

OUR VIEW

Lack of jail cooperation wastes taxpayer dollars

Last month, Steele County commissioners did something citizens usually criticize: They kicked a can down the road.

The “can,” in this case, is the Steele County Detention Center (SCDC). Built to house 154 inmates, it now holds under 50. Everyone knows the facility was overbuilt from the start, and taxpayers are now shelling out big bucks every year to maintain it.

To their credit, commissioners have studied ways to reduce costs. On May 24, they reviewed information about turning the jail into a booking and transfer facility. The biggest problem with that option should make every citizen of Steele and Rice counties furious.

It’s the cost of transportation. Steele officials said Rice County won’t take local prisoners—even after completion of a \$48 million, 76-bed law enforcement center.

Three years ago, the state Department of Corrections (DOC) told our neighbors to the north they had to make changes to their facility or see it downgraded to a 90-day jail. That would have forced the county to spend about \$1 million a year transporting prisoners who were given longer sentences.

Among the options they turned down was an offer of cooperation from Steele County. Officials here made two suggestions: an agreement to house Rice County inmates at the Steele County Detention Center and a Regional Jail Authority Joint Powers Agreement.

While officials met informally a few times, Rice County declined both in favor of a new facility that will have their residents and county visitors paying another .375% sales tax for the next 30 years – while populations in both Steele and Rice facilities are expected to remain relatively flat for the foreseeable future.

It’s disappointing and saddening to see that officials from both counties couldn’t have worked together on a joint effort utilizing the Steele County facility and saving taxpayers in both counties big money. We think Rice County officials are doing a major disservice to their citizens by building another facility when they could have easily worked with Steele County to come up with a cheaper alternative.

Many years ago Steele and Rice counties came together to operate a joint 911 dispatch center in Owatonna. In 2021, that center handled a total of 178,987 emergency and non-emergency calls between both counties. Now 21 years later the center is flourishing and presumably has saved both counties significant tax dollars by having one joint operation instead of two or more operations. The concept has proved to be a homerun for both counties when it comes to cost and overall efficiency.

If a joint dispatch center can work, why couldn’t a joint detention center for both counties?

What Rice County is doing seems to be a recurring problem with government in general. Certain officials, especially politicians, which in this case is county commissioners, let egos take over and become territorial within their jurisdictions. They are not looking out for the greater good of government and the people they represent.

Government officials should be wiser and make smarter decisions that are going to benefit the most people, even if that means going outside their respective jurisdiction. Rice County has done a great disservice not only to its residents, but also to the citizens of Steele County.

Rice County’s need for space isn’t related to the number beds but creating adequate space for segregating different inmate classifications and more program and leisure time activities. Steele County has allocated funds to build a wall that closes off underutilized space.

At a time when construction costs are skyrocketing, it seems clear that officials’ refusal to cooperate will result in an enormous waste of tax dollars they could put to much better use.

Family is most important in life



Hot Pursuit
RICK BUSSLER

A trio of life events in June provides me with a great reminder of how fortunate I am.

First, a birthday and anniversary wrapped into one special day and then followed by Father’s Day hits on the importance of what’s most important in life—family.

On June 9, my parents celebrated their 63rd wedding anniversary. It also was the same day as my mother’s birthday. And of course, I will be spending Sunday with my dad for Father’s Day.

While taking my parents out for their anniversary/birthday,

it dawned on me how incredibly fortunate I am to have them in my life as they continue in their later years.

We certainly aren’t able to enjoy things at the pace we did say just 10 years ago, but it’s neat to be able to get together.

You likely don’t know this, but my parents are actively involved with this newspaper on a couple fronts. They are avid readers of the paper and keep tabs on everything going on around the area, even though they don’t live around here. When the paper doesn’t show up in their mailbox on Thursdays, I’m the first one to hear about it. By now, I’ve got them well trained to know it’s not us, but rather the postal service that prevents the paper from coming on time. Sound familiar? I know many of you can relate to this.

Besides reading the paper, my parents also help every month to

send out subscription renewal notices. This is quite the process as we all form an assembly line of sorts and push out hundreds of notices in one afternoon.

They have been there to help me out in many other ways as well. I wouldn’t be where I’m at today without them.

Hard work has been a part of our family’s DNA for decades, and it doesn’t show any signs of leaving any time soon. For me, it all started with my dad and mom while growing up on the family farm. My parents operated a hog and crop farm of 200 acres. By today’s standards, it would be a tiny farm.

From slopping the hogs to bedding them with straw to bailing hay and harvesting crops, we learned the value of hard work and the rewards that come with it. I wish all children would have an opportunity to experience farm life.

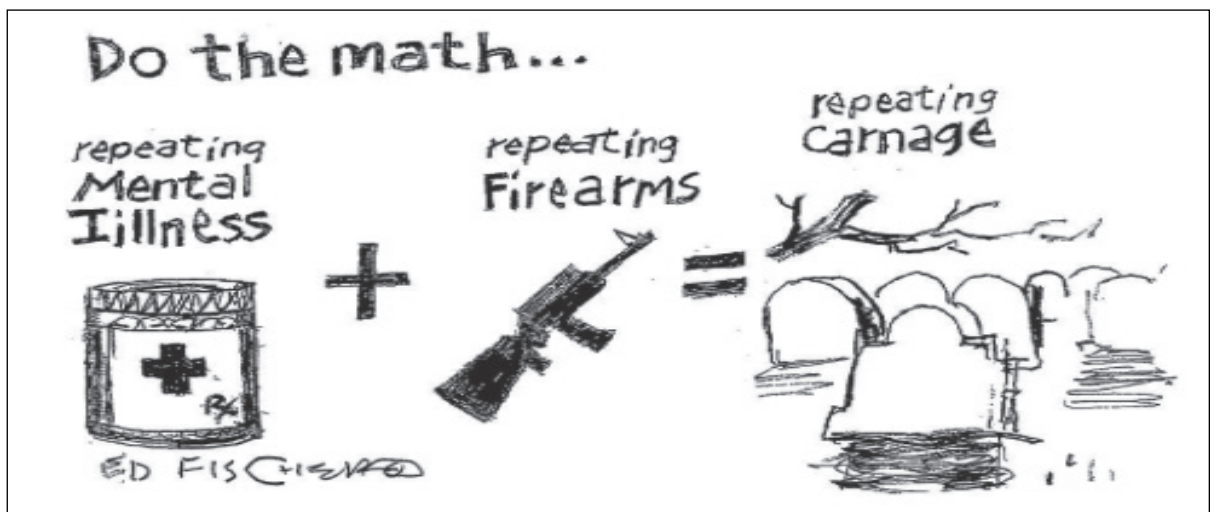
It’s not all work, though. We do find a little time here and there to play my dad’s favorite card game, Rook. It’s something he played while growing up with the neighbor, and we now make it part of our family gatherings.

I credit both of my parents for providing me with an understanding of what I believe is life’s greatest reward. Family is where it’s at. Without family, we would have nothing.

I have often said in the past that my greatest accomplishment in life has been being a father as I have three children of my own. I wouldn’t have been able to realize that achievement without a strong father (and mother) figure in the background.

Don’t forget your fathers this weekend. They deserve so much for all they’ve done.

For me, I’m in hot pursuit of celebrating the special day with my father.



GUEST COLUMN

Disappointment in no tax relief bill

BY JOHN PETERSBURG

The 2022 legislative session is now in the books. Though some might be discouraged that lawmakers did not give a specific direction to our projected state surplus, I am not among them.

Sure, I am disappointed that we were not able to get a tax relief bill across the finish line. The problem is the approval of a tax bill would have been made in exchange for billions of dollars in new, and permanent, spending obligations within state government, as that was the priority of the House

Democrat majority. In fact, the supplemental budget plan approved by the House majority earlier this session would have spent \$21 for every \$1 cut in taxes. So, it was far from an even trade.

We also did not have to do anything with the state surplus, as it was not a budget year. We set the state’s budget last year, and spent roughly \$52 billion in the process. Any amount of spending that was approved in supplemental budget spending this year – and estimates had that total as high as \$5 billion – would have been new, permanent

spending added to the \$52 billion.

Not spending away the surplus does have its benefits. If the economy bottoms out, we will then have billions of dollars at the ready to assist with state needs. If our finances stay strong, House Republicans will come back next year to focus on the priorities of Minnesota families – we will help Minnesotans struggling with record inflation and soaring gas prices in the Biden/Walz economy by delivering massive tax cuts, and work to make our communities safer with investments in public safety and by holding

criminals accountable.

If our legislative work is indeed finished for the year, we are set to enter the 2023 session in a very strong financial position. The potential exists for Governor Walz to call us back in to special session, but it is unlikely that he would do so unless the House and Senate majorities have reached some form of agreement. Stay tuned.

John Petersburg represents District 24A in the Minnesota House. District 24A includes Steele and Waseca counties. He lives in Waseca.



Heart Of Steele
JONI HUBRED

What’s your summer reading program?

I finished the last few chapters of my current read out on our front steps.

That was my summer reading program. Nowadays, libraries create a theme and give kids a reading log and special programs and other cool stuff, because it just isn’t easy any more to get and keep their attention.

My only other distractions were a TV with unreliable “rabbit ears,” a tiny AM radio, my LP collection, and an occasional movie night.

Books compete now with 200-plus cable channels and streaming services, social media, video games, cell phones, computers, and a world full of distractions.

If it takes a magic show, a free book, and a little ice cream to cut through all that, I am all for it. In fact, I am so all for it that I’d like to see a similar program for adults.

We have the same distractions kids do, with the added responsibilities of work and

paying the bills. It can be difficult to find a minute for ourselves, never mind trying to finish the latest bestseller.

Still, the benefits of reading are so clear. According to the National Literacy Trust, reading for pleasure expands our appreciation of other cultures and supplies greater insight into human nature. Other studies show reading enhances creativity, boosts brain power, and supports self-improvement.

We all know those

things are good for us, but I strongly suspect a bookmark or a tote bag or a free book would be a more effective incentive. They would work for me.

I think deep down, we’re all looking for one thing in our phones and gaming systems and Netflix subscriptions, something we don’t get nearly enough of in our lives, something that gets lost in the day-to-day grind.

Those studies also show you don’t have to read a heavy, literary

classic or nonfiction to reap the benefits of reading. A summer program for adults could serve as an important reminder that reading can be just plain fun.

Creating your own summer reading program is simple: Make a list, set a goal. And please find time to visit the Owatonna or Blooming Prairie library this summer. We are fortunate to have two places to find our next favorite read in the heart of Steele County.

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Subscription Rates:
Steele, Dodge, Freeborn & Mower- \$49
Elsewhere in Minnesota- \$52
Out of State- \$56

Ethics:
The Steele County Times strives to present the news in a fair and accurate manner. Please bring any grievances to the attention of the News Editor.

Postmaster:
Send address changes to: Steele County Times, P.O. Box 247, Blooming Prairie, MN 55917
Published weekly by Bussler Publishing, Inc., P.O.

Box 247, Blooming Prairie, MN 55917
USPS 058-340
Periodicals postage paid at Blooming Prairie, MN

A state and national award winning weekly

MINNESOTA NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION

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