

New Iowa law opens door to corruption

JOURNAL EDITORIAL BOARD

Checks and balances sustained a horrible blow in Iowa last week.

When Gov. Kim Reynolds signed a bill that threatens to weaken the state auditor's ability to view records to root out fraud and abuse in state and local governments, she opened the door to potential corruption.

If Auditor Rob Sand doesn't have the ability to investigate fully, he won't be able to issue audits that are complete enough to confirm something's awry. That could affect the state's bond rating and his ability to provide oversight on programs that total more than \$12 billion.

Republicans insist this isn't an attempt to target Sand – the only Democrat elected to statewide office. GOP lawmakers claim the new law will protect Iowans' privacy by restricting access to personal information such as criminal records, patient's medical records and



FILE

State Auditor Rob Sand speaks at the Iowa Capitol on Jan. 9, 2020.

students' grades.

The auditor won't be allowed to publicly disclose private information without the individual's permission. In cases of embezzlement, theft, fraud or other significant financial irregularities, the auditor could access the information but would need permission of the

entity being audited to publish private information.

Sands dismissed the Republicans' stated reasons for the new restrictions during a recent visit to the Sioux City Rotary Club, pointing out his office already maintains strict confidentiality of information and records obtained during the

course of an audit, including medical and student education records.

As a protector of government spending in Iowa, the auditor is charged with preventing fraud and misuse of taxpayer funds. If the office holder is hampered, is that even possible?

Nonpartisan and bipartisan auditors and CPA organizations have insisted it goes against their standards when conducting audits.

The shift could prompt federal agencies to withhold, disallow or suspend payments to the state through such programs as Medicaid and federal food assistance programs. That creates another problem without solving any.

Sand said an agency being audited could hide records from his office as long as the governor agrees, halting his access to Iowa courts for independent review. He said it was "akin to letting the defendant decide what evidence the judge and jury are allowed to see."

Clearly, voters liked Sand's work as a watchdog. They re-elected him to the job and wanted to make sure he was there to protect their interests. Muzzling him serves no one.

Further, the bill hinders the auditor's subpoena power. If there's a dispute over access to records, a three-member arbitration panel would make a decision. The auditor's office, the state department or agency under investigation and a representative of the governor's office would each appoint a representative to the panel. Sand argues that would allow any agency being audited to hide records from the auditor's office as long as the governor agrees.

The auditor wouldn't stand a chance of challenging the decision in court.

What Reynolds and her supporters fail to see is the bigger picture. Even though they're in office now doesn't mean they'll always be. An unencumbered auditor could be their best ally.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Memorial Park no longer a beautiful place

I like to let Mary know she is not alone in being disappointed with how poorly cemeteries are keeping them. This is where our loved ones are laid to rest – only to be treated with such disrespect.

I just wanted to cry when I went out Memorial Park Cemetery the Friday before Memorial Day. Obviously, she did not go there. The roads have been bad for years with potholes. Now, over half the cemetery had not been mowed for weeks – weeds and grass knee-high. This is where my parents, sister, and brother reside.

Their excuse? They cannot find enough help in Sioux City. However, there are lots of lawn services that they could hire. There is no reason for our families who are deceased to be treated with such disrespect. It used to be a beautiful place but no longer.

– Bonnie Ullrich,
Sioux City

Return to principles of 'Love thy Neighbor'

Hate crimes, hate speech and bigotry have over many years and fought to eradicate by world leaders and Americans have been lessened over time. However, these issues have been brought back in recent years. Our world has once again resorted to these evils.

Just recently, a hate and bigot group in California, representing the LGBTQ community, reared its ugly head and blasphemed Christianity. Los Angeles sports groups are honoring them in a ceremony.

As a country that was founded on Christian principles, we must come back to our values or hate and bigotry will once again prosper. We must stop the killing of our citizens many times caused by hate. Let us return to the principles of "Love thy Neighbor."

– Carl Hardy, Sioux City



THE REGULARS

Facing a changed world in the wake of COVID

In the spring of 2020, the earliest days and weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, our community experienced many creative acts of kindness and caring. I remember being surprised and delighted by the dozens of colorful yard signs that appeared one morning on Country Club Boulevard in front of Perry Creek Elementary School.

The school yard and parking lot were empty. Only those making occasional trips to the grocery store, or welcomed outside walks on warm spring days, were the extent of traffic.

These colorful yard signs were greetings and encouragement from teachers to students. Mrs. Kolbush, a Perry Creek Elementary

teacher, shared this sign:

You Matter
You Are Loved
Everything Will Be Okay!

Another sign had a vocabulary lesson (teachers never miss an opportunity to teach and learn!). The sign said "FIKA (fee-ka) Swedish" – and then gave the timely definition of the word: "A moment to slow down and appreciate the good things in life."

The past three years have surely given us all the opportunity to "slow down and appreciate the good things in life." Also, we have all experienced the challenges and changes that this once-in-a-generation public health crisis provided.

I've wondered how we, as a community, are, and will continue to be, interpreting and understanding this chapter of history which all have experienced. And, I'm glad for those who are helping us do so.

The Sioux City Art Center is a

community treasure. The Art Center's mission is "to enrich our region's quality of life by bringing the excitement of the visual arts to our community through education, exhibition and permanent collection." One of the most enriching exhibitions is available for all to experience now.

"Facing a Changed World" is an exhibition of photography and story currently at the Art Center (now through July 30). Mark Munger of Siouxland Public Media, local photographer Ron Johns, and Todd Behrens and the staff of the Art Center have done an excellent collaboration which tells about living, coping, hope, and recovery in the midst of the COVID-19 restrictions and in the days and months following.

A group of diverse Siouxland neighbors were interviewed and photographed. As you enter the third floor of the Art Center you will read this: "Each of the interviewees navigated this time in a different way but they all had the courage to speak up and talk about what they went through. Some of the stories you'll hear in the exhibition are heartbreakingly familiar and others intensely personal."

"Each recorded interview is accompanied by Ron's beautifully spare black and white photographs. The images give each person a presence ... When

all 30 photos are seen together, they introduce us to and represent a coming together of our diverse community members, which includes business owners, creative professionals, religious leaders, and academics. It's easy to see that Ron has an immediate connection with his sitters, making them comfortable while they share their story."

At the Art Center, every photograph is accompanied by a digitally-recorded interview, which can be heard by scanning the QR code with a smartphone. Some of the photographs and interviews are also available on the Siouxland Public Media website.

A sampling of the interviews: Terry Brooks – "Coming out of COVID, I love music even more."

Dwight Howe – "I think it made us less effective, because it made us more individuals and isolated than ever before. And being a communal people, it was counterproductive."

"Wynema Morris – "I think it's going to be noted and remembered as a very difficult time...a time of mourning, loss and grief."

Rosie Kuehne – "Try to learn how to be quiet, to go from an active to a contemplative life, and to not resent it, because it's the only life I had. And I could either make the most of it or I could complain and feel bad about it. So, I decided that I was going to make my life valuable in any way that I could."

Rev. David Esquiliano – "The mass, our mass is a dialogue. It has a dialogue part. And there are parts where you would say, 'The Lord be with you.' And there's nobody to reply."

"Facing a Changed World"

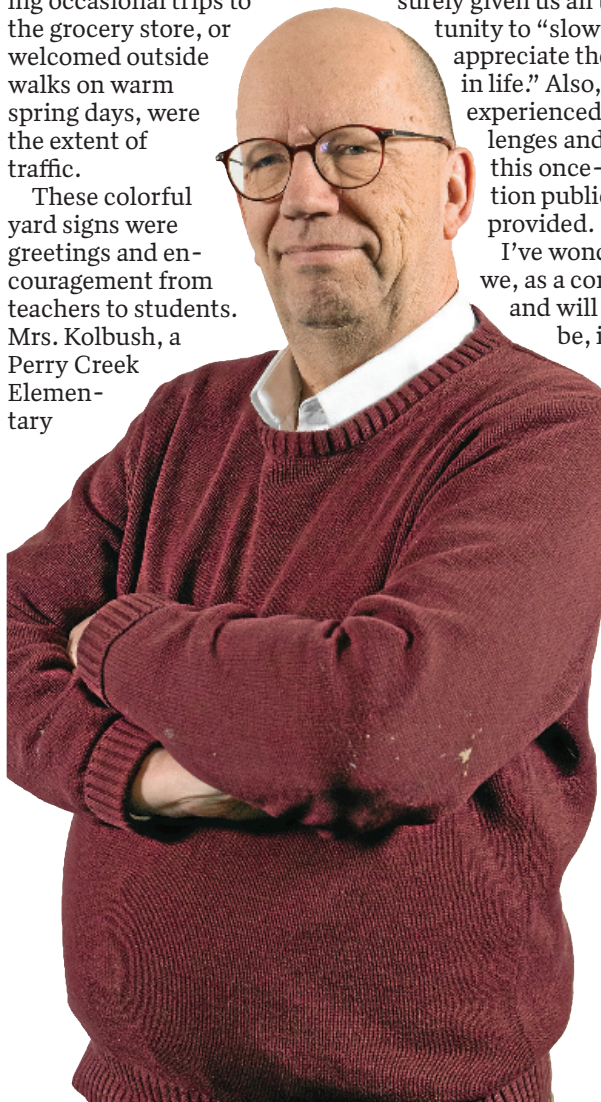
poignantly gives voice and presence to our community that continues to heal.

Another gathering of "COVID-time" stories are collected in a new book called "Resilient Kitchens: American Immigrant Cooking in a Time of Crisis" (edited by Philip Gleissner and Harry Eli Kashdan, published by Rutgers University Press). Here you will find essays, recipes, and photographs from around the United States. Immigrants from Belarus, Mexico, India, Syria, Venezuela, Palestine, Philippines, and Germany write with eloquence.

The story tellers are restaurant owners, local food writers, chefs, and food scholars. The essays tell of how cooking, eating, and drinking became practices of spiritual survival during the pandemic. Gathering around a table, either in person or "on zoom," was surely a way to break out of the times of isolation by "connecting with our communities, identifies, and heritages through our kitchens."

The recipes, with photographs, feature Red Chilaquiles, German-Greek bread, Butter Chicken, Hot Walnut Soup, Sour Cream Pound Cake, Vietnamese-style Iced Coffee, and more.

After more than three years most social distancing restrictions in our lives have been removed. Vaccines and boosters have helped stop the spread of the virus and saved countless lives all over the world. However, the realities of our common pandemic experiences will always linger in different ways. We will do better and be better if we continue to tell the stories of our experiences, and honor and celebrate the diversity of our communities.



David Halaas

David Halaas has a commitment to community involvement, recently serving on the boards of Leadership Siouxland, SafePlace, the Sioux City Public Library and currently on the Board of Trustees of the Sioux City Public Museum. He is the pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church ELCA in Sioux City.