

# Journal blamed for city-county woes

Commissioner:  
Newspaper editor  
distorts relationship

By **Darrin Stine**  
*Salina Journal*

A month ago, when the five-member Salina City Commission was the subject of a League of Women Voters public forum, League member Ann Zimmerman wanted to know why the city commission and Saline County Commission can't seem to get along.

She asked the same thing of county commissioners Tuesday, when commissioners Craig Stephenson, Sherri Barragree and Randy Duncan were the guests of a league public forum.

During the past two years, when the league was giving reports on the merits of studying city-county consolidation, Zimmerman and other league members had attended several joint city-county meetings, and she said she was troubled by the way the members of the bodies treated one another.

"We were pretty dismayed by the fact that the city and county commissions do not cooperate . . . that they don't even speak with respect toward each other in many instances," said Zimmerman, who was one of about 20 people who attended the event at the Salina Public Library. "It seems that even on issues where they don't agree, they would at least be able to speak respectfully to

each other."

Stephenson, chairman of the county commission, suggested the Salina Journal had distorted the nature of the city-county relationship.

In making his point, Stephenson mentioned an Oct. 31 editorial that Journal editor and publisher Tom Bell wrote about the last joint city-county meeting. The editorial pointed out that three city commissioners never spoke during the meeting, "apparently seeing the futility in trying to change the mind of any county commissioner."

Stephenson conceded that some meetings have been "extremely ugly," but he said the most recent one went well.

"It was only when I read

the editorial that I thought we had a disagreement at the meeting," he said. "So is it really a city-county issue, or is it an issue of the editor of the editorial page that wants to probably make this issue into something more than what it really is."

Zimmerman said she's seen altercations with her own eyes.

"I have to say, in the league's experience," she said, "it's not just the paper that's made these things up."

**It's all been resolved . . .**

Zimmerman also mentioned the "latest incarnation" of city-county discord, a flap over office space

needed for a new outreach center. "I don't see how that's resolved," she said. "It's still a problem."



Tom Dorsey / Salina Journal

**Saline County Commissioners Sherri Barragree (from left) Craig Stephenson and Randy Duncan listen to a question from the audience during Tuesday's League of Women Voters public forum at the Salina Public Library.**

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position at the city's Human Relations Department. The city approached the Saline County-City Building Authority about using common space in the City-County Building but was rejected by a 4-2 vote. The three county commissioners cast three of the four votes against; the votes to approve came from two city commissioners.

Stephenson and Duncan had contended that there was sufficient space elsewhere in the building, but city officials said using that space would require expensive renovations, whereas the space they were seeking would not.

At Tuesday's meeting, Stephenson and Duncan said the city found available space soon after their request was rejected.

"That issue has been resolved," Stephenson said. "That staff person was hired and in place about a week ago. After a review of their floor space, the city happened to find an empty office on the second floor that satisfied the needs of that individual."

Duncan also commented on the matter.

"The city of Salina had the space to begin with," Duncan said. "If you go down to the Human Relations office, it's been cramped anyway. The city really just needs to bite the bullet and redo the office down there, expand the department and give it more room."

## ... Uh, that's not true

Kaye Crawford, executive director of the Human Relations Commission, heard about the county commissioners' comments on Tuesday and called the Journal to set the record straight.

"That is not true," Crawford said

of Stephenson's claim that space had been obtained and the position filled. "We have not hired anyone for the position that I was approved for. As far as I know, it still stands as it was. There's just no place for them."

## Journal was unfair

Regarding the Human Relations issue, Duncan said at the forum that the Journal was unfair toward the county commission.

"It kept getting reported in the media and in the Salina Journal, in particular, that it was those mean old county commissioners, us three up here right now, complete with the horns, (who) wouldn't turn loose of just a store room," Duncan said. "Well, no, that's not the case. It was the (Community) Access Television control room, just the back half. The room is a shared joint space between the city and county, and it's storage space on the back half."

Stephenson concluded the discussion on city-county relations by saying, "We're really hoping to do better."

## We welcome visitors

Zimmerman set off another round of spirited discussion when she questioned the way county meetings are structured.

She said the league tries to have observers present at meetings of key local entities, but it's nearly impossible to do so with the county because of the large block of time that would be required to do so.

The county commission meets informally from 9 a.m. to noon Monday through Wednesday, or until the business of the day is concluded. The sessions, which are at the county commission office, are open to the public, and the commission sometimes votes on matters that come before it. It also has a "public

forum and commission meeting" at 11 a.m. Tuesdays, but frequently, agenda items are of little substance — or meetings are canceled because there are no agenda items at all.

"We've never been able to send (an observer) to the regular county commission meetings, because your meetings are counted as (9 to noon) on Monday through Wednesday, and nobody can sit there that long," Zimmerman said. "We've always been kind of curious how that meets the (Kansas) Open Meetings Act."

Stephenson pointed out that the meeting agenda is available on the county's Web site or by calling the county commission office.

"If you try to rely on what's sometimes put in our local newspaper, you would think we really weren't doing anything," Stephenson said. "But actually, if you get on our Web site or want to request an agenda, there may be some specific items that are of issue to you, and you would be able to devote possibly that 30 minutes to an hour of time to come down and observe those."

"We welcome people to come to our office. It's something we seldom see."

## Could reduce meetings

Duncan said state statute requires that county commissions meet at least two days a week, and it might be a good idea to cut back in Saline County.

"I think we could probably do it two days a week," Duncan said. "It's just a matter of whatever the majority of commissioners determines at any particular time."

Duncan alluded to redundancy in the current system. As an example, he pointed out that at the "open forum" commission meeting on Tuesday morning, the commission had approved the purchase of

a salt spreader that it already had approved during an informal session at the commission office.

"We approved that at a session two weeks ago, just to expedite the process," Duncan said. "There are times in study sessions where we meet before the televised session that we have already approved it."

## County on 'cutting edge'

Asked their thoughts on issues that will face the county — other than those that have been reported on extensively, such as the development of Kenwood Park and the problem of deteriorating bridges — Stephenson said the county needs to be more aggressive in its economic development efforts.

"If I hear that we sit at the crossroads of two Interstates one more time, I'm going to scream," he said. "We have to do something more than sit at the — that's exactly what we've done in our community, we've *sat* at the crossroads of two Interstates."

Barragree said she sees the county making strides.

"To me, we are progressing now, and the county needs to stay progressive and do some of these things with economic development," Barragree said. "Saline County is one of the better counties in the state as far as being on the cutting edge of being progressive and dealing with some of these issues."

Duncan mentioned the county has more than doubled its contribution to the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce as part of the chamber's new strategic plan for economic development.

Stephenson gave credit to Dennis Lauver, who was hired about a year ago as the chamber's president and CEO.

"I've got to thank Dennis Lauver

for bringing the county to the table," Stephenson said. "The county really wasn't at the table in the past in economic development. We were left to the side. We were asked to contribute \$15,000 to the chamber and sit at chamber meetings and vote Aye when we needed to, and (then) go back across the street. Now, we're a partner over there, and I think that's going to make a huge difference in our community."

## What? Another meeting?

Zimmerman asked the county commissioners their thoughts on the groundwater contamination problem under the former Schilling Air Force Base, which experts have said is migrating toward city wells.

While acknowledging that the matter is on the city's plate and not the county's, Stephenson said the approach has been too passive.

"Other communities have taken action and figured out later how it's going to be paid for," he said. "In our community, we seem to be more concerned about who's going to pay for it, and we're going to argue for years about who's going to pay for it, and then we're going to take action."

"The action needs to be taken first. You need to stop the migration of any of those chemicals. There are things that can be done currently. Wichita has already done things. It's not rocket science; things could be done."

"So, nothing's being done, is that what you're saying?" Zimmerman asked.

"I think they've had a lot of meetings," Stephenson said. "That'll probably be a really big quote for me. They've had a lot of meetings, but I haven't seen them remediate anything out there."

"But that's not exactly our issue. It's a city issue."