From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 1-6-20
Date: Monday, January 6, 2020 8:48:43 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Jan 2020	3.56	-30.00	08:32
Corn	Dec 2020	3.61	-40.00	08:32
Milo	Jan 2020	2.98	-88.00	08:32
Milo	Dec 2020	3.16	-85.00	08:32
Soybeans	Jan 2020	8.36	-105.00	08:32
Soybeans	Dec 2020	8.66	-105.00	08:32
Wheat	Jan 2020	3.99	-75.00	08:32
Wheat	Jul 2020	4.04	-85.00	08:31

Governor
OWH: Gov. Pete Ricketts again makes property tax relief his top goal for Nebraska legislative session
LJS: Ricketts targets prison salaries, flood repair
AP: Ricketts picks taxes, flood recovery as top issues in 2020
OWH: Nebraska legislators aim to finalize property tax proposal before session starts
NP Telegraph: Property tax back at top of 2020 Unicameral priority list as the session starts Wednesday
NP Telegraph: Regional state senators ready new bills; lobby for old ones
LJS: Nebraska Legislature looks to tackle familiar issues in 2020 session
LJS: Don Walton: 2020 Legislature, election, Iran and LSU
OWH: Prison overcrowding prompts lawmaker to propose new work-release facility in Omaha
GII: AgLines: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program extended
Sandhills Express: Nebraska State Poet Matt Mason At Broken Bow Public Library January 14

State Capitol
OWH: Nebraska Supreme Court again upholds state's death penalty, says repeal never went into effect
OWH: 'I'm really disgusted to see that number': 56 Nebraska educators linked to sexual misconduct
LJS: Senators ready to get things done, want to see cooperation

State, Local and Regional
AP: Regulators to review handling of water problem at nuke plant
LJS: Grand Island-area residents ask judge to block historical horse racing terminals at Fonner Park

Opinion
OWH Editorial: Work by a range of Omahans has helped reduce the city's homicide rate
OWH Editorial: Legislature should make sure to address its key tasks this session

OWH Editorial: Offutt forensic lab's work brings comfort to military families

OWH Public Pulse

1. Get Dutch advice on flood control
2. Best choice for Bellevue?
3. Lies and Afghanistan disaster
4. Dems' failed moves against Trump
5. Christians and Trump
6. Australia crisis offers a warning
7. Iowa caucuses
8. Nebraska's tax relief complications

LJS Editorial, 1/5: Editorial board sets 2020 agenda

LJS Letters

1. Restraint bill too dangerous
2. Voters have say on property tax
3. Senators must do their job
4. Left not willing to give up

NP Telegraph Editorial: Note to Unicam: Make best use of 2020 session

National/Federal

OWH: Nebraska's congressional delegation backs action on Iran, says killing was 'defensive move'

OWH: Gov. Pete Ricketts again makes property tax relief his top goal for Nebraska legislative session

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts once again named property tax relief as his top priority heading into the new legislative session.

But tax cuts for military veterans, funding for flood recovery and money to continue addressing the state's overcrowded prison system also rank high on his to-do list for the year.

Ricketts sat down with The World-Herald ahead of the Legislature's Wednesday kickoff. He sounded some familiar themes during the conversation, including the need to control spending, oppose new taxes and encourage economic development.

Here are the highlights of the interview. His comments have been edited for length and clarity.

Legislative priorities

We've seen an uptick in revenues from the financial forecasting board, and those revenues need to be put into tax relief. So that will be one of our top priorities. Property tax relief is going to be the No. 1 issue that we're talking about.

I've continued to have conversations with Sen. (Lou Ann) Linehan as chair of the Revenue Committee, Sen. (Mike) Groene, members individually of the Revenue Committee, to work on a plan that we can get done in this legislative session. You recall last year we increased the property tax credit relief fund by 20%, and we want to build on that going into this year using those increasing revenues. I'm confident that we'll have a plan to be able to get accomplished in this 2020 session. So that's the first priority.

The second is continuing on that tax relief theme with regard to our military retirees, our veterans. Legislative Bill 153 is a 50% tax credit on military retirement benefits. That's an important step for us to be competitive with the surrounding states, most of whom do not tax military retirement benefits. This will allow us to help hold on to our veterans so they can help us grow Nebraska.

Part of the budget priorities will be money for the flood recovery. We're looking at, you know, over $700 million total damage. And so part of our budget program will be the recovery from all that damage.

There will be other issues as well, such as the scholarship program, which I proposed last year, continuing work on corrections and so forth. Finally, the (business tax) incentive program is also up for renewal this

year.

Property tax relief

Recall that we already increased the property tax credit relief fund by 20%, so that was meaningful last year. In fact, that fund has nearly doubled since I've been governor. It started off at $140 million and now it's $275 million. The way we were able to accomplish that is by controlling our spending and allowing those additional revenues to go into tax relief. And that's how we'll continue to do this going forward. I'll lay out all the numbers for everybody on Jan. 15, when we roll out the entire budget.

One of the things that we have to do is make sure we live within our budget. We're not going to raise taxes to be able to do this. We have to live within our existing means. This is where the uptick in the forecast will help us be able to provide additional relief over what we've already done.

I also remind people that we didn't get into this situation overnight, this has been in the making for the past dozen years or so. So when we think about how do we provide that tax relief, we have to think about long-term plans to be able to do that.

The only way we've been able to do that at the state level is by controlling our expenses, and that needs to happen at the local level as well. We've got 2,336 local taxing entities in the state of Nebraska. That means literally thousands of people are involved in your property taxes. It's important that citizens go to those board meetings and really ask tough questions about the budget and make sure that those local taxing entities are controlling their spending so that when we provide additional tax relief from the state that is actually making it into people's pocketbooks.

Prisons

Well, let's take a step back. One of the things that (Department of Corrections) Director (Scott) Frakes has laid out is his long-term plan for capital improvements. So we've gone to the Legislature and asked for numerous capital improvements, over $170 million worth, and the Legislature has granted us those dollars, which will expand our capacity.

We obviously have to work on talent retention, to be able to deliver the programming so that people are parole eligible by their parole eligible date. And that's part of what this FOP (prison workers union) contract is about.

We're in a state where we're growing, and so it's a tight labor market. We've got to be competitive. This will help us attract and retain that talent, which will then allow us to be able to deliver the programming, which will then allow us to be able to make sure people are parole eligible by their parole eligible date.

We're looking at other ideas that I'm not prepared to talk to you about at this point. We've got continuing ideas on how to address the issues with regard to keeping the people of Nebraska safe.

Labor shortages

What we're doing is creating that talent pipeline with regard to workforce development. So it started with our program, the Developing Youth Talent Initiative, back in 2015 to get private-sector companies to work with school districts, starting in seventh and eighth grade, to expose kids to careers we've got available in manufacturing and IT and that sort of thing.

And we've got the career academy to be able to help those kids continue to pursue those interests to earn college credit. We also have registered apprenticeship programs; in fact, we've increased those programs by 44% since 2016.

What I proposed last year was our Nebraska talent scholarship program, to be able to help make that postsecondary education more affordable in those high-demand career fields. While that did not get funded last year, I want to continue to work with the Legislature on a scholarship program for our community colleges, our state colleges, our university system.

We've got to focus on getting that complete talent pipeline so that we're making the best use of all the talent that we've got available in the state.

Medicaid expansion

We've laid out a plan to implement Medicaid expansion that is going to make sure we have a great quality system for the people who qualify. We are doing some innovative things with regard to how we're delivering that care. So for example, we're going to have a basic plan for everybody and then allow people to earn additional benefits by focusing on wellness or taking care of a loved one or getting a job or something like that.

This is a big, complicated program that we've got to implement. We're talking about adding maybe 90,000 people to the Medicaid rolls here in the state, and we don't have an enrollment system to be able to do that. So we've got to develop that.

We've got to make sure we've got providers to be able to take those people. We've got to make sure our managed care organizations, their systems are up to date. We've laid out that project plan to be able to deliver that by the fall of this year. And, obviously, if we can do that sooner, we will do that.

What we're trying to do is make sure we avoid mistakes that other states have made. So this is why we have to put together a thought-out program, a high-quality program, (so) that people will be on it who deserve to be on it, but not people who don't deserve to be on it. I believe Nebraskans are very generous, they want to help out people, but they also want to make sure we're reserving those resources for people who truly need the help.

Death penalty

We currently don't have any of the cases that are at that stage where we would be able to carry out an execution, from the legal process standpoint. When we have somebody that meets that criteria, then we will work to be able to carry out that execution. So we will continue to have the death penalty here in Nebraska, we will continue to carry out those executions.

Redistricting

I don't think the Legislature needs to make any changes to the current system. It's the Legislature's constitutional responsibility to redistrict after the census, and that's what they should do. To be specific, they shouldn't delegate that authority to anybody else. They should take the responsibility as state senators who are elected by the people to fulfill their constitutional duties, this being one of their constitutional duties. They shouldn't try to dodge that responsibility.

Future plans

My plans are to continue to be the best governor I can be for the next three years. I am not running for Senate.

By Martha Stoddard

LJS: Ricketts targets prison salaries, flood repair

Gov. Pete Ricketts is approaching the 2020 legislative session with familiar priorities in mind.

But this year he'll also ask for targeted increases in the current state budget to hike prison staff salaries and help finance repair of some of the record flood damage that scarred the state during the past year.

Property tax relief and sharp limitation of state spending growth head the governor's legislative to-do list, and that has been an ongoing refrain moving into the sixth year of the Ricketts governorship.

In coming days, he will push for approval of a 50% reduction in state income taxation of military retirement benefits, the governor said. That's an issue the Legislature may deal with shortly after it convenes its 60-day session.

Although Ricketts has been working closely with Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, chairwoman of the Legislature's Revenue Committee, to determine whether he and the committee can reach consensus on a new property tax reduction plan, no agreement has yet been forged with days to go before the 2020 legislative session sets sail Wednesday.

The Revenue Committee is scheduled to meet in executive session on both Monday and Tuesday

mornings and the governor said he has a future meeting already on his calendar.
Ricketts said he is determined to make "continued progress on property tax reduction," and an unanticipated increase in state revenue — pegged at about $266 million for the current fiscal biennium — provides "an opportunity to do much more."
This year's legislative property tax relief efforts will play out with a statewide initiative petition drive applying a drum beat of pressure in the background. That proposed constitutional amendment would provide a 35% state income tax credit for local property taxes paid, potentially opening a $1.5 billion hole in the state budget.
Ricketts has opted during recent years to deliver property tax assistance by funneling more money into the state's property tax credit relief fund.
"We've made progress," he suggested during a half-hour interview in the Governor's Office, but now the current increase in state revenue beyond the amount forecast provides "an opportunity to do more."
Ricketts said he will continue to tackle the challenge of workforce development in Nebraska.
That fits into the governor's definition of "an emergent issue" that needs to be addressed, he said, while pointing to a number of initiatives — including scholarships and internships — that he already has embraced.
"I realize we can do more," he said.
Ricketts said he remains focused on recovery from last year's record flooding that caused more than a billion dollars of damage in Nebraska while he also is proactively engaged with other Missouri River Basin governors in efforts to prevent or limit the damage caused by future disasters.
"We need to work on better management of the water in the Missouri Basin," he said. "That's a long-term process," he said, and it could even include some construction alternatives.
"We may need to make levees higher," he said.
Ricketts has been working with the governors of Iowa, Kansas and Missouri to map a proposed path forward, and they in turn have reached out to the governors of North Dakota and South Dakota.
In future dealing with the federal government, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, it will be helpful to "have good relations with the White House," Ricketts said.
"This is probably the most states-rights White House since Ronald Reagan," the governor said. "They recently brought governors to the White House to talk about deregulation.
"This administration does push power out from D.C."
Once again, the governor described the efforts of Nebraskans to help, and sometimes save, neighbors and strangers caught in the rising floodwaters as "Nebraska's finest hour."
Ricketts appeared reluctant to discuss his possible involvement in 2020 legislative races.
In the past, he has been actively engaged in a number of contests, including promoting Republican challengers to a number of Republican incumbent members of the nonpartisan Legislature who opposed him, particularly on high-profile gubernatorial vetoes.
"I always look for good candidates," Ricketts said. "It will be case by case."
Sen. Julie Slama of Peru, the only incumbent candidate the governor specifically named, is already clearly receiving his active support. Ricketts appointed Slama to the District 1 seat in the Legislature one year ago.
By Don Walton

AP: Ricketts picks taxes, flood recovery as top issues in 2020

LINCOLN, Neb. — Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts will attempt to lower taxes for homeowners, farmers and military retirees this year while setting aside money to help the state recover from the historic 2019 floods.

The governor pledged in an Associated Press interview to present lawmakers with a property tax package during the legislative session that begins Wednesday. He said he also will continue pushing for one of his earlier priorities, a tax exemption for military retirees equal to half of their benefit income.

"What you'll see in the budget that I lay out is us continuing to make significant progress on property tax relief," Ricketts said. "We made progress in 2019, and we want to continue to build upon that."

Ricketts and lawmakers will have more revenue at their disposal this year, thanks to higher-than-expected tax collections over the past several months.

"We have the opportunity to be able to deliver significant tax relief," Ricketts said.

However, members of the tax-focused Revenue Committee still haven't completed a property tax proposal for the upcoming session. Ricketts said he remains opposed to any measure that lowers property taxes by increasing other taxes, an approach the committee considered last year.

Revenue Committee members are now considering a bill that would reduce the amount of property that school districts can tax.

If it passes, school districts would only be allowed to tax 55% of the total value of agricultural land, down from the current 75%. They could tax 85% of the value of residential and commercial property, down from the current 100%. Nebraska would compensate the schools with increased state funding, but the bill would also impose spending limits on each district.

"The governor wants spending controls, and I do too," said Sen. Mike Groene, of North Platte, a Revenue Committee member and chairman of the Legislature's Education Committee. "Just throwing money at it isn't going to work."

The push comes as activists and some state senators gather signatures to place a property tax cut measure on the 2020 ballot. Ricketts has opposed the ballot measure, saying it would create budget problems and potentially lead to other tax increases. In the interview, he said there's little he can do to stop the ballot campaign, and he plans to remain focused on addressing the issue in the Legislature.

"This is not a one-and-done kind of issue," he said. "Even if we make progress on this issue this year, we still need to continue to work on this issue in the future."

Ricketts said his budget proposal to lawmakers will include additional money to help cover the state's flood recovery expenses. The federal government is expected to pay most of the cost, but the state must provide matching dollars for road repairs and to fix local, publicly owned bridges and buildings. Ricketts said the state will likely spread the costs out over several years.

"We just have to manage that within our budget," he said.

Another Ricketts priority, the tax bill for veterans, is set for debate in the Legislature on Jan. 13. Sen. Tom Brewer, of Gordon, introduced the measure last year but it didn't advance out of committee until just before the 2019 session ended.

Brewer said he believes the measure has a good shot at passing. He said Nebraska's tax on military retirement income discourages former service members from remaining in the state, particularly when they can move to neighboring Iowa or Missouri and not pay any tax on their benefits. Those who do move often start new careers or businesses that generate other taxable income, Brewer said.

"This issue is bigger than people realize," he said. "I'm really hopeful this will work out."

OWH: Nebraska legislators aim to finalize property tax proposal before session starts

LINCOLN — A committee of state lawmakers is planning an 11th-hour, full-court press to craft a new property tax relief bill prior to the start of the 2020 legislative session.

The Legislature's Revenue Committee, which oversees state tax policy, plans to meet Monday and Tuesday in hopes of finalizing the details of a proposal in time for the Wednesday start of the 2020 session of the Nebraska Legislature.

In between the two closed-door meetings, the eight senators on the committee plan to have lunch with Gov. Pete Ricketts in pursuit of his support.

"We need the governor," said State Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, who chairs the Revenue Committee. "Maybe he won't love it, but hopefully he'll agree it's what we can do."

Ricketts has said it's imperative that lawmakers do something to lower property taxes in the 2020 session, given that the State Economic Forecasting Board has projected a healthy surplus in state tax revenue.

The rosy forecast has state lawmakers eyeing a bill to deliver at least $100 million a year in property tax reductions. Linehan said the overall goal would be to reduce taxpayers' property tax bills for K-12 education by 15% to 20% over three years.

The Revenue Committee has been working on a new bill after its proposals during the 2019 session went down in flames.

Since the end of the 2019 session, the committee has considered several options. It shelved more ambitious proposals that would have added new sales taxes to things like junk food and haircuts in deference to a more modest package that doesn't shift taxes.

In November, Revenue Committee members reached a general consensus on the "framework" of a property tax relief bill that would use the excess revenue to increase state aid to K-12 schools, particularly those schools in "bedroom" communities with high tax levies, and gradually reduce, over three years, property taxes by lowering the valuation of agricultural, residential and commercial properties for purposes of funding schools.

In the end, Linehan said, farmland would be taxed at 55% of its actual value, down from the current 75%, and residential and commercial properties would be taxed at 85% of their value, down from the current 100%.

But major sticking points remain.

Linehan, as well as the governor, support stricter limits on school districts' ability to increase spending in exchange for more state aid. But the state's largest school districts, such as Omaha and Millard, oppose new caps on their authority to spend.

Sen. John McCollister of Omaha is one member of the Revenue Committee who is "reserving judgment" on the committee's bill until he sees the details of any new cap and whether school districts in his district would support it.

"This drama is not over," McCollister said.

Another Omaha-area senator not on the committee, Wendy DeBoer, who represents the Bennington area and north-central Douglas County, has drafted an alternative plan that doesn't have additional spending caps on school districts. Currently, school districts cannot exceed a property tax levy of $1.05 per $100 of taxable value without voter approval and are restricted from increasing general fund spending in excess of 2.5% to 4.5% per year, except in certain circumstances.

"We're a local control state that has locally elected school board members who do a very good job of setting levy limits that are low when they can be," DeBoer said.

But Linehan said any bill that increases state funding must have new caps to prevent local school districts from just spending the money, rather than passing it along as property tax relief.

"They have cost controls now, but there are ways around it," she said.

The details of any new spending cap will be among the information revealed, and debated, in the two committee meetings on Monday and Tuesday.

One rural senator, Curt Friesen of Henderson, said it's hard to tell how he'll react until he sees those details. He was among a coalition of senators who blocked passage of a state business tax incentive bill last spring, arguing that a significant property tax relief bill to help farmers was a bigger priority.

Meanwhile, a grassroots group seeking to place a property tax proposal on the 2020 ballot is still

collecting signatures. But organizers of the group declined Thursday to say how many signatures they've gathered. They must turn in more than 120,000 signatures by July.
The TRUE Nebraskans group reported raising $11,265 between Nov. 26 and Dec. 25, to raise its total donations to just over $100,000 for 2019, according to its latest filing with the Nebraska Accountability and Disclosure Commission. That is far short of the $1 million-plus some observers have said is necessary to pay circulators and collect enough signatures to qualify for the ballot.
One TRUE Nebraskans official, Paul von Behren, said the group has talked to major donors and is waiting to see if they'll donate.
The group's proposal, the so-called 35% Solution, would give all taxpayers a state income tax credit equal to 35% of their annual property tax bill. Supporters say that it would force the Legislature to create a fairer tax system and that lawmakers' current proposal is far too meager; opponents, including Ricketts, say it would cause budget chaos and could actually increase property taxes.
By Paul Hammel

NP Telegraph: Property tax back at top of 2020 Unicameral priority list as the session starts Wednesday

The 2020 Legislature's opening gavel Wednesday will launch a three-month sprint that will decide victory or defeat for rural Nebraskans' latest quest for property tax relief.
It'll also feature efforts to recast the basis of farm and ranch land valuations, clarify teachers' disciplinary powers and other old and new bills from west central Nebraska's state senators.
But the 106th Legislature's "short" 60-day session will debate property taxes with a petition drive lurking in the background to constitutionally mandate relief through substantial income tax credits.
Without that effort spearheaded by Bayard Sen. Steve Erdman, urban senators "won't be honest brokers on property tax relief," said Gordon Sen. Tom Brewer.
Senators will reconvene at 10 a.m. CT Wednesday with plans to adjourn no later than April 23 so eligible incumbents can campaign for re-election.
Half the Unicameral's 49 seats will be filled in the May 12 primary and Nov. 3 general elections, including those held by Brewer (District 43) and Erdman (District 47).
Both said they plan to run for their second and final consecutive four-year term allowed under the Nebraska Constitution's legislative term limits.
The region's other three senators — Mike Groene of North Platte (District 42), Matt Williams of Gothenburg (District 36) and Dan Hughes of Venango (District 44) — are in the middle of their second terms.
As during 2019's "long" 90-day session, west central Nebraska will enjoy the advantage of having four of its five lawmakers as chairs of major standing committees.
Groene will begin his fourth year as Education Committee chairman, as will Hughes as leader of the Natural Resources Committee.
Starting their second years will be Williams (Banking, Commerce and Insurance) and Brewer (Government, Military and Veterans Affairs).
Erdman, who again will chair the special Building Maintenance Committee, also sits on the budget-writing Appropriations Committee with Chairman John Stinner of Gering.
All five put property tax relief at the top of their constituents' concerns, though their optimism varied about finding a meaningful alternative to the Erdman-led petition drive.
Groene played a prime role in a session-long effort last year to recast Nebraska's financing of state and local governments. Legislative Bill 289 reached the floor but stalled there in May after three hours of debate.

Still technically alive, LB 289 would raise the state sales tax, end a handful of sales-tax exemptions, reduce taxable values of farm and ranch land and incorporate a Groene plan to boost state school aid in part by reinstating per-student "foundation aid."

But that plan ran aground amid skepticism from the state's largest schools, divisions among rural senators and Gov. Pete Ricketts' consistent opposition to raising any tax to lower another.

Groene, who helped craft the plan with Revenue Committee Chairwoman Lou Ann Linehan of Omaha, said the two have kept working on their plan to win over Ricketts and urban senators.

Their latest approach, which Revenue Committee members will discuss early this week, would instead tap existing state revenues estimated in November to be $160 million more than expected this fiscal year.

Foundation aid still would be restored, but taxable values of all types of property would be reduced. School budget lids also would be tightened to generally hold annual spending growth to inflation plus the value of new homes and businesses.

The state's existing $275 million Property Tax Credit program would remain, Groene said. But it also wouldn't grow beyond last year's $51 million boost that raised tax-rate discounts in North Platte from 4.2% to 5%.

"We're fixing state aid to education, which is the main reason we've had (property tax) problems," he said. "The Property Tax Credit Fund is just throwing money at it."

Groene's regional colleagues agreed, but some warned rural Nebraskans are more likely to back the petition drive if the Revenue Committee plan doesn't make a large enough dent in property taxes.

Erdman, the sponsor of the petition, said he'd vote against a tax-relief bill failing that test. "I would rather fail at trying to do the right thing than vote for a bill that's not in the best interests of my constituents."

Erdman's petition would amend the state constitution to impose state income tax credits equal to 35% of property taxes paid. It needs roughly 120,000 valid signatures to reach the Nov. 3 general election ballot.

Erdman, whose Panhandle district includes Keith and Arthur counties, introduced his petition proposal last year as Legislative Resolution 3CA. He doubts it will go anywhere, he said.

Brewer, who represents the Sandhills, said any tax-relief plan needs to provide $100 million or more a year in relief over at least three years to be passed.

"The problem right now is (that) a lot of people are giving lip service to property tax relief," he said. "I don't think they have their hearts in it."

Regional senators reiterated that they're less inclined to favor continuing Nebraska's 33-year-old program of state business tax incentives without substantial action on property tax relief.

LB 720, favored by the state's business community, was introduced in 2019 to replace the Nebraska Advantage Act that expires after this year.

But it also stalled last spring when several rural senators, angry at the lack of progress on property tax relief, withheld their votes.

"I think the line in the sand was drawn last year that property taxes had to come first," said Hughes, whose district covers southwest Nebraska. "They didn't believe us last year. I think they believe us now."

Urban senators also would do well to take Erdman's petition drive seriously, he added. Otherwise, "if the people have something (to vote on) when they get in the voting booth, they'll vote to cut their taxes."

Williams, who represents Dawson County and part of Buffalo County, said the Legislature needs to both renew the tax incentives and reduce pressure on property taxes with help from the rosier state revenues.

"I think when people analyze what that (Erdman) petition would do to this state, I'd consider that irresponsible," the Gothenburg banker said.

"But we need to find a way forward on property taxes. That probably will not give agriculture the level (of relief) they want, but it's important to get something rather than nothing. We've left solutions on the table because agriculture has said no."

By Todd Von Kampen

NP Telegraph: Regional state senators ready new bills; lobby for old ones

Unlike its "long" counterpart in odd-numbered years, the Nebraska Legislature's "short" session features both old and new business.

After dealing with housekeeping matters, the 60-day session's first days will feature debate on carryover 2019 bills while lawmakers offer new ones.

A concept North Platte Sen. Mike Groene calls "microTIF" — meant to encourage owners of declining homes to rehabilitate them — likely will be among bills introduced in the session's first 10 days.

Groene, who has clashed with state and local leaders over large tax increment financing projects, said his idea would enable TIF-like techniques for individual aged homes throughout North Platte and other cities.

Though his bill's final language isn't ready, he said, his concept would have the owner of an aged home sign a document with the city committing to fix it up.

In return, the homeowner would pay property taxes as usual but receive a refund of taxes generated by increases in the home's taxable value.

Groene said his concept also could encourage landlords to renovate older homes without having to charge steep rents to recoup the costs.

"You just get two or three people on a block to do it, and it's catchy," he said.

Two noteworthy bills from regional lawmakers will be debated Jan. 13, including Groene's bill clarifying teachers' powers to restrain unruly students to protect others or school property.

Legislative Bill 147 reached the floor last May, but only after Groene, the Education Committee chairman, moved to pull it out of his own deadlocked committee. Senators voted 25-14 to do so.

Groene said he'll offer further refinements in an amendment during first-round debate and introduce new bills requiring teacher training in "acceptable behavioral interventions" and financing that training with some state lottery profits.

The Nebraska State Education Association — often a Groene foe — backs LB 147, and state and rural school board associations are friendly to it, he said.

"It's a whole different bill" than his first attempt at a student discipline bill several years ago, Groene said. "That's how the process works."

The Nebraska Association of School Administrators remains opposed to Groene's initiative, along with the American Civil Liberties Union and advocacy groups for children and the disabled.

But the planned three-bill package strives to recognize the needs and varying conditions of special education students, Groene said.

The Unicameral's Jan. 13 agenda also will include first-round debate on LB 153, which would exempt half of military retirement benefit income from state income taxes.

Gordon Sen. Tom Brewer, a retired U.S. Army colonel, introduced the bill in 2019 on behalf of Gov. Pete Ricketts. He's urged veterans groups to attend the State Capitol debate "to make the legislators as nervous as they can," he said.

Another carryover bill, Bayard Sen. Steve Erdman's LB 483, would once again base taxable values of farm and ranch land on its ability to produce income rather than on land sales. A similar plan was enacted in the 1980s but lost in the Nebraska Supreme Court.

LB 483 was sidetracked last April after three hours of debate, during which Erdman — also the sponsor of a petition drive to mandate income tax credits for property tax payments — told skeptical senators he designed the bill to hold agland taxes steady.

He thinks more of his colleagues understand that, he said, though he's still working to set his plan's

“capitalization rate” to best meet that goal.
“In reality, what I think they were concerned about is they thought I was trying to move property tax relief (along) secretly,” Erdman said. “And that’s not the case.”
One ongoing effort facing tough sledding is Groene’s plan to clarify that “water augmentation projects,” like NCORPE in Lincoln County, can sell their land without losing the right to use water below it.
He said he’ll abandon LB 606, currently stalled in the Natural Resources Committee, and introduce a new bill using language the Nebraska Attorney General’s Office says would protect projects choosing to sell their surface land from lawsuits over its water.
But Groene still faces opposition from committee Chairman Sen. Dan Hughes, whose farmland near Venango falls within one of the four Natural Resources Districts involved in the Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement Project.
Past Nebraska Supreme Court decisions, Hughes said, have stated that groundwater belongs not to the landowner but to the state.
Even if LB 606 or a similar bill says otherwise, “if the people in the black robes say that’s not right, we’re screwed,” Hughes said. “I’m not willing to take that risk.”
By Todd Von Kampen

LJS: Nebraska Legislature looks to tackle familiar issues in 2020 session

As 49 senators head into a new session, a new year, a new decade, they will bring Nebraska residents along with them in the policy they set and the public discussions they have along the way.
Many are seeking clarity on the major issues of our state, and how Nebraska fits into the national political and social scheme.
What will be that clear vision on medical cannabis, prison reform, relief from taxes, the farm economy, reproductive health, education funding, business growth, rights of Nebraskans to work, live and grow in this state?
It will begin to unfold in the four months of the 2020 short session, and then beyond to the general election and the coming years of this new decade.
Will it be mayhem or harmony? In time, we hope, it will all become clear.
Property tax relief
Property tax relief is a perennial topic during sessions of the Legislature, but in 2020 it will be shadowed by an initiative petition drive that would take decision-making out of the hands of state senators.
While the Legislature's Revenue Committee attempts to forge a proposal that can win legislative approval this year, signatures are being gathered for a proposed vote in November on a constitutional amendment that would grant a state income tax credit equal to 35 percent of local property taxes paid.
Voter approval of that proposal would blow a $1.5 billion hole in the state budget and prompt increases in state taxes and/or reductions in state programs and services.
Revenue Committee Chairwoman Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn and Education Committee Chairman Mike Groene of North Platte have been working with Gov. Pete Ricketts to determine whether they can reach consensus on a property tax relief plan.
The committee has been eyeing a proposal that would direct initial relief to farmers and agriculture while providing additional state assistance to school districts with high property tax levies.
Election season
Only half a dozen state senators will be removed from the Legislature by term limits following the end of this year, but others will be tested in their 2020 reelection bids.
One state senator, Julie Slama of Peru, will be facing voters for the first time this year. She was appointed by Gov. Pete Ricketts one year ago to fill the District 1 vacancy created by Sen. Dan Watermeier's

election to a seat on the Nebraska Public Service Commission.
Among the departing term-limited senators will be Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, who has been a force in the Legislature during a span of almost five decades, and Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk.
This is the second time Chambers has been term-limited by the state constitution's limit of two consecutive terms, adopted in 2000.
Also leaving is Sen. Kate Bolz of Lincoln, who will be seeking the Democratic nomination for Republican Sen. Jeff Fortenberry's 1st Congressional District House seat this year.

Medical marijuana

2020 could be the year — through legislation or initiative petition — that medical cannabis becomes legal in the state of Nebraska.
Initiative petition supporters are gathering signatures for a ballot measure that would establish the right of patients with serious health conditions to use medical cannabis as recommended by their physicians. It would also authorize the creation of a regulated system for producers, testing laboratories and dispensaries to enable safe access to medical cannabis products, according to Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana.
Lincoln Sen. Anna Wishart also has a bill (LB110) to legalize medical cannabis that would be more restrictive than a proposed constitutional amendment. It got several hours of legislative debate in the 2019 session before moving off the agenda. It could come back, but only if Wishart could show she has the votes to allow it to advance to another round of debate.
Gov. Pete Ricketts is opposed to the measure, and Attorney General Doug Peterson has issued an opinion that it is unconstitutional, saying that by the state creating a regulatory scheme to cultivate, process, distribute and sell a product considered federal contraband on an industrial scale would conflict with the purpose and intent of the federal Controlled Substances Act.

Youth treatment and reform

As of December, 92 boys and 17 girls were confined at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Kearney. Beginning in January, some of those with more complicated mental health and behavioral problems, who need more intensive attention, will go to a section of the Lancaster County Youth Services Center in Lincoln. A few who are ready to transition out of the youth centers will go to Geneva, which will house three to six girls for reentry services.
Senators believe the youth centers, by law, are to be rehabilitative, not correctional. And housing kids in a fenced facility such as Kearney's or a locked center such as Lincoln's is contrary to law.
The Department of Health and Human Services developed a business plan for the YRTCs in October for a vision, guiding principles and business goals for the system. In the coming session, the legislative Health and Human Services Committee has said it will ask for clarification of a plan in statute and wants to give the Inspector General for Child Welfare additional access to records to improve her investigations.

Prison reform

In December, Gov. Pete Ricketts, state agencies and representatives of the Fraternal Order of Police 88 made progress on one aspect of the state's prison crisis: reaching agreement for a new pay plan with progression steps and pay increases.
Officials said if it is endorsed by union members, it would encourage people to make Corrections a long-term career choice and reverse the trend in high prison security staff turnover.
But the Legislature and state administration still have work to do, said Inspector General for Corrections Doug Koebernick. That work includes resolution of supervisors with the same skills getting different pay, adequate compensation for positions outside of the security staff, crowded facilities that result in challenging work environments, rehabilitation needs of inmates and the continued influx of drugs and other contraband into the prisons.
A number of bills could be introduced to continue to address those problems. And the Appropriations

Committee will need to work an estimated $2.3 million in general funds in the current fiscal year budget and $5.7 million next year, that Gov. Pete Ricketts is expected to propose in the mid-biennium budget adjustments for this second year.

State budget

Gov. Pete Ricketts will present his 2020-21 interim budget when he addresses the Legislature on Jan. 15 at 10 a.m.

Ricketts said with increased economic growth in the state in 2019 and the projected rise in the revenue projection of an extra $266 million by the state's forecasting board, the state should be poised to deliver "additional tax relief in 2020."

The state's two-year budget has been set, he said, and with the exception of a couple urgently needed priorities, such as flood recovery funding, growth in revenue should go toward property tax cuts.

Once the Legislature receives Ricketts' budget proposal, the Appropriations Committee will review and hone it as members look at how tax money from individual income, sales, corporate income and miscellaneous collections continue to come in.

Appropriations Chairman John Stinner said in October his committee will work with the governor and Legislature on a fair and balanced approach to spending. They closely watch the rainy day fund to ensure it is adequate for the state's needs, he said, and would also provide funding for the effects of flooding. And he remains concerned about budget revisions that may be needed because of circumstances surrounding agriculture in the state.

Redistricting

Once the 2020 Census is complete, Nebraska will redraw its political boundaries for the next decade in 2021, with many expecting the lines to shift eastward as they follow the state's population growth.

If lawmakers want to make any changes to how the redistricting process plays out next year, they'll need to act soon.

Two proposals introduced last year, one from Sen. John McCollister of Omaha that created an independent redistricting commission, the other from Sen. Sara Howard of Omaha setting new rules for the senators tapped to redraw lines, failed to advance for a full debate.

McCollister said he'll introduce a new bill this year that keeps the Legislature's nine-member Redistricting Committee in place but codifies how leadership of that committee is chosen into law and includes some additional measures of transparency sponsored by other senators last year.

By JoAnne Young

LJS: Don Walton: 2020 Legislature, election, Iran and LSU

New year; new decade; new legislative session.

And there's some mystery ahead.

The safest prediction for the 2020 Legislature, which convenes on Wednesday, probably is that not much big is going to happen.

Some incremental reform or progress, perhaps. Lots of defense.

"Holding to traditional attitudes and values and cautious about change or innovation," the online dictionary says when you look for the meaning of conservative.

So, no doubt, there will be some additional property tax relief — with the question being whether it is targeted or not.

And whether it qualifies as tax reform.

Probably some welcome and needed movement forward in prison reform, essentially in the form of higher staff salaries that allow development of deeper and more experienced prison staffing.

A new business development tax incentives plan to keep up with the other states is likely.

There will be a whole array of legislative initiatives and proposals on the table for senators to consider before they wrap up business in late April, a few weeks before the May 12 primary election.
* * *
This is an election year that could be dominated by those pending ballot issues.
But it's tricky this far out to guess which initiative petition drives will be successful. That process is a challenge — and an expensive one — and it's still in progress.
Sen. Ben Sasse appears likely to sail to re-election. Count Rep. Adrian Smith as a cinch in western and central Nebraska.
Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Lincoln might face his toughest opposition yet, but will be a strong betting-man's favorite to win eastern Nebraska's 1st District, which hasn't elected a Democrat in more than a half-century.
Rep. Don Bacon will face a competitive challenge in metropolitan Omaha's 2nd District.
And the results of that contest could be influenced by voter turnout sparked by the presidential race; a strong, organized and determined Democratic bid for the 2nd District presidential electoral vote could have an impact.
A number of competitive legislative races dot the ballot, but this year it appears that Gov. Pete Ricketts will not be involved in any contest that attempts to replace an incumbent member of the non-partisan Legislature who is a registered Republican.
In the past, the Republican governor has targeted some incumbents who are Republicans because they opposed him on key votes, including veto override motions.
So it looks like this is not a particularly spectacular election year in Nebraska — except for the possible initiative issues and the battle at the top of the ballot pitting President Trump against the Democratic presidential nominee.
Trump will send voters streaming to the polls to either support or oppose him.
Substantial and immediate property tax relief along with the advent of casino gambling — at horse race tracks — would energize the turnout if those issues reach the ballot.
* * *
Finishing up:
* Opinion: The president has made this a far more dangerous and uncertain world with his sudden drone assassination of Iran's top military commander, setting in motion forces that he cannot control or predict and placing untold numbers of lives in danger. And what has he gained?
* Alarm bells are ringing in the wake of dramatic new evidence that Nebraska is falling short in attracting and retaining a vibrant young work force. That's the state's future at stake.
* A shout-out on Twitter from Matthew Hansen for the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge in Omaha.
* What happens if a court finds that the state is attempting to transform the Medicaid expansion approved by Nebraska voters in 2018 into Medicaid reform?
* I'm taking LSU.
By Don Walton

OWH: Prison overcrowding prompts lawmaker to propose new work-release facility in Omaha

LINCOLN — Lack of progress in reducing overcrowding in Nebraska’s prisons is spawning a proposal to plan for a new 300-bed work-release facility in Omaha.
State Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha, a leading legislator on corrections issues, said he’ll introduce a bill when the State Legislature convenes this week to begin planning a community corrections facility, which could cost upward of $40 million.

As of Friday, state prisons held 2,006 more inmates than their design capacity of 3,535 inmates.
Nebraska's prisons are currently the second-most overcrowded in the nation at 157% of capacity, trailing only Alabama, which is under federal order to address its overcrowding problem.
"We're at a crisis level," Lathrop said. "We need to be on a path to solve it."
The senator's bill would see only planning money at this time, perhaps $50,000 to $100,000. But a multimillion-dollar prison project could compete moneywise with efforts to pass a multiyear property tax relief bill.
Still, groups including the Omaha Police union and the union that represents corrections officers have increased calls recently for more prison construction. They maintain that crowded prisons are not only less safe, but make it harder to rehabilitate inmates, further threatening public safety when those inmates are released.
Gov. Pete Ricketts, who has urged lawmakers to devote the state's excess tax revenue for property tax reductions this year, said that his administration is looking at "a variety of different ideas" to reduce prison overcrowding besides new construction and that details would be coming later.
"What we've been doing is asking for the additional capital improvements to our current facilities to be able to expand capacity and add new beds," Ricketts told The World-Herald on Friday. "We're always going to be evaluating what the needs are and expanding (prison) capacity as appropriate."
Overcrowding has plagued Nebraska's prisons for years, and the state is now defending itself against a federal civil rights lawsuit that alleges that overcrowding has created dangerous conditions for prisoners and prison staff.
In 2015, state lawmakers passed a series of sentencing reforms in hopes of reducing overcrowded conditions. But projections of a 1,100-inmate decline in state prison populations by now failed to materialize. Instead, overcrowding has worsened, hitting record highs in 2019.
Dozens of inmates sleep on plastic floor cots in day rooms at the state's Diagnostic and Evaluation Center, which is holding about three times as many inmates as its design capacity. Cells there and at other prisons are being double-bunked to handle the excess inmates.
The Omaha Police Officers Association this fall released an analysis showing that Nebraska had the fewest prison beds per capita of any of its neighboring states. The state, the union said, had 23.5% fewer prison inmates per capita than the average of adjacent states, but its overcrowding was 49% higher.
"We clearly have a capacity problem, not an incarceration problem," said union President Tony Conner. "We're too low with the amount of prison beds we have."
Conner said it would take the addition of 3,100 new prison beds for Nebraska to match the regional average for prison beds per capita.
To be sure, the Ricketts administration has embarked on prison expansion projects, targeting $151 million for five prison additions over the past five years, all in Lincoln.
A 100-bed dormitory and a 160-bed work-release facility for women have opened in the past two years.
A 100-bed dorm is under construction at the State Penitentiary, and work has started on a 64-bed facility that will house elderly and mentally ill inmates, as well as a larger kitchen and cafeteria to serve nearby prisons.
And, earlier this year, lawmakers approved an addition to the Lincoln Correctional Center that will house 384 beds for the state's worst-behaving inmates.
State Corrections Director Scott Frakes, in a statement, said that with the additions, the prison system has enough community custody beds at this time.
But Lathrop said that the state needs to do more. The current prison additions, when completed, he said, would still leave state prisons overcrowded.
The need for planning more prisons, Lathrop said, became apparent this fall when Frakes told a legislative committee that state prisons were only 150 inmates away from being totally full.

The senator said that expansion of the community corrections prison in Omaha, which houses inmates who work during the day, was recommended in a 2014 master plan developed for the state prison system by a prison consultant, Dewberry Architects Inc., but was never built. Lathrop said that such work-release facilities help better prepare inmates for a return to society.

The state is facing a deadline of sorts. As of July 1, the governor, by state law, will be forced to declare a prison overcrowding "emergency" if prison overcrowding doesn't drop to at least 140% of capacity, a figure no one expects the state to achieve. The emergency will force the State Board of Parole to consider releasing more inmates on parole — if they don't present a danger to society — to reduce the crowding.

Does the state have the money to build another prison?

Gering Sen. John Stinner, who heads the Legislature's budget committee, said the state revenue is exceeding forecasts so far this fiscal year, which began in July. But it remains to be seen how the governor and other senators will respond to increased prison construction.

"There's competing interests for the money, there's no question about that," Stinner said.

By Paul Hammel

GII: AgLines: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program extended

The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program Cooperative Agreement has been extend the program through Dec. 31, 2032. The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program is a joint program between the federal government and the States of Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming.

It uses federal and state financial resources, water and scientific monitoring and research to support and protect four threatened and endangered species that inhabit areas of the Central and Lower Platte rivers in Nebraska while allowing for continued water and hydropower project operations in the Platte River basin.

"This program is truly an important partnership that has been successful because of the broad collaboration between federal and state representatives, water and power users and conservation groups," said U.S. Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt. "All of these stakeholders working together to help recover imperiled species is critical as new water and power projects are continued and developed in the Platte River Basin."

The program provides compliance for four species under the Endangered Species Act for new and existing water-related projects in the Platte River Basin. Examples of existing water related projects include the Bureau of Reclamation's Colorado Big-Thompson Project on the South Platte River in Colorado and the North Platte Project in Wyoming and Nebraska.

The program began in 2007 and is managed by a governance committee comprised of representatives from Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming, water users, environmental groups and the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

"Agriculture is Nebraska's number one industry," said Gov. Pete Ricketts."Extending the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program gives Nebraska's ag producers certainty around water and land use in the coming years. We appreciate the collaboration we enjoy with the other states who are party to this agreement, and we look forward to working with them in the coming years."

The estimated total value of federal and state contributions to the program during the first extension is $156 million. The U.S. Department of the Interior will provide one half of the funding necessary for the extension, which will be matched by states through contributions of non-federal funding and water from state-sponsored projects that is provided for the benefit of target threatened and endangered species.

To learn more about the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, visit https://platteriverprogram.org.

Corn growers accepting applications for FLAGship Program

The Nebraska Corn Growers Association is now accepting applications for the fifth class of the Future Leaders in Agriculture Scholarship Program.

The FLAGship Program is a scholarship program intended for future agricultural leaders in Nebraska. The association will award up to 5 $2,000 scholarships to high school seniors or college freshman who are continuing their education in Nebraska. Three of the scholarships are set aside strictly for those students pursuing a degree directly related to agriculture. Two of the scholarships are open to non-agricultural degree seeking students.

To be eligible for this scholarship students must be a member of NeCGA or the son/daughter of an NeCGA member. The application for the FLAGship Program must include one letter of recommendation, a current resume (not to exceed one page), as well as proof the student is continuing their education in state. Applicants are also asked to explain how they will advocate for agriculture in their future career as well as what issues they feel the ag industry is currently facing.

Applications must be postmarked by Feb. 28. Packets can be mailed to 4435 O St., Suite 210, Lincoln, NE 68510, Attn: Director of Grower Services, or emailed to mwrich@necga.org. Recipients will be notified in March and scholarships will be distributed in December.

For more information about the scholarship and an application, visit necga.org or call (402) 438-6459.

By Robert Pore

Sandhills Express: Nebraska State Poet Matt Mason At Broken Bow Public Library January 14

BROKEN BOW— The Broken Bow Public Library along with the support of the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, is proud to host Nebraska State Poet Matt Mason on Tuesday, January 14 at 6:30 PM.

Matt is based in Omaha and has published eight chapbooks, two full-length works of poetry, as well as two anthologies. He has written about fatherhood, relationships, religion and the Bible, and themes of Midwest and Great Plains life.

This award winning poet and slam poetry champion was installed as Nebraska State Poet in early 2019 by Gov. Pete Ricketts. The State Poet promotes and encourages appreciation of poetry and literary life in Nebraska while inspiring an emerging generation of new writers. Part of Mason's goal while serving as State Poet is to present a public reading in all 93 counties of the state which includes Custer County.

This is a free event as Matt's presentation is made possible with the support of the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. The Broken bow Library Foundation will provide cookies and coffee.

By Gavin Higgins

OWH: Nebraska Supreme Court again upholds state's death penalty, says repeal never went into effect

LINCOLN — The Nebraska Supreme Court on Friday again rejected claims that the State Legislature's repeal of the death penalty in 2015 had changed the sentences of those on death row to life in prison.

The court, in a six-page opinion written by Judge Lindsey Miller-Lerman, said that the repeal law never went into effect because petitions containing 166,000 signatures seeking a state referendum to overturn the repeal were turned in four days before the repeal bill was to become law.

Voters, in 2016, then reinstated capital punishment by a wide margin.

The ruling came on an appeal filed by death-row inmate Marco Torres Jr., who was sentenced to death in 2009 for the execution-style slaying of two men in Grand Island.

The Supreme Court has issued similar rulings in at least two prior appeals by death-row inmates.
By Paul Hammel

OWH: 'I'm really disgusted to see that number': 56 Nebraska educators linked to sexual misconduct

In return for pictures of a 14-year-old student's naked breasts, a Norfolk student teacher bumped the girl's grade from a 79 to a 95.
A Loup City teacher set up a camera in a locker room to spy on high school girls changing their clothes.
An Omaha middle school math teacher groomed and then sexually assaulted a female student in his classroom during lunch.
Since the beginning of 2014, at least 56 certified Nebraska educators were caught having inappropriate communication or sexual contact with students.
Their misconduct ranged from sexual intercourse with a student to dinner and a movie with a student.
At least 74 students or recent high school graduates were victimized. In some cases, the abuse occurred years before the perpetrators were caught.
Most perpetrators, but not all, were men.
Those are the central findings of a World-Herald investigation into the problem statewide.
After a series of high-profile criminal and civil cases, The World-Herald sought to find out how often Nebraska educators abused students.
There is no single, central database containing complete real-time records of such misconduct. Records that exist are spread across several different databases from different state agencies.
The World-Herald examined thousands of records from the courts and the Nebraska Department of Education to figure out how many teachers, coaches and administrators were caught and convicted or disciplined.
The numbers come with a caveat — these were the cases that were uncovered or reported to authorities. The actual number of perpetrators and victims could be much higher.
A national expert said less than 10% of abused students tell somebody about the abuse because of fear, guilt or a misguided desire to protect the educator.
Charol Shakeshaft, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, has researched educator sexual misconduct for decades.
"From the kid's perspective, what they see is they're going to be told, 'You're just a kid. You're not supposed to be having sex. You're a slut. You're this. You're terrible. You're horrible.' So the kid doesn't want to say anything because they're ashamed, embarrassed, afraid."
If the nonreporting percentage is accurate, then the actual number of Nebraska victims during that period could be in the hundreds.
The World-Herald recently wrote about a victim whose abuser was caught by accident when a neighbor surprised him in the girl's home.
Anna, now 18, told The World-Herald about how starting when she was 12, her Davis Middle School math teacher, Brian Robeson, groomed and then sexually assaulted her outside of school, in his classroom during lunch, in a computer lab and in a bathroom. Robeson is now in prison.
Anna said Robeson's lies and manipulation made her his puppet. She didn't feel she could come forward about what was happening to her.
Anna is not the young woman's real name. The World-Herald doesn't name victims of sexual assault unless they want to be named.
Anna's mom, an educator herself, said no one keeps data on educator sexual misconduct so, on one hand, she's not surprised by the numbers uncovered by the newspaper.

“But I’m really disgusted to see that number in print,” she said. “Those were just the ones who were caught.”
The challenge of getting an accurate count is not unique to Nebraska.
In a 2004 report for the U.S. Department of Education, Shakeshaft wrote that educator misconduct was “woefully understudied.”
Since then, there’s been no national study to gauge the scope of the problem, Shakeshaft told The World-Herald.
“We don’t know any more than we did before,” she said.
Nebraska Education Commissioner Matt Blomstedt said there are discussions among state leaders on how to reduce incidents of educator misconduct.
“For me, the perfect number would be zero,” Blomstedt said. “The reality is, we have to make sure the system, No. 1, prevents that from happening and, No. 2, captures it as quickly as possible.”
To be counted in The World-Herald’s total, the perpetrators had to either be convicted of a crime against a student or disciplined by the Nebraska Department of Education for misconduct of a sexual nature involving a student — or both.
Brian Halstead, a deputy commissioner in the State Department of Education who investigated and prosecuted educators for professional practices violations from 1990 through 2017, said the department is catching all the cases it knows about.
Halstead said he has no way of knowing to what degree misconduct may be underreported.
“All I know is today there’s about 360,000 kids somewhere in the K-12 education system of public and nonpublic. I have absolutely no idea of how their experiences are going every day.”
In addition to revealing the scope of the problem, the investigation sheds some light on the perpetrators and victims.
Forty-five of the perpetrators were men. Eleven were women.
They taught virtually every academic subject — from industrial technology to English and art.
The most common certification held by the perpetrators was coaching. Coaching is a popular certification typically paired with other subject areas; for instance, a social studies teacher may also be certified to coach.
About a quarter of the certifications held by the perpetrators were coaching, physical education or health.
After coaching, English was the next most common certification.
Among the other subject areas, the numbers were too small to indicate a trend.
There is no discernible trend when it comes to the size of district where they worked. The perpetrators worked in large urban districts, middle-sized ones and the smallest rural districts. They were employed in both public and private schools.
And the victims?
Mostly female, but not all.
Where records listed the victim’s gender, female victims outnumbered male 52 to 16.
Male educators, in nearly every case, targeted female students.
Female educators, in all but one instance, abused male students.
The average age of the female victims was just under 13 years. That average age reflects the inclusion of the six first-graders whom Omaha Public Schools teacher Gregory Sedlacek was convicted of sexually assaulting in 2018. The Sedlacek victims were outliers because of their young age. Without the Sedlacek victims factored in, the average female victim’s age was 15.4.
The average age of male victims was 16.2 years.
Of the cases found, 41 involved sex or sexual contact between the educator and victim. The majority of the rest involved inappropriate communication or behaviors that violated professional boundaries,

including sexting, sending inappropriate messages or touching students in ways that made them feel uncomfortable.
Although the Nebraska Department of Education keeps complete records of its disciplinary actions, the records can lag years behind waiting for court action.
Department officials typically wait for a verdict before imposing discipline.
The World-Herald found that some of the most serious offenders don't appear in the department discipline records. In cases where educators are prosecuted criminally, sometimes their certifications expire before their criminal cases are resolved, leaving the department with nothing to revoke.
For example, there is no record of any state action on the certification of Shad Knutson, an Omaha Public Schools middle school teacher who was convicted in 2013 of sexually abusing a student. His certification expired while he was awaiting the completion of his criminal case.
In contrast, the State Board of Education revoked the certificate of Robeson, the middle school teacher who sexually assaulted Anna.
However, if convicted of a sex crime, an offender's name would likely appear on the state's sex-offender registry. The conviction and sex-offender registration would be obvious red flags to future employment as long as HR directors were diligent about background checks.
The investigation did not answer the question of whether educator abuse is happening more frequently in Nebraska than in the past.
It is a challenge to obtain reliable, detailed records of abuse in past decades. Public mores have changed over the years. What used to be kept secret is now reported more often. And recent technology advancements have made it easier to catch the perpetrators, who often leave a trail of incriminating texts and emails.
That's much different than before the Internet, Halstead said.
"Child pornography, you caught it because the mail postal inspector saw the brown paper wrapper going through the mail," Halstead said.
He said comparing the prevalence today with past numbers is problematic. It presumes you knew how much child abuse there was 50 years ago, because back then people didn't talk about it, he said.
"Human behavior has changed as to our own expectations, too," he said.
According to Shakeshaft, there has been an increase in reports nationally, but it's not clear if there's been a rise in incidents.
Some data and anecdotal reports suggest that nationally more reports are being made to districts, she said.
She believes it could reflect more awareness that suspected abuse should be reported and acted on.
Available records did reveal that offenders in past decades have been as brazen, their acts as outrageous in some cases, as in recent years.
Disciplinary records from the 1990s document Nebraska educators giving students valentines and flowers, leaving notes in their lockers, giving them massages, grabbing their chests, fondling them in the classroom, taking them to motels and having sex with them.
In recent years, some cases have prompted public dismay.
Sedlacek, the first grade teacher, abused students on the playground and in his classroom. Of the cases examined by The World-Herald, the girls he assaulted were the youngest victims.
And Matthew Fedde, a former assistant principal at Millard South High School, sexually assaulted a student at the school. Fedde is also in prison.
Anna's mom tells her students and colleagues to be aware of every adult in the school building — even the man tending to the vending machine.
She wants her fellow educators to be on guard and look for grooming behaviors and not wait until they see an assault actually happening to call authorities.

Their priority, she said, has to be on the students.
“Believe what you see. And what you feel. Those intuitive things.”
By Joe Dejka and Emily Nitcher

LJS: Senators ready to get things done, want to see cooperation

Senators are pretty much in agreement the 2020 session will be taken up with property taxes, business tax incentives and what to do with excess tax collections over the past year.
Last year, the long 90-day session ended a few days early, with no resolution on those key issues senators had worked throughout the session to resolve.
They got a warning from Speaker Jim Scheer in those last days about what would happen in a 2020 short session that lasts only 60 days.
"The short session is a completely different session," he said then. "Be prepared for a number, if not an extensive number, of late nights in order to facilitate all the priority bills."
Lincoln Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks had her own vision for the session that starts Wednesday, and beyond, for senators. Greater communication, greater compassion, greater ability to listen. And nix the confrontation.
That means, no one stomping their feet on the floor in a "my way or the highway" gesture, she said.
"It doesn't do anybody any good. Nothing gets done. It doesn't help our constituents in Nebraska at all."
Nebraska's unicameral government is a treasure in the middle of a country where other governments -- national and state, maybe even local -- are unable to get things done because of partisanship and refusal to work together, she said.
"We are able to find common ground better than anywhere else in our nation. Certainly better than Congress, and from what we hear, better than any other state," Pansing Brooks said.
Her goal for not only the session but every part of her life this year: Try to meet people where they are in their knowledge and opinions on issues -- whether they agree or disagree -- and move forward together.
She has worked with more conservative senators on substantial issues, from education to the cleanup in Whiteclay to the devastating flooding in the state. She has come to respect their knowledge and views, and learned from them, she said.
"Our state will be stronger for this collaboration," she said.
Sen. Julie Slama of Peru has worked over the interim on a number of issues including ensuring resources are available for flood recovery, which affected her district, southeast Nebraska and beyond. Three-fourths of the state's 93 counties suffered the consequences of spring storms and flooding.
"One of my bills for this session will be a resolution requesting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers change their manual to reprioritize flood control as their top priority and to modernize their levee standards," she said.
Last year's flooding caused hundreds of millions, maybe more than a billion, dollars worth of damage to roads, bridges, other state infrastructure systems, crops, fields and homes. And climate experts warned in November that conditions are ripe for a repeat of last spring's severe flooding.
Beyond the several major issues, senators have agendas and topics important to them and their districts, revolving around funding, committee work, moving the state forward on economic growth, workforce development and continuing prison and juvenile justice reform.
Lincoln Sen. Kate Bolz sees unfinished business, including funding for the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, so it can continue to respond to disasters. But she also wants to see full funding of the costs of developmental disability and behavioral health services, and a return to discussions on scholarships for students pursuing in-demand careers in Nebraska.
Her vision also includes the need for workforce development policies. More than 70% of industries are

having difficulty finding workers, she said, and that limits economic growth.
"In 2020, I will bring legislation to promote apprenticeship programs, career education initiatives and increased access to child care assistance to address Nebraska's workforce shortage," she said.
Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair sees a session with substantial opportunity for tax reform, outside of the usual rural vs. urban property tax fights.
"A conversation and potential legislation has been long overdue," Hansen said.
He is hoping senators debate a number of bills he introduced in 2019, concerning modification of meal and incidental travel reimbursements for state employees, board members and officers; amendments to the weights and measures act; and increasing opportunities for dental hygienists in rural areas.
Health and Human Services Chairwoman Sara Howard of Omaha said the committee will be asking to codify a specific plan from HHS, to clarify objectives and purpose for the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers that were in crisis last year.
The committee also will work on putting assurances into law that Medicaid expansion will begin by Oct. 1, while adding fingerprinting requirements for child care providers and looking at nursing home payment rate methods.
The state Division of Medicaid & Long-Term Care has been working with others outside the state agency for more than two years to update the payment methodology for nursing facilities. That update is set for April.
The clear vision for Omaha Sen. Steve Lathrop, Judiciary Committee chairman, is that senators are going to cooperate on issues even if they don't accomplish everything they want in their own important work.
All 49 senators must be invested in finding solutions for those key issues surrounding tax reform and incentives, he said.
Senators can't leave the field if they aren't getting what they want on their own agendas, Lathrop said.
"We have to stay there, work through it, and come up with good policy," he said.
By JoAnne Young

AP: Regulators to review handling of water problem at nuke plant

BROWNVILLE, Neb. (AP) — Federal inspectors plan to review how well a Nebraska nuclear power plant handled a water service safety problem blamed on a silt buildup from the Missouri River, which overwhelmed or broke through levees last spring.
The Cooper Nuclear Station near Brownville was operating on full power Dec. 6 when employees detected that water wasn’t flowing through a pipe that sends water to cool plant safety equipment, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said in a news release Thursday. Another service water system was operable throughout the situation, the release said.
The plant generated power throughout the problem. The plant owner and operator, the Nebraska Public Power District, soon determined that silt had built up and blocked the pipe outfall, the NRC said. The district had the silt removed within a week.
The plant’s water intake site was normal and there had been no indication of any problem at the discharge site, said power district spokesman Mark Becker.
“We’ve never had that happen before,” Becker said. Officials were still trying to determine where the silt came from because the river water taken in for cooling is heavily filtered before it begins its work inside the plant, Becker said. No issues have been found in a check of water systems inside the plant, he said.
The Missouri River is already known as “The Big Muddy” — a nickname made even more apt by the flooding, Becker said.
“Just think how much flooding there was and how much runoff there was from fields,” he said.
The Missouri remained high since spring flooding caused by heavy rain and snowmelt flowing into the

river and its tributaries was near record levels this year. The Missouri River gauge at Brownville was at or above flood stage for 272 days, the National Weather Service said.
Floodwater threatened the plant in March, but it never stopped generating power, Becker said at the time. The rising river water stopped 4 inches (10 centimeters) short of the level at which the reactor had to be shut down as a safety precaution.

LJS: Grand Island-area residents ask judge to block historical horse racing terminals at Fonner Park

The Nebraska State Racing Commission's order allowing Fonner Park to add historical horse racing terminals at the Grand Island track is unconstitutional and should be overturned, two Hall County residents said in a lawsuit.
Duane Fuller of Grand Island and Jeffery Hayman of Doniphan filed the lawsuit against the commission and Fonner Park in Lancaster County District Court on Friday afternoon.
Neither the Nebraska Constitution nor state law authorizes wagering using an electronic historical horse racing terminal, the two said in their lawsuit.
"By issuing the Final Order that allows Fonner Park to engage in pari-mutuel wagers on historic horse races in violation of the Nebraska Constitution and the Nebraska Revised Statutes, (the commissioners) improperly exceeded the authority granted to the Commission," their lawsuit said.
The State Racing Commission narrowly approved the new, controversial form of wagering and machines for Fonner Park in July and the final order was issued last month.
Historical horse racing terminals allow a bettor to make wagers on unidentified horses in previously run races from across the U.S., officials with AmTote International said.
The terminals, which look like slot machines and operate in Kentucky, Wyoming, Oregon and Alabama, are seen by proponents as a way to draw more people to the tracks and keep the struggling industry viable after decades of decline in Nebraska.
In his order, Commission Chairman Dennis Lee of Omaha said the terminals are just a new form of pari-mutuel wagering, which is already legal in Nebraska, and state law doesn't allow the design of the terminals to be considered in assessing whether they perform a pari-mutuel wager.
Nebraska lawmakers in 2012 passed a bill to specifically allow betting on historical horse races, but then-Gov. Dave Heineman vetoed the measure, and an effort in 2014 to ask voters to amend the state constitution to allow historical horse race wagers was blocked by the Nebraska Supreme Court.
There was little further talk of historical horse racing in Nebraska until the Racing Commission voted to approve terminals for Fonner Park in October 2018. That vote was ultimately withdrawn after Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson questioned the legality of the vote and the meeting.
Then, in January 2019, the commission again considered the issue, and opponents of expanded gambling in Nebraska urged the commission not to approve Fonner Park's application.
The Attorney General's Office also warned the commission that it would not defend the commission in court if it approved historical horse racing and faced a lawsuit for doing so.
Chris Kotulak of Fonner Park said it still plans to install the terminals so they're operational Feb. 21, when the track hosts its first live racing of 2020.
Fonner Park officials believe the commission made an accurate and proper decision when it approved historical horse racing, he said.
"Historical horse racing is legal in more than half a dozen states, providing millions of tax dollars currently, and it has resurrected a number of state’s racing industries as close as Wyoming and far as Virginia," he said.
By Riley Johnson

OWH Editorial: Work by a range of Omahans has helped reduce the city's homicide rate

A decade ago, Omaha experienced a disturbing increase in its homicide rate. Such deaths climbed from 34 in 2010 to a peak of 50 in 2015, far above the city's historical average. Since then, the trend line has moved in the right direction — downward. Last year, homicides totaled 23, one more than in 2018.
Omaha compares well to peer cities in this regard. Omaha's homicide rates for the first three quarters of 2018 and 2019, for example, were well below those of similarly sized cities, The World-Herald's Alia Conley reports. Tulsa and Wichita, with smaller populations than Omaha, had double or triple the number of homicides in those time periods, she found.
Omaha has achieved this improvement in recent years in large part due to capable police work, community efforts and effective work among organizations to offer greater opportunity for young people.
It's notable, indeed, that no Omaha police officer had fired his or her gun at anyone during the entirety of 2019, until an incident on Dec. 31 in which an officer fatally shot Terry Hudson, who had fired on the officer after killing Dana Wells, the city's final homicide victim of 2019.
The number of Omahans injured or killed in officer-involved shooting incidents has fallen from 11 individuals in 2010 to one — Hudson — during 2019.
Regardless of the reduced homicide totals, every such death brings enormous pain and is to be lamented. Striving to further reduce the city's homicide rate will be an ongoing endeavor by police, community organizations and nonprofits.
Community volunteers, churches and a range of local grassroots organizations have contributed significantly to Omaha's progress by connecting with youths and promoting neighborhood safety. Organizers and financial supporters of summer job programs for disadvantaged young people continue to expand on what's become a robust and successful initiative.
The Omaha Police Department has made a set of significant improvements to strengthen its accountability, community outreach and investigative effectiveness. The department has equipped all patrol officers with body cameras and less-lethal Tasers. It's boosted training to help officers interact properly with people with mental illness. Its community policing efforts include youth sports coaching by police personnel and a program in which police hand out free sports equipment while on patrol.
The department has hired more gang prevention specialists and has gang unit officers engage earlier in homicide investigations. Through such efforts, the department has raised its homicide clearance rate to above 70% — major progress from 2010, when the rate was a mere 32%.
Our city has seen significant improvement in its homicide incidence, and the wide range of Omahans working to reduce violence in our city deserve a salute.

OWH Editorial: Legislature should make sure to address its key tasks this session

The Nebraska Legislature opens its 2020 session on Wednesday, and it's called a "short" session for good reason. The sixty days lawmakers will have for hearings and debate may seem like a large amount, but in reality, senators will likely find themselves pinched for time in meeting their obligations.
The two central issues that lawmakers face — property tax relief and a much-needed business incentives revamp — will involve sharp disagreement and much debate time. It's vital that lawmakers find consensus on both issues. The Legislature has kicked the can down the road for far too long on overall property tax legislation. And the business incentives legislation by State Sen. Mark Kolterman of Seward is well crafted and deserving of passage, not least since the current incentives law, Nebraska Advantage, expires at the end of this year.

The session will feature many more issues, of course. Among the most important will be major additional aid to schools to enable a measure of property tax relief; urban and rural interests will likely collide over how to allocate the school funds, and senators will need to avoid stalemate. Also on the to-do list: Debating and approving steps to help address Nebraska's state prison woes. Setting the general policy to guide the state's facilities for juvenile offenders. And agreeing on a responsible procedure for the Legislature to handle its redistricting duties next year.

For the Legislature to stay on track and achieve success, Speaker Jim Scheer and other senior members need to assert strong leadership, keeping debate focused and promoting constructive negotiation to achieve final resolution. Key lawmakers on the tax and business incentive bills need to be energetically engaged with colleagues to remove roadblocks. Filibusters are likely, but in the end, these bills — adjusted with practical amendments as needed — must make it across the finish line.

A key ingredient for overall success this session must be a culture of professionalism by state senators. The Legislature in recent years has fallen into bad habits at times, with displays of petty game playing, petulance on the microphone, "gotcha" rhetoric in committee hearings and floor debate, and individual soreheadedness after losing a vote.

The proper antidote is responsible adult behavior: active engagement in debate and negotiations, dutiful work in committee, an openness to reasonable compromise and a focus on policy rather than politics and personalities.

This session unfortunately will be the last one for some of the Legislature's skilled bridge-builders, due to term limits. These senior lawmakers have defended the Legislature's processes against game playing by self-serving senators and have worked with colleagues across lines of party and philosophy to help committees function properly and bills to be debated responsibly.

Senators who are continuing their service past this current session need to learn from such positive examples, to keep the Legislature on a constructive course into the future. That achievement, plus passage of key legislation, must be the central aims of the 2020 short session.

OWH Editorial: Offutt forensic lab's work brings comfort to military families

The death of a loved one in a faraway war zone brings enormous heartache to the person's family back home. The pain felt by a mother, father and other family members is compounded when the remains of a fallen service member are unidentified. Such "unknowns" have been common throughout the history of warfare.

Modern forensic science is bringing dramatic change, however. Technicians with the U.S. military are now performing remarkable feats of identification in an ever-increasing number of cases. Forensic specialists at the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency laboratory at Offutt Air Force Base are in the forefront of those efforts.

Their work has brought comfort to families in the Midlands and across the U.S. by providing an all-important opportunity for these Americans to be remembered and honored. In many cases these long-lost relatives have been buried beside their parents or siblings. It's hard to express how meaningful such comfort can be for a family.

Four years after the remains from a military cemetery in Hawaii were exhumed, forensic scientists at Offutt and in Honolulu have identified some 242 of the USS Oklahoma men, enabling their return to their families. These fallen servicemen have included Gerald Clayton of Central City, Nebraska, and George C. Ford of Carroll, Iowa.

On Monday, Agnes Porter, the 89-year-old niece of a USS Oklahoma sailor who hasn't yet been identified, called Steve Liewer, The World-Herald's military reporter, who has written extensively about the Offutt lab.

“I hope they find something, even a fingernail,” said Porter, a native of Schlewig, Iowa, now living in California. “I want to see him buried next to his parents and sister.” Her still-missing uncle is Charles Homer Johannes, who grew up in North Dakota.
The University of Nebraska at Omaha — specifically, information and technology science professor Sachin Pawaskar and student Ryan Ernst — deserve applause for developing a program that simplifies the Offutt scientists’ work in matching bones belonging to the same skeleton.
What laudable work by all involved.

OWH: Nebraska’s tax relief complications

To answer Frederick Skinner’s eloquent Dec. 22 Pulse letter, yes indeed, 2020 is a great year to reform Nebraska’s tax system. But so were 2015, 2010, 2005 and on and on. It’s not going to happen, so all Nebraskans have to evaluate where they want to live and whether it is worth paying these obsessively high taxes.
When evaluating this, keep in mind that you need to base your decision on five and 10 years from now. Since moving back to Nebraska seven years ago, I have found it is delusional to expect that taxes will, at a minimum, not continue their higher rate of growth.
In my observation it all starts with leadership from the governor. I only see a total lack of said leadership from our current governor. To be fair, that seems to be the job description for the last several officeholders. I will let the next governor and Unicameral deal with the issue.
To be fair, citizens are also to blame. Everyone wants the national budget balanced and state taxes lowered. But they also want their special projects they deem indispensable. Combine that with a lack of courage by many of our elected officials and what you get is what we have. Until a mandate is passed that forces changes, nothing will ever change. The problem is, ballot initiatives many times have unintended consequences. But due to this lack of leadership, that approach appears to me at least to be the only option available, other than leaving the state.
Mike Dohmen, Hickman, Neb.

LJS Editorial, 1/5: Editorial board sets 2020 agenda

If you’d say the Journal Star editorial board had an agenda, you’d be right. We have one every year. And we publish our agenda – an annual list of five priority topics for editorials in the year to come – shortly after the calendar turns. These items represent matters of significance that will be revisited throughout 2020.
The bolded words in each bullet point below will look nearly identical to last year’s listing; indeed, none of the problems we listed have been solved, despite varying levels of progress in each. Just as decisive actions come with consequences, so, too, does inaction.
That’s why we’re adamant about the following subjects for 2020:
*** Civility and civic-mindedness:** Passion about politics and improving our world is great. But involvement and engagement must be channeled in a responsible, productive and civil fashion. Make your voice heard by writing letters, engaging with elected officials, participating in a peaceable demonstration, attending public meetings. Such behavior will bolster democracy, particularly in this election year.
Just as voters must be cognizant of how to best express themselves, elected officials must act in the public’s best interest, placing any partisan affiliations to the side. One area where that can come to fruition is transparency. Rather than making it more difficult for the public to hold government accountable, our representatives must welcome and promote such scrutiny. In recent years, legislation on the state level, at least, has carved out new exceptions to open meetings and open records laws.

Those trends must be stopped or even reversed.
*** Climate change:** "Studies show us that climate change is real, and it's already here. The trend for Nebraska will be for more extremes." These are the exact words Nebraska State Climatologist Martha Shulski told the Journal Star's Matt Olberding this week.
Last year saw a bomb cyclone and record flooding – the second 500-year flood to wreak havoc in eight years – become Nebraska's costliest natural disaster. Despite the devastation, no meaningful progress has been made on climate change, and the results are evident. That legacy of indifference must change.
*** Corrections reform:** Last week's agreement between the state and the union representing Corrections officers would boost pay rates for frontline workers in hopes of reducing the turnover and burnout that has plagued staff. That's the long-awaited good news. The bad has been many years in the making, too: Conditions within prison walls need major improvement after decades of neglect.
Plus, on July 1, a prison overcrowding emergency will be declared in accordance with a 2002 state law, beginning the process of releasing at least 1,000 inmates to bring the prison population down to 140%. Indeed, 2020 is a momentous year for Nebraska's correctional system.
*** Protecting our farm economy:** Regardless of whether Nebraskans live in the city or country, the farm economy affects us all. After all, one in four jobs in this state is connected to farming and ranching. Free trade agreements with foreign countries, increased blending of ethanol and biofuels, protecting this state's rich natural resources – these benefit the state as a whole.
Nebraska's ag producers are being crushed by a three-legged stool that's increasingly relied on its steadiest leg – property taxes. But the structure must be rebalanced in a manner that doesn't blow a hole in the state budget or unfairly shift burdens to urban areas. Some kind of grand bargain will be needed to achieve this long-desired goal. Whether someone can marshal it, though, is yet to be seen.
*** Strengthening public education:** That aforementioned grand bargain will affect K-12 schools, too. With fewer and fewer districts – down to roughly 25% – receiving direct state aid, school boards have been forced to turn to property taxes to fund their operations. Any state tax reform must ensure schools are adequately funded.
Funding is also a concern at the university level, particularly given the political forces at play. After all, Nebraska's community college and public universities provide more than education. They help to train the workers to fill the jobs needed to power the state – vitally important during this tectonic shift of workplace churn and looming shortage of employees.

NP Telegraph Editorial: Note to Unicam: Make best use of 2020 session

Whatever Nebraska's state senators do in the 2020 legislative session that begins Wednesday, they need to use their full 60 legislative days to do it. Or more.
When one reviews last year's unfinished Unicameral agenda — and considers the long-term problems still going, begging for answers — going home six days early, like last spring, would be unconscionable.
Not that it's easy to get either old or new bills through the lawmaking process in an even-numbered year's "short" session, when elections increasingly occupy the State Capitol's attention.
But, like always, there's plenty of time if senators and the governor decide something can't wait.
We strongly suggest, on behalf of our western Nebraska neighbors, that there's a great deal that cannot wait.
For example, senators can pass existing bills to better protect classroom teachers (North Platte Sen. Mike Groene), clarify the relationship between land ownership and water rights (Groene) and reasonably regulate wind turbines (Gordon Sen. Tom Brewer).
But once again, like last year, lasting property tax relief needs to come first.
Senators can strike a lasting blow for tax fairness, if they do nothing else, by passing Bayard Sen. Steve

Erdman's worthwhile carryover bill (Legislative Bill 483) to again value farm and ranch land by income capacity rather than land sales.

But state leaders need to stop pretending that the state Property Tax Credit program, raised last year from $224 million to $275 million, amounts to more than a property tax Band-Aid.

As The Telegraph reported during last fall's local "budget season," that $51 million statewide infusion raised the discount on North Platte property owners' combined tax rate from 4.2% all the way to 5%. Not much of a tax break.

Do state leaders feel like the pressure's off since the past decade's acceleration in agland valuations has finally come to a halt?

Or do they simply believe there's little reason to worry about Sen. Erdman's scorched-earth petition drive to mandate state income tax credits in the Nebraska Constitution equivalent to 35% of property-tax bills?

As we said after the 2019 session, so we say now: Enacting petitions, including that one, is a terrible way to conduct state fiscal policy.

But so is playing chicken with the constitution.

Far better that easterners content with a status quo that favors them — for now — seriously engage with the broader-based property tax effort led by Sens. Mike Groene of North Platte and Lou Ann Linehan of Omaha's Elkhorn area.

Its latest outlines, as Groene says elsewhere in today's Telegraph, still include the restoration of per-student "foundation aid" to the complex school-aid formula to take pressure off small rural districts' strained budgets.

Such a step is long, long overdue. Unfortunately, chances are dim for financing it with common-sense changes to what the state does tax — and doesn't — while rebalancing the three-legged property-sales-income tax stool.

With tax shifts off the table in Gov. Pete Ricketts' office, Groene and Linehan instead want to harness rising state tax collections that finally are exceeding projections once more.

We understand that step. After all, they're up against the kind of thinking that says shifting even a little of the tax burden to optional goods like pop and candy is an unfair "tax increase."

But even if this version of the Groene-Linehan plan becomes law, it can't last.

The fiscal "fat years," however many Nebraska should get this time, always are followed by "lean years." Tax collections, at some point, again will fall short. And we all know school aid will be cut when that happens.

If some version of the Groene-Linehan plan passes, we're quite sure rural Nebraskans won't turn it down. But will they also go sign petitions and put Erdman's ticking fiscal bomb on the November ballot?

We haven't even gotten to the inevitable but expensive need to resolve overcrowding in Nebraska's prisons. Implementation of the voters' 2018 mandate to expand Medicaid services. Higher education needs. Fighting "brain drain" inside and out of the state. And so on.

And will senators enact a new version of Nebraska's 33-year-old business incentives (LB 720), which dearly matter in economic development but which rural senators have blocked (thus far rightly) in their quest for property tax relief?

If 60 legislative days isn't enough, well, senators still owe Nebraskans the equivalent of a special session for those six days they skipped last year.

Don't say there isn't time. There is.

OWH: Nebraska's congressional delegation backs action on Iran, says killing was 'defensive move'

WASHINGTON — Some critics have characterized this week's killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani as an unauthorized and reckless move by President Donald Trump that could push the nation into yet another Middle East conflict.

But members of Nebraska's all-Republican congressional delegation say the president had little choice, given how the head of Iran's elite Quds Force was ramping up his long-running terrorist campaigns against the U.S. and its allies.

"The intention of a move like this is to deescalate the war that Soleimani was already plotting on America," Sen. Ben Sasse told The World-Herald. "I think this is a defensive move."

Sasse is a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, but because of the holiday recess, it's been a couple of weeks since he has been able to receive classified briefings in the secure facilities of the U.S. Capitol.

But Sasse said that he talked to Trump after the strike and that the president laid out Soleimani's recent movements leading up to it. Those movements support administration assertions that Soleimani was involved in planning the kind of attacks that U.S. officials have been worried about for months, Sasse said. He also said it was telling that Soleimani was in Iraq, where Iran's proxy forces have engaged in terrorism.

Rep. Don Bacon said the president had to act and pointed to a hearing last month in which he pressed top U.S. military leaders on whether American restraint was being interpreted as weakness by Iran.

"We've shown ultimate restraint with this, and I think it actually incentivizes their behavior," Bacon said in an interview. "I don't think we had a choice."

Bacon said Soleimani's killing could lead to further escalation but stressed that Iran must understand that it will lose any conflict and that the U.S. could destroy Iran's navy and air force in a day.

There has been a low-intensity war going on between Iran and America for some time, he said, but it's been one-sided, with Iran as the aggressor. And Bacon suggested that American pushback probably should have come sooner.

"To do nothing is not the right answer," he said. "These guys have acted as our enemy for a long time, and we have not reciprocated. We have shown the restraint. The gloves came off last night, and Soleimani got what he deserved."

Other delegation members issued statements supportive of the president's actions.

"President Trump repeatedly demonstrated restraint, and Iran's leaders were given the opportunity to turn from the path of violence and escalation," Sen. Deb Fischer said. "They did not. Having seen the resolve of the United States to defend itself, I hope that Iran will end their destructive behavior and choose a more rational path."

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry described the killing of Soleimani as a "defensive military response" to "the Iranian-inspired attack on our embassy in Baghdad," and Rep. Adrian Smith said the U.S. takes security threats seriously.

"The president's decisive action sends a message that while our goal must be peace, the United States will not tolerate Iranian provocations or further attacks on Americans," Smith said.

Sasse has previously highlighted Soleimani's nefarious activities around the globe. The senator supported Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration and instead mount a campaign of maximum pressure on Iran that involved crippling sanctions, including ones that targeted Soleimani's supply lines.

Soleimani responded to that approach by ramping up his activities — as evidenced by attacks on tankers and Saudi oil facilities, the downing of a U.S. drone and a string of attacks on bases housing U.S. military personnel.

"If anything, the administration has been showing borderline too much restraint the last 45 to 60 days in the face of increasing attacks by Soleimani," Sasse said.

Sasse said there's no clear "Soleimani junior" waiting to take the place of the dead general, who had proven to be an effective warrior.
Iran appeared to believe that there was no limit to what the U.S. would tolerate, he said.
"Now that they see that there's a limit, I think they're going to have to ask themselves what do they want to do next," Sasse said.
By Joseph Morton

Ryan Kopsa

Office of Governor Pete Ricketts
Office 402-471-1966
ryan.kopsa@nebraska.gov
governor.nebraska.gov | **Facebook** | **Twitter**