

# OPINION

**THE HUTCHINSON NEWS**

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**EDITORIAL**

## Special treatment

Besides being a sweet deal that doesn't sit well with other public employees and some taxpayers, legislators' special retirement benefit complicates the process of finding a solution for the actuarial crisis in the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System.

As explained in a story in Sunday's Hutchinson News, KPERS benefits are calculated differently for a legislator than for the average state employee. Legislators work part time, but their benefits are calculated as if they worked all year long. And, in fact, they even get credit for a few extra days by assuming a 31-day month - multiplied times 12 months in a year their benefit gets adjusted as if they worked 372 days a year. Typically, legislators work a 90-day session, plus a couple of weeks in the wrap-up session, though that doesn't count committee and constituent work through the rest of the year.

The unique benefit formula apparently goes way back and has been accepted as a trade-off for the perceived relatively low pay for legislators and in lieu of trying to raise that pay, which is politically challenging for legislators. While it is a little tricky to calculate total

pay, it looks like legislators make anywhere from \$15,000 to \$40,000; it varies by the amount of committee work and leadership position. They can make that much more in annual KPERS benefits for years into perpetuity, long after they are gone from the Legislature.

We can argue whether pay for citizen legislators is appropriate. And, actually, it appears that should be the argument. Granting legislators special lifetime retirement benefits is not the ideal way to compensate for low pay.

It especially isn't a good way right now, as KPERS is staring at a projected gap of at least \$7.7 billion between anticipated long-term revenue and the promises made to retirees for the next several decades. Various plan proposals would have government employees and employees contributing more to the system, cut benefits or move to a 401(k)-style retirement plan.

Legislators will have a hard time maintaining their credibility in this decision-making if they retain the special benefit calculation for their own pensions, especially if they end up requiring employees to contribute more and/or cutting their benefits.

**COLUMNIST**

## Cutting off our public voice

Growing up in a small town near Hays, I thought I lived in Western Kansas - that is, until I came to teach at Garden City Community College.

Driving west through Great Bend, my wife complained softly of the distance: another hour to grain-elevator Kalvesta; yet another to big-town Garden City, population 13,254 (now 27,000-plus).

Wide-open spaces seemed wider yet as I worked my summer job with the Soil Conservation Service. Most days, nearly an hour's drive was our minimum to reach Finney County farmers. Plains stretched from horizon to horizon, interrupted only by the occasional farmstead, tree, tractor or cattle herd.

Isolation was easy to come by and difficult to overcome.

There was no public radio. That is, until two young, ambitious Garden City grads, Quentin Hope and Malcolm Smith, came back with high hopes and a big idea - creating an area public radio station. Fundraisers were held. Community petitions circulated. Local engineering volunteers were enlisted. And a few short years after I arrived, High Plains Public Radio was born.

Suddenly, we heard daily not only from our neighbors in Olysses, Sublette, Dodge City, Syracuse and Scott City. We also heard live, from every corner of the state, country and globe, news on "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition." While the area and community rallied to make HPPR happen, it would have been impossible without federal funding and assistance.

This is Rep. Tim Huelskamp's home area. Without it, he and his neighbors would gain information only through useful but short-sighted commercial radio, whose primary purpose is profit. By contrast, citizen-owned public radio's primary purpose is the public good.

"So, how does one explain Rep. Huelskamp's vote to deal a death blow to this vital enterprise? Why vote to suck such crucial local support into the government's maw and marrow?"

It makes no sense. Unless you consider that Huelskamp is indeed a representative - but not, first and foremost, for his constituents.

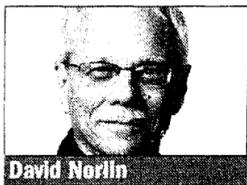
His recent response to letters requesting he vote for, not against, NPR contained only one simple excuse: "We can't afford it." What bunk.

National public broadcasting is remarkably cost-effective, providing local news and information, free of charge, for millions of viewers while only receiving about .0001 percent of the federal budget.

Such attacks on public broadcasting would eliminate all federal funds to some 1,300 public radio and public TV stations around the country.

Some rural stations, the only source of local and national news and information, depend on federal funding for up to 30 percent or even more of their budget. The

Guest columnist



David Norlin

vast majority of money from the federal government goes to support local stations - not NPR - and those stations match each dollar with six more. These kinds of stations are the ones Huelskamp assigned to the guillotine.

In so doing, he voted to slice away public radio's independent reporting.

Take Daniel Zwerdling, for example. Keeping an eye on the sparrows - that is, on small individual lives - Zwerdling clarifies significant public policy issues. He reports on such topics as awarding soldiers with traumatic brain injury the Purple Heart. Many of them come from towns like Fowler, Huelskamp's home.

Other Zwerdling reports: the secrets around the doomed 1986 Challenger space shuttle; dangers posed by the plant pesticide Chlordane (eventually banned by another Huelskamp target, the EPA); and the Corps of Engineers' failure to maintain New Orleans' dikes and dams.

Missing such news makes us vulnerable and uninformed. As Rep. Lloyd Doggett of Texas said, constituents "want fact-based, not Fox-based news coverage."

But our loss is not just news. Think Garrison Keillor. Krista Tippett. Ira Glass. Think "Car Talk," for the hidden humorist and grease monkey in all of us.

Even if one ignores the loss of independent reporting and excellent programming, Huelskamp also voted to eliminate more than 20,000 local jobs - the engineers, writers, radio hosts and reporters who are the backbone of local public radio.

His vote ignores 69 percent of the public, including more than half the Republican faithful, who oppose attempts to gut federal funding for public media. Even Sen. Saxby Chambliss, a Republican from Georgia, says it's unwise to eliminate their federal funds because "they provide a valuable service."

As Oscar Wilde might say, Huelskamp seems to know the price of everything - and the value of nothing.

In a world where wealth and large corporations can buy all the influence they want, mostly through commercial media, we, the people, need our voice as well. NPR, though not perfect, is one place for it.

You should have fewer tea parties, Rep. Huelskamp, and more time to wake up and smell the coffee.

David Norlin, retired college English/broadcasting instructor and department chairman, lives in Salina, where he is chairman of the Salina Human Relations Commission.

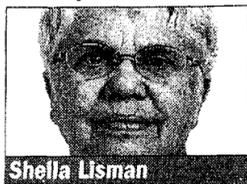


'No, I'm wide awake... Why?'

**COLUMNIST**

## An All-American Bad Drivers' City finalist

Community columnist



Sheila Lisman

Ring. Ring. Ring. Sheila: Hello. Voice on phone: Good morning. This is Mr. Bureaucrat speaking from Washington, D.C. Is this Sheila Lisman?

Sheila: Yes, it is. Mr. B: Are you the one who filled out a nomination for nominating your city, Hutchinson, Kansas, to be one of the all-American, Bad Drivers cities in America?

Sheila: Yes, I did. Mr. B: Congratulations! Your nomination was selected. Now we go to the next step in the process. Here's how it works. We send a team out to Hutchinson. Our director will meet with you. He will observe drivers in Hutchinson, and his team will assemble a group to question and get anecdotal information. Would you like to host the director?

Sheila: Yes, I'd be glad to. (One week later Sheila and the director are in Sheila's minivan going down 17th Avenue.)

Director: I am sure you understand the process. Remember I'd also like to get anecdotal information from you.

Sheila: Well, actually, last week I had a problem right at this side street on the edge of this church parking lot a block from Main. A driver whose head was covered by a hoodie came up to the street here going pretty fast. I wondered if the driver would stop. I slowed down. Sure enough, the car shot out in front of my van without stopping. We were both caught side by side at the stoplight. I pulled up ahead and looked back. I could finally see the face of a young woman.

Director: That sounds like a

close call. Sheila: Here we are in front of the library. Look! Someone is making a J turn right now! They even do that right downtown. I don't know if they are lazy or want to save gas, but they are going down one lane and decided to park on the other side of the street.

One day I was in the middle of downtown when the car in front of me suddenly stopped in the middle of the block, put on her turn signal and waited for a car on the other side of the street, and then she turned to park - a perfect J turn.

(On South Main now going toward Carey Park)

Director: I notice the speed limit here is 30, but everyone is passing us.

Sheila: Yes, that is common. So is following too closely. Look at the car behind us.

(Director makes another mark on his bad drivers' check list.)

Director: My checklist is getting quite full.

Sheila: I knew we would score well.

Director: Say, do you know that guy who just passed us? I think he was waving to get your attention.

Sheila: (Laughing) Actually, he's flipping me off because he thinks I am driving too slowly.

(Late afternoon) Director: Thank you, Sheila. You have been a great help. Now I'll go meet with the other team members so we can put our data together and compare it with that of the other town finalists. I will get back to you.

Sheila: Thank you. (Next day) Ring. Ring. Ring.

Sheila: Hello. Director: Hi, Sheila. I told you I would report back. While I can't reveal the final results, I can tell your drivers here in Hutch are right up there on the bad drivers' scale.

During the group meeting, our team members were somewhat shocked. It seems 80 percent thought a yellow light meant "hurry up, you have plenty of time." They turn right on red but don't stop first if no one is coming, and some even turn left on red if no one is around.

If people are driving too slowly on a narrow street, it's OK to squeeze by on the right.

Sheila: Yep, that's our Hutch drivers.

Director: Well, we are flying back to Washington tonight. You should hear in a month.

You may soon have another sign to go with your All-American City designation - 2011 All-American Bad Drivers' City. Good luck!

Sheila Lisman retired in 2003 after teaching English at Sherman Junior High for three years, Hutchinson High School for 35 years and one year in Auckland, New Zealand, on exchange. Email: sheila.lisman@sbcglobal.net.

**WESTERN FRONT**

### Raise taxes

Do you make over \$250,000 a year? If you do you, may get a tax raise, but because I make a lot less than \$250,000 I don't have to worry.

The right (Republicans) say you must not raise taxes, you must lower them because the rich create jobs. Well, they not only did not create jobs with G.W. Bush's tax cuts, they lost millions of jobs (a lot of them overseas) and since the re-instating of those same tax cuts, they have done nothing.

I say raise their taxes back to the Clinton days.

We average Americans are paying more for everything and while a few dollars more for gas and groceries means nothing to the rich, it hits us really hard.

Gas is now at an all-time high, even though there is no shortage; it is because of speculation and the greed of big oil and gas. We must find alternative fuels and stop this dependency on fossil fuels.

There is a lot of talk about natural gas and this is a possibility, but we must make sure this gas is not produced by the "fracking" method.

This operation not only ruins the water supply but can ruin the

soil for generations. We must let our congressmen and women know we want "safe" alternatives.

DOROTHY COUCH  
Hutchinson

### Trump's nerve

Potential presidential candidate Donald Trump has finally had the nerve to use the "C" word.

You know that 800-pound gorilla in the room that everyone

seems to ignore. They steal our technology with impunity; they have implanted malware in our power grid.

They have a specially designed ballistic missile just waiting to take out our carrier battle groups; they manipulate their currency to take unfair advantage of us and we owe them tons of money.

But I guess we don't have anything to worry about, do we?

They are our friends. GREGORY H. BONTRAGER  
Hutchinson

**JOIN THE DISCUSSION**

The News encourages readers to share their opinions on this page and offers a number of ways to do so:

(1) Write a letter to the Western Front on any topic. Send to The News at 300 W. Second Ave., Hutchinson, KS, 67504-0190; fax to (620) 662-4186 or e-mail to westernfront@hutchnews.com.

Letters should be limited to 500 words. Poems, consumer complaints, business testimonials and group-written letters will not be accepted. Please sign your name and provide your address and a phone number so

we may call to verify the letter. We strive to publish letters within one week of verification. There is a 30-day waiting period between submissions.

Western Front letters are subject to editing for space considerations and libel concerns.

(2) Respond directly to a newspaper editorial by joining our online opinions blog. Go to www.hutchnews.com/editorial-blogs and comment on any of our latest posts. A selection of constructive comments may be excerpted to go with opinions that are published in a later print edition of The News.

**Doonesbury**

