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Sedalia students tackle tough capital punishment issue

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It was a hung jury last Friday at Sedalia Elementary School as students tackled some of the same tough questions that have puzzled lawmakers and judges for years — namely if and when capital punishment is appropriate.

Examining both ethical and economic sides of the issue, a panel of Nancy Bressler's sixth-graders turned at least two weeks research into convincing debate.

Proponents Tricia Batchler, Lance Denton and Ian McCrudden related the brutality of highly publicized murders, informing their classmates

that the death penalty is imposed only if there is an eye witness to the crime.

The threesome also argued that the cost of imprisoning convicted murderers often exceeds that of putting them to death.

Speaking against the issue were Raneë Somsky, Brandi Clark and Ian Friedman, who circulated sheets describing methods of execution allowed in the United States.

Calling capital punishment inhumane, the youngsters also pointed out the possibility of executing an innocent person.

Additionally, they argued that particular events in a murderer's background might have caused him to



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CONS OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT — Ian Friedman (far right), a sixth grader at Sedalia Elementary School, debates classmates on the wisdom of inposing the death penalty. From left to right

are: proponents Tricia Batchler, Lance Denton and Ian McCrudden, and opponents Raneë Somsky, Brandi Clark and Trumbore.



NOT CUT-AND-DRIED — Denver criminal attorney John Tatem (right) explains to Sedalia sixth graders the ambiguity of some murder cases. To Tatem's left is Douglas County deputy

sheriff Gary Robinson. Both men visited Nancy Bressler's class Friday as part of a discussion on capital punishment.

go astray.

"We shouldn't kill just because they did," explained Brandi Clark. "But we should put them in the most rotten maximum security prison around — I mean rotten!"

Their positions understood, the panel then battled it out before hearing from Douglas County deputy sheriff Gary Robinson and John Tatem, a Denver attorney specializing in criminal law.

Emphasizing that his opinions were not necessarily shared by the Sheriff's Department, Robinson sided with proponents, relating the brutality and senselessness of many slayings.

"We should think of (these murderers) not as people as you and I know them. Just because they walk on two legs, have two eyes and speak our language, I don't confer the name of human being on them.

Pointing out that convicted killers are often paroled, the deputy continued, "While I don't believe that capital punishment is a deterrent, I can guarantee you one thing: the person you execute will never kill again.

"You were talking about (what is) humane. Is being locked up humane?" he asked. "A lethal injection is very humane."

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President Reagan's would-be assassin? How can you tell he is insane?" another pupil questioned.

Still another youngster wondered,

"What if somebody forces you to kill somebody?"

So while, following Friday's lesson, students returned home with a more

sophisticated understanding of the law, many also gained appreciation for the problems inherent in its application.

On the con side, criminal attorney John Tatem outlined three ambiguous cases being handled by his law firm, which illustrate the difficulty of determining guilt in certain instances.

When asked if anyone would seek the death penalty in either of the cases only one youngster raised his hand.

"This is about morals, what is right and what is wrong. And it's about a lot of everyday considerations," explained Tatem.

Appeals consume money

The attorney also took aim at financial arguments, explaining that appeals required to seek the death sentence consume more public money than long-term imprisonment.

Moreover, he noted, punishment is often doled out unequally with more conservative governments exerting pressure on judges to step up the number of convictions. So while the judicial pendulum may swing according to public mood, application can also vary according to geography. The South in the '60s, said Tatem, executed a high percentage of blacks convicted of killing whites. But only a small percentage of whites convicted of killing blacks received the death penalty.

Apparently grasping the complexities of generalization, students began grilling Robinson and Tatem about the differences between seemingly similar crimes.

"What if somebody killed a regular person and another person killed the Pope in the same way?" asked one boy.

"What about John Hinckley (Jr.,

hearing, but when we have the hearing on the landfill matter on March 8, we invite concerned residents to put in writing their concerns and give the written evidence to the county planning office."

Commission member Virgil Young asked Schau to describe the site in more detail to the board and Schau said it is located one mile south of Titan Road, near the Matchbox Bar.

Several board members cited "the mess at the County Line Road landfill," and asked if CDI planned to do anything different with a Douglas County dump.

Lenderink replied construction of the wind screen would help, adding, "we are committed to keep this area clean. We have spent \$60,000 in the past year at County Line Road with off-site trash pick up and intend to do more in Douglas County."

Commission member Tom Chase said one of his greatest concerns was with traffic impact throughout the county. He said, "we have no roads in the county and I am concerned about increased traffic to Castle Rock, Castle Pines and the Parker area."

Lenderink said CDI had done a traffic study at the Gun Club Road landfill in Arapahoe County and it was determined 1,046 vehicles in a 10-hour period used the dump.

A resident in the audience said the study was done on August 26 and more than half of the vehicles going into the

... landfill

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Company is doing similar reclamation projects in several states. "Mount Trashmore" was at one time a sanitary landfill operated by CDI's parent company.

Lenderink addressed the audience and said he can see a lot of interest and concern about a landfill in the county. He invited residents to call the CDI office and set up meetings, "either at the office or your homes. We want to work with you all."

There's a need . . . but

Emotions during and after the meeting ran high among the 200 people there, and although, most felt a landfill is needed somewhere in the county, "we just don't want it next to us."

The county commissioners briefly discussed the issue of a county landfill at their weekly meeting Monday, but didn't come up with any answers. One suggestion made was that developers be made to create their own landfills on-site for construction debris and

then clean it up when they are finished with construction.

However, that is going to be studied by the board because of concerns with contaminating ground water supplies.

Rick Jeffries of CDI spoke to the board Monday about the raise in landfill hauling costs to the county. The rates for hauling trash out of the county dumps to the Arapahoe County landfills will be increased by about 11.65 percent.

The commissioners said they'll have to pass on the increase to residents who use the three dumps in the county and may go up by almost one-third the present fee rate.

Naturally, Jeffries said, if a landfill could be built in Douglas County, the rates would rapidly decrease to the county and to the dump users, as well.

The county commissioners recognize the problem and the sensitivity to landfills by residents, but say "there is definitely a need for a land fill someplace in the county." The board will carefully study the dump issue for the next several weeks.

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