and Willowbrook, as well as by 15 different townships. The remaining 16 townships in Reno County don't charge the tax.

So, if you live in Partridge and own a \$100,000 certificate of deposit yield-

Community columnist



Brad Dillon

ing 5 percent, an intangibles tax is payable to the city for \$112.50, and to the county for \$37.50. In contrast, real estate taxes owed on a \$100,000 home in Partridge would be \$504 to the city, \$401 to the county, plus additional amounts for school district and Hutchinson Community College levies, for a total real estate tax bill of over \$1,700 (state and federal income taxes on that interest income would generally range from \$891 to \$1,972, depending on the recipient's income).

The Reno County Commission debated this issue and decided to retain this tax in its budget for 2008. Does anyone know why it was discussed? Mr. Smith?

It was discussed because receipts from the intangibles tax have dropped by over 50 percent in the last six years. It's apparent that a lot of taxpayers aren't paying the tax. Mr. Knauer, isn't that an indication that the tax is unfair and inequitable?

That's a good question. Should we have this tax? Any thoughts, Mr. Dillon?

The tax is not unfair. If taxpayers pay the cost of local government based on the values of their house, farm and automobiles, why shouldn't we include a small tax on income from investments? The effective rate is much smaller than on these other types of investments, and this tax

spreads the cost of government by taxing those who have the money to pay the tax, rather than those with assets that don't necessarily generate income.

The only aspect of this tax that is unfair is that enforcement is lacking, and the answer is to beef that enforcement up. Tax avoidance is nothing new. Look at people who tag their cars or boats in other states to avoid Kansas taxes, or who don't file tax returns at all. Anyone who decides to dodge a tax should feel that they are at risk of getting caught. Here's my question: Why would the state allow the intangibles tax to be assessed without then assisting the counties in tracking and collecting the tax owed?

That's a good question, Mr. Dillon. I note that the governor is here today. Can you answer that question for us?

The state doesn't collect this tax, doesn't benefit from this tax, and I'm devoting my energy to reducing state income taxes by shifting the tax burden to local governments. This is a problem for the Legislature to deal with.

Thank you, governor: I see a state legislator in the audience. Any comments? This is an executive branch issue. We're focused on keeping the state income tax in check, and shifting the cost of government to the local level.

Well, class, I think we've only confused the issue more. I haven't heard any solutions today. All we know for sure is that this problem is no one's fault. Next week, we will discuss why animal rights issues are taking up so much of the Hutchinson City Council's time. Surely there is an easy answer to that issue.

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Similarities between 2007, 1971

It's beginning to look a lot like 1971.

For this baby boomer, the current mixture of popular culture and an unpopular foreign war brings back memories. Memories of an odd-numbered year before a presidential election, when Hollywood moved left – and the country moved right in reaction. And it was over-the-top anti-war protesters who cemented the conservative majority.

The war back in '71, of course, was in Vietnam. In that year, most Americans had concluded that the war was a failure, at least in terms of securing South Vietnam as a "model democracy." And in fact, Richard Nixon had been elected president in 1968 on a promise of ending the conflict.

But Nixon had also said he would bring "peace with honor," and that was a powerful message. OK, Americans told themselves, maybe we weren't going to win in Vietnam, but darn it, we weren't going to let ourselves be humiliated. The answer was some sort of gradual draw-down, combined with various tactical "surges" along the way – although back then, they were called "incursions."

Nixon, a Republican, was widely reviled for pursuing this cautious strategy, but most Democrats didn't seem to have a better idea – so they mostly just held congressional hearings and criticized.

Do any of these events from 36 years ago have a contemporary ring? What about the saying "The more things change, the more they stay the same"?

Meanwhile, the popular culture targeted not only Nixon and the war but



James Pinkerton

also, in the minds of many, America itself. In 1970, movies such as "MASH," "Catch 22" and "Little Big Man" mocked the military.

And in December 1970 came the nastiest movie of them all, "Joe," a direct assault, launched by the counterculture – a young star in the movie was Susan Sarandon – on factory-working "hard hats," who were portrayed as hateful and murderous.

And January 1971 saw the CBS premiere of "All in the Family," establishing Archie Bunker as the archetypal blue-collar bigot – the man all enlightened Americans were supposed to hate for his racism or at least pity for his ignorance. But in fact, the Archies from Queens – and other Silent Majoritarians across the nation, all scorned and scourged by the entertainment elite – had the last laugh at the ballot box.

Because the following year, 1972, George McGovern, the liberal Democratic presidential nominee – who promised "I will crawl on my knees to Hanoi" to seek a peace deal – was crushingly defeated by Nixon. If the

bicoastal elites hated Nixon so much, Middle America reasoned, then he must be doing something right.

Now let's fast-forward to another odd-numbered year before a presidential election, 2007. Once again, an unpopular foreign war, with no good end in sight. Once again, the American people don't want to continue the combat, but they like the thought of losing even less. Smart politicians, in both parties, are trying to reflect that stalemated sentiment; a case in point is Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., who endlessly triangulates between hawk and dove.

But in politics, one must answer for one's friends, as well as oneself. And so when the lefty group Moveon.org took out a full-page advertisement in – where else? – The New York Times, in which the antiwar activists rhymed the name of Gen. David Petraeus with "Betray Us," the Democratic Party inevitably got some of the blame.

Meanwhile, the Hollywood hits against America keep coming, just as in 1971. A new film, "In the Valley of Elah," written and directed by Oscar-winning Paul Haggis, presents a biting and bitter view of the Army; indeed, the movie goes much further, deliberately dishonoring the American flag. And it stars, interestingly enough, the same Susan Sarandon, veteran of left-leaning movies.

Can Democratic presidential prospects survive these wounds inflicted by supposed allies? Perhaps. But history provides them with a pessimistic precedent.

Doonesbury

