From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 5-3-21
Date: Monday, May 3, 2021 9:22:35 AM
Attachments: image003.png

AG VALLEY CO-OP

Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	May 2021	7.00	18.00	09:07
Corn	Oct 2021	5.40	-27.00	09:07
Milo	May 2021	7.12	30.00	09:07
Milo	Oct 2021	5.92	25.00	09:07
Soybeans	May 2021	15.03	-30.00	09:07
Soybeans	Oct 2021	12.78	-70.00	09:07
Wheat	May 2021	6.46	-55.00	09:07
Wheat	Jul 2021	6.46	-55.00	09:07

MLB: In May, Cubs-Reds 'felt like a playoff game'
Reds – 13
Cubs – 12

TV and Radio
NTV: Herbster visits central Nebraska, responds to Ricketts
KETV Editorial: Ricketts Screening Questionnaire
NTV: Capitol Steps see several demonstrations
NCN: Dorn discusses senators not voting, Beatrice Six state aid bill
WOWT: Nebraska fireworks bill headed for governor's desk
Fox News: DeSantis will 'absolutely sue' federal government if H.R. 1 is passed
NET: Community College President In Lincoln Says Biden Tuition Proposal Not A Big Stretch
NET: Water Studies Boosted In Nebraska Legislature
KMTV: COVID vaccines, testing down in Nebraska
KETV: Johnson & Johnson vaccine getting back in arms in Douglas County
WOWT: Omaha battles COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy
KLKN: LPS superintendent discusses possibility of vaccine requirement, masks for next school year
Wall Street Journal: Vaccinating America Means Convincing Skeptics in Rural Nebraska

Governor

OWH: Press freedom group objects to Gov. Ricketts' new media credentialing process
Reporters Committee For Freedom Of The Press: RCFP expresses concern about Nebraska governor's decision to deny press access to local news outlet
Kearney Hub: Gov. Ricketts to speak in Kearney about proposed health education standards
CNS News: Nebraska Gov.: 'The Real Threat to Security Is the Dangerous Defund the Police Movement'
AP: Nebraska board sees revenue uptick this year before decline
OWH: Nebraska lawmakers' compromise puts stamp of approval on 'postcard bill'
OWH: Nebraska Legislature passes natural hair discrimination ban
LJS: Legislature advances bill to help pay Beatrice 6 judgment
AP: Partial bailout for botched Nebraska murder case advances
LJS: Don Walton: Challenges, change and opportunities in the Legislature
Scottsbluff SH: Connecting rural Nebraskans
KLKN: Two rallies discuss Second Amendment Sanctuary at the State Capitol
GII: Internships vital to the Grand Island workforce
NE Farmer: Switzer Ranch named Nebraska Leopold award winner
LJS: Herbster says he'd focus on tax, school funding reform if elected governor
Columbus Telegram: Herbster stops in Columbus, talks candidacy for governor
Progressive Farmer: Nebraska and EPA Look for Solution

Coronavirus

WJAG: Pregnant women OK to get COVID-19 vaccines
LJS: COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations on the decline. Has Nebraska turned the corner?
LJS: UNL sorority enters quarantine after COVID outbreak in house
LJS: Lancaster County reports 27 new cases of COVID-19, fully vaccinated nearing 50%
LJS: Lancaster County reports 32 new cases of COVID-19
GII: More COVID-19 patients hospitalized this week
OWH: COVID antibodies produced by South Dakota cattle to be tested in NIH trial

State Capitol

GII: Setting up Wood River for future success
Hastings Tribune: Leaders tout plans for new truck stop, motel in Geneva

Legislature

LJS: State lawmakers reject attempt to send resolution objecting to federal overreach to a different committee
OWH: Legislature considers study of Platte River flooding, hike in non-resident park fees
AP: Rental protections in Nebraska win final OK from lawmakers

University

OWH: It's official: Joanne Li is next UNO chancellor
AP: New chancellor chosen for University of Nebraska at Omaha
OWH: UNL to offer two-week pre-session in January, pushing back spring semester

State, Local and Regional

LJS: Feds pledge $50 million to help remove failed Spencer Dam

OWH: Nebraska gets $50 million for dam destroyed during 2019 floods

AP: Nebraska gets $50M for dam destroyed during 2019 floods

OWH: WWII Blitz brothers among honorees at 'Honor and Remember' event Monday

OWH: A town renewed: Factory in tiny DeWitt, Nebraska, putting tools on the market again

OWH: Metro Community College offering free courses to Nebraska high school students

LJS: Ord man sues the city for filing lawsuit against him over letters to city officials

Opinion

OWH Editorial: Omaha police should adopt early release of body camera footage

OWH Editorial: The timing is right to create a pedestrian-friendlier Old Market

OWH Lance Morgan: My uncle was denied burial in Sioux City because he was a Native American

OWH Midlands Voices: What a challenge Omaha-area educators have met during the COVID crisis

OWH Midlands Voices: Action needed to remedy systemic racism in education

OWH Public Pulse

1. Old Market revamp
2. Old Market vision
3. Misplaced loyalty
4. Biden's overreach
5. It's for us to decide

LJS Editorial, 5/2: City election will shape the path ahead -- so vote in it

LJS Editorial, 4/30: Spring Game shows return to normal is getting nearer

LJS Local View: Together, we can begin to undo harm of Whiteclay

LJS Letters

1. Testing isn't closing the gap
2. Climate plan an investment
3. So many questions for governor
4. Ricketts tips playing field
5. Filibuster helps temper parties
6. Kids caught in political fight

National/Federal

AP: What's behind the growth slump? Takeaways from census data

AP: US vows again to ban menthol flavor in cigarettes, cigars

LA Times: New CDC mask guidance draws clear line between vaccinated and unvaccinated Americans

AP: Iowa turns down 71% of available vaccines on weak demand

OWH: Press freedom group objects to Gov. Ricketts' new media credentialing process

LINCOLN — A national press freedom group pressed Gov. Pete Ricketts on Thursday to adopt a "less onerous" media credentialing process that allows unbiased access to the governor's press briefings. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, a Washington, D.C.-based group that provides free legal help with free speech issues, wrote Ricketts on Thursday objecting to his recently announced process for credentialing news organizations. The group said the policy may be used as a pretext to exclude media based on their perceived political viewpoint.

The letter comes after the Governor's Office denied media credentials to an online North Omaha news service, NOISE Omaha, saying it was "an advocacy organization funded by liberal donors," and not a mainstream media outlet.

The denial, and objections to it raised by The World-Herald and other Nebraska media outlets, prompted the Governor's Office on April 15 to announce a new application process to obtain credentials.

The application asks questions about whether a media organization is financed "entirely" by advertising and subscriptions, and whether it has a "clear distinction between the editorial division … and the news reporting division." Those questions, the press freedom group wrote, have no bearing on the governor's stated reasons for requiring credentials, which were "security reasons" and "operational limits."

The Reporters Committee cited federal court rulings that concluded blocking access to a media outlet based on its perceived political viewpoint violated the "fundamental" constitutional right of the media to gather information. Any restrictions on that access must be based on reasonable and neutral grounds, the Reporters Committee wrote citing a court ruling, and cannot be used as "a facade for viewpoint-based discrimination."

"Accordingly, denying NOISE press credentials based on a belief that it has 'liberal' funders and thus a 'liberal' viewpoint unquestionably violates the First Amendment," the letter stated.

When asked to comment, Taylor Gage, the governor's spokesman and head of his strategic communications, said, "We stand ready to credential media outlets."

Gage wrote a letter dated April 23 to Media of Nebraska, which represents the state's newspapers and broadcast media, including The World-Herald, saying that the new media credentialing process was drawn from policies used by the Texas Legislature, the Wisconsin Governor's Office and the U.S. Congress.

However, a review of those policies by The World-Herald found there are some key differences. None of the three ask the number and range of questions posed in the Nebraska application. In addition, the Nebraska application leaves it up to the Governor's Office to decide whether an applicant's answers qualify that person for credentialing.

"The (Nebraska) Governor's Office firmly believes the application and criteria that were published last week reflect a neutral and fair approach to qualifying media organizations to cover credentialed news events," Gage wrote in the April 23 letter.

He also noted that before issuing the new application process, he had asked Nebraska media for input, but instead got a "general letter of concern." Gage said he remains willing to discuss the new policy.

NOISE officials have told The World-Herald that it is not an advocacy group but a small group of reporters dedicated to reporting on Omaha's minority communities.

The Reporters Committee also rejected the characterization of NOISE as an advocacy organization, pointing out that it is a member of the Institute for Nonprofit News, which requires "organizational independence" and that members not advocate or promote legislation, policies and government actions. The Reporters Committee also said it would be unfair to reject NOISE on the basis that it is exclusively an online outlet because increasingly, newspapers and other media are posting stories on the internet to save expenses.

The letter from the Reporters Committee was also signed by The World-Herald, the Lincoln Journal Star and the Associated Press.

"Decisions restricting press access must not be taken lightly, for the ability of journalists to gather

information about government activity and report this news is of vital importance to the public," the letter stated.
Among the contributors to NOISE Omaha, which is a nonprofit funded by donations, are the Sherwood Foundation (founded by philanthropist Susie Buffett), the Omaha Community Foundation and the Gilbert M. and Martha H. Hitchcock Family Foundation, originally established in 1945 by the family of The World-Herald's founder.
NOISE, which stands for "North Omaha Information Support Everyone," was established in 2018.
By Paul Hammel

Reporters Committee For Freedom Of The Press: RCFP expresses concern about Nebraska governor's decision to deny press access to local news outlet

In a letter submitted to Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts on April 29, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press expressed concern about the governor's recent decision to bar a local news outlet from attending his press briefings.
Ricketts denied North Omaha Information Support Everyone, or NOISE, access to press briefings because his administration considered the news outlet to be "an advocacy organization funded by liberal donors." The Reporters Committee's letter, joined by 12 news organizations and one journalism professor, disputes that characterization, noting that NOISE is a nonprofit news group and part of the Institute for Nonprofit News, which requires that its members "do not advocate or operate in a way that promotes any legislation, policies, government action or outcomes."
"In any event," Reporters Committee attorneys argue, "the First Amendment prohibits government officials from attempting to suppress a news outlet's expression because of its viewpoint — or perceived viewpoint — and denying access to press conferences on these grounds is thus unconstitutional."
The letter raises additional concerns about the new media credentialing process adopted by the governor following publicity about his administration's decision to deny access to NOISE. The Reporters Committee notes that members of the news media have pointed out that some of the questions included in the application are "unduly invasive."
"Given the reasons you previously asserted for denying NOISE press credentials," the letter states, "we are concerned that this new application process may be used as a pretext to exclude NOISE and others whose perceived viewpoints are disfavored under the guise of neutral factors."
The letter urges the governor to reconsider his administration's media credentialing process "with the aim of providing access to all bona fide journalists and news outlets, including NOISE."
By Jessica Blake

Kearney Hub: Gov. Ricketts to speak in Kearney about proposed health education standards

KEARNEY — Gov. Pete Ricketts will speak Monday about Nebraska State Board of Education's proposed health education standards.
The Buffalo County Republicans will host Ricketts at 7 p.m. Monday in the South Platte Room on the second floor of the Kearney Public Library, 2020 First Ave. The public is invited.
Ricketts has said the sex education portions of the Nebraska Department of Education's proposed health education standards "politicized," saying they should be scrapped. He said they represent a

"significant shift" in the approach to health education, and that many of the themes should be left to parents to discuss with children at home.
For more information about Monday's event, contact Trenton Snow at 308-293-1085.

CNS News: Nebraska Gov.: 'The Real Threat to Security Is the Dangerous Defund the Police Movement'

(CNSNews.com) – Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said Thursday that contrary to what Vice President Kamala Harris says, the greatest threat to national security is not domestic terrorism manifested by white supremacists. It's the defund the police movement.

"That is not the single greatest thing to our safety and security in Nebraska. In fact, if you look over the course of last year with the riots, what -- I think you see this across the country. The real threat to security is the dangerous defund the police movement, which is in some states, not in ours, but in some states, underlying law enforcement and preventing them from doing their job," he said at Fox News's "Red State Trailblazers" town hall event in Orlando, Fla. "And frankly, when I talk to my county prosecutors, my law enforcement, you know who that harms the worst? It's our folks in the minority communities, because they know that the police are there to help them. Now, we've got to change this narrative with regard to law enforcement," Ricketts said.

"It has never been harder to be a law enforcement official than right now. We need to support our police, not attack our police," the governor said.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who was also present at the event to celebrate Republican governors, said that Democrats "use race to divide and then attack each other, and It's wrong."

"In Texas, we use everybody to unite. Let me give you a quick example. It shows you the opportunity that exists in Texas. Texas ranks number one in the nation for black-owned business job creation, for black women-owned businesses, for Hispanic-owned businesses job creation and for Hispanic entrepreneurs," Abbott said.

"And so it doesn't matter your color, what your background is. Texas is a land of opportunity for everybody, and we want to unite everybody, not divide people," the governor said.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said his state passed an anti-riot bill that prevents local governments from trying to defund the police.

"What we do is a couple things. One, if a local government tries to defund law enforcement, the state of Florida won't let that happen. We will stand by law enforcement. We make local governments protect folks. If you do have a riot, you need to get in there and protect people," he said.

"If you don't, people can sue the local government for their damage to themselves or their property. Finally, if you riot, if you loot, if you're violent in one of these assemblies, we're putting you in jail, period," the governor said.

A similar bill is being considered in Iowa, and Gov. Kim Reynolds said she will sign it.

“And we actually in the middle of the civil unrest last year, I brought legislators from both parties to my office in the Senate and the House. We sat down with three days we hammered out the More Perfect Union that passed the House, the Senate and I signed in one day, and actually it was supported by law enforcement and civil rights organizations,” Reynolds said.

“You can come together and you can do the right thing. It just enhances training. It limits chokeholds, and it punishes bad actors, but we also are doing Back the Blue that actually does a lot of the things that Governor DeSantis just talked about. We do not fund cities. They’ll get no more state dollars if they defund the police. If you’re going to peacefully protest, absolutely. You have the right to do that,” she said.

“If you’re gonna riot, if you’re gonna block highways and roads, you're going to pay a price for that. We're increasing the penalties for that. We won't stand for it, so we’ve got a great bill that’s working its way through the legislature that really supports our law enforcement and all the great work that we’ve done, but we've done both,” the governor added.
By Melanie Arter

AP: Nebraska board sees revenue uptick this year before decline

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska state government will collect an extra $90 million in tax revenue in the current fiscal year that ends June 30 but will face a less rosy outlook over the following two years, based on new state estimates.
The Nebraska Economic Forecasting Advisory Board on Friday lowered its revenue projections by $5 million over the following two budget years, starting on July 1.
The new predictions will give lawmakers about $38 million more than expected in the current legislative session, after adjusting for requirements of state law. The projections will also trigger an automatic boost to a new state property tax credit program.
Gov. Pete Ricketts urged lawmakers to “stay the course” with his plan to ease the local property tax burden for Nebraska residents.
“Nebraska’s economy continues to show significant signs of strength as we emerge from the pandemic,” Ricketts said.

OWH: Nebraska lawmakers' compromise puts stamp of approval on 'postcard bill'

LINCOLN — A compromise approved Wednesday night put a stamp of approval on a bill that requires the mass mailing of postcard notices when a property tax increase is proposed.
The “postcard bill” has been hailed by backers as increasing transparency for taxpayers when an increase in property taxes is being considered. But opponents had complained that mailing postcards would be expensive and would be unfair in instances where inflation and growth force a hike.
Under the compromise crafted on Legislative Bill 644, postcard mailings to taxpayers would be required only when proposed growth in property taxes is higher than 2% plus growth in valuation due to new construction. The need for a postcard is based on the amount of property taxes

collected. For instance, Sarpy County's property valuation due to new construction increased about 3% in the most recent year. That means the county would have had to send out a postcard if its property tax request increased by more than 5%.
A notice of the proposed raise, plus notice of a public hearing on the request, would also have to be published in a county newspaper under the Property Tax Request Act.
The "2% plus growth" language was modeled after a proposal, backed by Gov. Pete Ricketts, that would have limited increases in property taxes by 3% plus growth. But that proposal died in the face of a filibuster.
As originally drafted, LB 644, introduced by State Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair, would have required postcards to be sent when any increase in property taxes was proposed. That led to complaints that mailing postcards could cost $26,000 in Sarpy County, and upward of $500,000 in Douglas County. Hansen said the compromise removed objections by cities, counties and school districts.
LB 644 was patterned after a Utah law that requires taxing entities to inform taxpayers, via a postcard and on a website, when an increase in property taxes is being proposed. Hansen and other advocates said that taxpayers are often unaware of proposed tax increases, and, as a result, there's little input given to governmental bodies.
The bill advanced to final reading on a voice vote.
By Paul Hammel

OWH: Nebraska Legislature passes natural hair discrimination ban

LINCOLN — Nebraska lawmakers once again passed a bill aimed at preventing job discrimination against African Americans who wear their hair in natural or protective styles.
Legislative Bill 451, introduced by State Sen. Terrell McKinney of Omaha, would expand existing laws banning racial discrimination in employment. The measure passed on a 40-4 vote. It would define race to include hair texture and protective hairstyles, such as braids, locks and twists.
The measure now heads to Gov. Pete Ricketts, who vetoed a similar bill last year. At the time, he said he supported the intent of the proposal but said its wording was unclear and did not specify that it applied to hairstyles tied to a particular race. His office worked with McKinney on the new proposal.
Supporters of LB 451 told of being forced by employers to straighten their hair, cut it short or cut off braids and dreadlocks to keep their jobs. They argued that treatments used to straighten African Americans' hair are costly, potentially cancer-causing and can damage the hair.
Among other bills passed Thursday:
Court fees. A fee charged to support the Nebraska judges' retirement plan would double over four years under LB 17, passed 33-13. Sen. Mark Kolterman of Seward, the chairman of the Nebraska Retirement Systems Committee, introduced the bill to shore up the retirement plan.
The bill would increase the judges' retirement fee from $6 to $12 by July 1, 2025, and direct a larger portion of other court fees into the plan. It would also require the state to start putting tax dollars equal to 5% of judges' compensation into the plan.
Fireworks. State law would allow Nebraskans to buy a wider variety of fireworks under LB 152, introduced by Sen. Julie Slama of Peru and passed on a 42-3 vote.
If signed into law by the governor, the bill would go into effect in time for Nebraskans to enjoy bigger booms and flashier displays on Independence Day. But the bill would not supersede local ordinances, so cities and villages could still limit the types of fireworks sold in their communities.
Broadband. Broadband expansion projects in Nebraska would have to meet higher speed standards

under LB 338, passed 46-0. The bill, introduced by Sen. Bruce Bostelman of Brainard, would require that any new project funded in part by the state's Universal Service Fund must provide speeds of 100/100 (100 megabits per second download and 100 Mbps upload).

Rentals. Landlords would have to give 24-hour written notice before entering a tenant's home or apartment under LB 320, passed 43-3. The bill, introduced by Sen. John Cavanaugh of Omaha, would make several other changes in landlord-tenant laws. Among them would be a provision allowing victims of domestic violence to get out of a lease under certain conditions.

Ethanol. Using pesticide-treated seed to make ethanol would be prohibited under LB 507, passed 48-0. The bill, introduced by Bostelman, addresses a practice used at the troubled AltEn Ethanol plant near Mead. The plant is being sued by the state over allegations of contamination and violation of environmental laws.

By Martha Stoddard

LJS: Legislature advances bill to help pay Beatrice 6 judgment

The Legislature gave first-round approval Thursday to a measure that would help Gage County pay a $28.1 million judgment to six individuals wrongly convicted of a 1985 murder.

Advanced with a veto-proof 35 votes, the bill (LB103) from Sen. Myron Dorn would help Gage County satisfy its debt.

During his introduction, Dorn offered a public apology to Ada JoAnn Taylor, Thomas Winslow, James Dean, Kathleen Gonzalez, Debra Shelden and Joseph White — the so-called Beatrice 6.

Together, the six spent a combined 75 years in prison after they were convicted in the cold-case murder of Helen Wilson. DNA evidence later proved the six were not involved in the crime, and they later sued Gage County, winning a federal jury trial in 2016.

"I'm sorry for the lost years of your life through your wrongful conviction," Dorn said. "We regret causing you so much pain and suffering, for you and your families."

Dorn also offered "our deepest sympathy" to the Wilson family.

But his bill was designed to provide relief to the taxpayers of Gage County, who saw their property taxes skyrocket and are now paying a special sales tax in order to pay the judgment, attorneys' fees and interest.

Gage County has done "everything fiscally possible to pay the judgment," Dorn said, and has paid more than $14 million to date.

"Now the county and its people are out of options, and also at the end of the financial rope," he added.

As originally introduced, LB103 would provide $2 million in state funds to any county facing a federal court judgment that exceeds $25 million, and where the total cost of the judgment exceeds 20% of the county's annual budget.

The Beatrice 6 judgment was three times Gage County's annual budget, Dorn said.

The Legislature's budget-writing committee advanced the bill to the floor with an amendment raising the amount to be paid to $5 million per year, and requiring counties to set their property tax rates to the maximum 50 cents per $100 of valuation for each year they receive aid.

Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard, who pushed for the increase, said he believed the state should act to reduce the amount of time Gage County residents paid the maximum property tax levy allowed under law.

Erdman said he believed paying $10 million of the remaining judgment would be a good use of the

COVID relief dollars sent to the state.
Omaha Sen. Justin Wayne suggested the Legislature use a portion of the additional funds set aside by lawmakers for property tax relief this year to assist Gage County.
But lawmakers pointed out that fund, raised to $313 million this year, had been signed into law by Gov. Pete Ricketts and couldn't be changed at this point.
Several lawmakers said they were sympathetic to taxpayers in Gage County, who had nothing to do with the arrest, prosecution or conviction of the Beatrice 6.
Many taxpayers in the county weren't even alive in 1985 when Wilson was killed, they pointed out, or in 1989 when the cold case investigation was reopened.
Dorn said he appreciated his colleagues' willingness to help but felt the amount included in the proposed Appropriations Committee amendment was too high to pass three rounds of consideration.
"I realize that $10 million is too steep of an ask," Dorn said.
He brought an amendment that reverted the appropriation back to $4 million total over the next two years.
By Chris Dunker

AP: Partial bailout for botched Nebraska murder case advances

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A rural Nebraska county that was ordered to pay a $28.1 million legal judgment for sending six innocent people to prison could get a $4 million bailout from the state under a bill that won initial approval from lawmakers on Thursday.
Lawmakers advanced the measure, 35-3, through the first of three required votes. Supporters initially proposed a $10 million payment over two years, but reduced it after some senators expressed reservations about that amount.
Officials in Gage County, in southeast Nebraska, have sought state help ever since a federal judge ordered them in 2018 to pay the wrongfully convicted people, known as the Beatrice Six. The $28.1 million judgment is more than three times the total annual property tax collections in the county, which has 22,000 residents. With attorney fees and interest, county residents will end up paying around $31 million on top of the cost of basic government services.
“Gage County has exhausted every financial resource available to the county and the taxpayers,” said Sen. Myron Dorn, a former Gage County supervisor who represents the area.
Gage County officials appealed the judge’s ruling but lost, and raised its property tax levy to the maximum allowed under state law to help pay the judgment.
In 2019, they also imposed a new half-cent sales tax under a new law approved by lawmakers over the objections of Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts. The sales tax has generated almost $2 million so far.
Last year, Gage County settled with its former insurers for another $6 million after the companies initially denied the county’s claim.
The Beatrice Six collectively spent more than 70 years in prison for a 1985 murder in Beatrice but were exonerated by DNA evidence in 2008. The man implicated in the rape and murder of 68-year-old Helen Wilson died in an Oklahoma prison in 1992.
Reviews of the criminal case later found that local authorities — under huge pressure to get convictions — obtained confessions from five of the six defendants with the threat that they could face the death penalty.
Authorities also persuaded several of the defendants that they had repressed memories of the

crime. Most struggled with mental health problems and developmental disabilities. And a Nebraska State Patrol forensic scientist who concluded that blood and semen at the scene didn't match any of the defendants was never called to testify at trial.

Some critics have argued that Gage County has only itself to blame, but many residents have countered that they didn't live in the area at the time and shouldn't have to pay for the mistakes of elected officials nearly four decades ago.

Sen. Steve Erdman, of Bayard, noted that the jury that convicted the six was drawn from residents in neighboring Jefferson County. Erdman, a staunch conservative, said he was moved to support the bill after hearing from a young farmer who was being forced to pay an extra $1,400 a year in property taxes because of the judgment.

"Some of these people weren't even born when this happened," he said.

Erdman also argued that the state ultimately trained the law enforcement officers who botched the case.

Sen. Lou Ann Linehan, of Omaha, who grew up near Beatrice, said lawmakers should view the issue as representatives of the entire state and not just their legislative districts.

"Any one of us could be in this boat," she said.

Sen. John Cavanaugh, of Omaha, said the case points to larger problems in a state system that he said over-incarcerates people.

"It's created by the policies we set in place and the expectations we place on that system," he said.

But Sen. Adam Morfeld, of Lincoln, said he was more comfortable with the smaller $4 million payout because Gage County residents shouldn't be totally relieved of the burden because they elected the officials who bungled the case.

"I think we should help a little bit, but I think that, quite frankly, there is some responsibility to be borne by those residents," he said.

By Grant Schulte

LJS: Don Walton: Challenges, change and opportunities in the Legislature

There have been some powerful debates in the Legislature this session, well above the curve.

One of them was last week's discussion of Sen. Lou Ann Linehan's bill that would provide tax credits for individuals whose private school donations help provide scholarship assistance for students to attend schools that may better fit their needs.

That would include, in particular, some Black students in Omaha who have thrived in Catholic schools after failing to do well in public schools for a variety of reasons.

Sen. Justin Wayne made a powerful case for providing them with that opportunity.

Color me impractical, or just dumb, but if we care about something enough to write a check and provide a little financial assistance, why don't we just do that without expecting or asking for a tax break for a personal act of giving or charity?

There have been other excellent debates this session, probably with more to come.

Some of the more seasoned, reasonable and moderate voices have only one session left after this year — and most of those senators are Republicans who have helped keep the nonpartisan Legislature on course at a time when politics is polarized in our country, more sharply divided and hopelessly partisan.

Partisanship is institutionalized in the Congress by dividing members of each party in seating them apart from one another in the chambers. Across the aisle are the opponents, the enemy, the others.

Not in Nebraska, where senators sit next to one another without regard to party affiliation. There are no institutionalized partisan divisions in Nebraska's Legislature, although for a time I thought one side of the aisle seemed to be reserved for the troublemakers.
Twelve senators will depart after next year and nine of them are Republicans.
The three Democrats who will wrap up their eight years are all Lincoln senators, with Sen. Matt Hansen's 26th District the only closely divided district in terms of party registration, although slightly Democratic.
There may not be much change in the number of Republicans and Democrats, but there could be a change in overall philosophy and tone that could alter the outcome in terms of legislation in 2023.
When you glance at the list of the nine departing senators who are Republicans, you see the names of some of the moderate legislative leaders, fundamentally conservative, collegial and reasonable, doers not doctrinaires, senators who are teammates and focused on achievements, not partisan goals.
* * *
The latest state revenue forecast is another huge invitation to think big.
An opportunity to invest in Nebraska's future.
A chance to broaden the focus beyond property tax relief, which has $1.45 billion in direct relief built into the state's next two-year budget cycle along with the voter-approved commitment of 70% of the new state revenue that will be generated by a 20% tax on casino gambling at race tracks.
Yes, absolutely, property tax relief is needed.
But there's a rare opportunity for the state to do more than that now; more than the expansion of rural broadband that's already approved; and such an opportunity doesn't come along often.
OK, I'm done.
* * *
Speaker Mike Hilgers already has called upon his colleagues to "think big" and be alert to "game-changing opportunities."
And senators responded with a 42-2 vote to advance amended legislation that would launch a $2 million study aimed at mitigating flooding and enhancing development along the Lower Platte River, around Lake McConaughy and near Lewis and Clark Lake.
Hilgers won approval to officially tag the newly-created study committee as the STAR WARS Committee, an amended version of the Statewide Tourism and Recreational Water Access and Resources Sustainability Committee.
It's Step One of what might be a think-big response originally prompted by the huge flood unleashed by the 2019 onslaught of rain, snow and ice that resulted in $3.4 billion in damage along the Platte and the Missouri Rivers, but now also incorporating economic development, recreational and tourism opportunities.
The bill was introduced by Sen. Mike McDonnell of Omaha.
Yoda thought big: "Do or do not. There is no try."
* * *
Finishing up:
* Gov. Ricketts' appearance along with four other Republican governors at a Fox News town hall in Florida moderated by Laura Ingraham was the governor's latest venture onto the national stage.
* Sen. Brett Lindstrom, addressing a Lincoln Chamber of Commerce audience on Zoom as the father of children who participate in youth sports and who look to parents for transportation and support: "It's more than a commitment; it's a lifestyle." You could imagine heads nodding.

* Has there been a more welcome May?
By Don Walton

Scottsbluff SH: Connecting rural Nebraskans

The internet is important in the success of Teresa Sanders' business. Fast and reliable connections with her 40 representatives and clients across the United States and Canada could mean the difference between success and failure.

Her business, Diamond T Livestock Services, is a service-based business specializing in performing a variety of tasks in beef packing facilities, feedyards and ranches.

“We are employed as a third party to perform extensive services including beef carcass data, beef mobility scoring, animal welfare monitoring, beef liver abscess scoring, DNA collection, and a large array of professional research work and audits,” Sanders said.

Sanders started her business 26 years ago with the data from about 2,000 head “coming across my desk; today I have about 7 1/2 million head come across my desk.”

Until a few weeks ago, on the Sanders ranch 21 miles Hemingford, she used a satellite provider, but the service was slow and unreliable.

”I receive big files and send big files,” she said. I have to have fast, reliable internet.”

A few weeks ago Mobius, a communications company in Hemingford, laid fiber to the ranch.

“With fiber, it’s amazing. It’s more like a relief” Sanders said.

The speed and reliability fiber provides is a “game changer,” she said.

SPEED & RELIABILITY MATTERS

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines advanced broadband as download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) with upload speeds of 3 Mbps, a baseline that experts call “25-3” for short. In today’s world this is almost obsolete, Mobius Communications’ General Manager Tonya Mayer said.

Mobius, because they use fiber, has 25-25 up to one gigabit per second, Mayer said.

“Our board believes everyone deserves broadband,” Mayer said. “We need fiber in rural Nebraska.”

In 2010 Mobius tested fiber in the village of Berea. After it was successful in Berea, Mobius put fiber in their hometown of Hemingford.

The rural Nebraska company has been adding fiber for rural Nebraska ever since, Mayer said. However, it is not cheap.

COST IS NOT CHEAP

Before the COVID-19 pandemic the cost to put in a mile of fiber was $15,000-$18,000. With the pandemic and the shortages, the price climbed to closer to $25,000 a mile.

“We get grants but that only covers part of our investments,” Mayer said. “We get excited when we get more than one person per mile.”

Mobius has laid down 400-route miles of fiber. Route miles are the number of miles that are spanned by a telecommunications network. They are the total geographic distance between cities or other terminal points.

Within the 400 route miles Mobius has been able to take fiber to the small rural towns of Crawford and Whitney, as well as to Agate Fossil Beds, and to the Sanders’ ranch.

“We are very proud of what we have done and continue to look for ways to continue deploying fiber in rural Nebraska,” Mayer said.

Mobius has just recently taken fiber to Belmont, Nebraska, a community of eight people, 11 miles

southeast of Crawford.

GOVERNMENT HELP

With the high cost of laying a mile of fiber, Mobius has taken advantage of money from the CARES Act and is hoping there will be more coming in the future.

“We were awarded $1,344,400 in DED Cares Act Grants in 2020,” Mayer said. “With it, we deployed over 75 miles of fiber to the home and connected approximately 100 homes/businesses. We had a 25% match but with increased costs it was closer to 50% match.”

There are bills in the state legislature attempting to address the need for high speed internet in Nebraska. The first is Gov. Pete Ricketts' bill, LB 338. The bill, called the Broadband Bridge Act, will commit $40 million over two years to expand the broadband infrastructure in Nebraska, both urban and rural.

“I think it’s a good bill, and I’m hoping it will pass,” State Senator Tom Brewer said in an interview Tuesday, April 27, while the bill was being debated on the floor of the Legislature. “It’s a lot of money, but it’s a good investment.”

The majority of the areas with no or limited high speed internet are in central and western Nebraska, he said. “Central and western Nebraska need the help.”

“It is going to be tough, but I think it will pass,” Brewer said. “The urban senators see it as a gift for the rural senators.”

If it goes to a filibuster, he said. “We will need 33 senators and we don’t have that.”

Between money from the Cares Act and the $40 million from LB 388 that is about a $90 million investment in broadband, Brewer said. “That is pretty good shot in the arm.”

The second bill is LB 388, introduced by rural senator Bruce Bostelman. The bill is meant to give rural internet customers more input on their broadband carrier.

In both bills, funding would only be available to companies offering service of 100 Mbps or greater for both upload and download speeds (100-100).

PANDEMIC & BROADBAND

“The (COVID-19) pandemic really showed our need for (advanced) broadband,’ Mayer said. “It also showed the gap in rural America.”

For Sanders’ two children, Wade, 17, and Josie, 14, “satellite was a mess for the kids on internet with school. The service was slow” and unreliable.

Besides school her children are also very active in 4-H livestock judging. With satellite, they would compete but, when they recorded their reasons for why they placed one animal ahead of another it would take a long time to upload and get to where they needed to go.

“Now (with fiber). it is instead,” Sanders said.

Whether it is for remote schooling or business, Mayer said it is important for economic development. People say they like the idea of living in a small town, but they need to be connected.

“Those living in rural America deserve good solid internet connections,” Mayer said.

LIVING RURAL, WORKING URBAN

For Paige Paradeis, the access to high speed internet made it possible for her to move home to Hemingford in 2015. Though she lives in rural Nebraska the company she works for is in Chicago, Illinois.

Paradeis works as a senior solutions architect a marketing company.

She was missing home and decided to move closer. Her original plan was to move to Denver, Colorado, but after spending time in Hemingford, she said, “It was a breath of fresh air and I decided to stay.”

A key reason was the high speed internet offered through fiber.
The company was new at the time and had employees in Chicago, Kansas City, Dallas and Hemingford.
"I had the best internet out of everyone in our company at the time," Paradeis, who lives on a ranch 13 miles outside of town, said. "It's crazy but II was the only one who had fiber. They have caught up."
In today's business world you are screen sharing, which Paradeis said takes a lot of bandwidth.
"You need speed and reliability," she said. "Anything less than 25 (Mbps) is not working, you need 100-100."
High speed broadband "opens up our opportunities for hiring," Paradeis said. Before a company's hiring pool was much smaller, you had to live where you worked. That is what took Paradeis from Nebraska to Chicago, now it is open to "anyone who has good internet."
The fiber, which offers high speed internet, allows Paradeis to live in rural Nebraska while working for a company in a large metropolitan area.
Today, Paradeis' company has grown to include an Alliance, Nebraska graduate who lives in Omaha and another western Nebraskan living 10 miles from Paradeis' ranch.
'SKY IS THE LIMIT'
"High speed broadband is the only way you can survive. You have to have fast instant internet," Sanders said. "Some of my reps are in small areas without fiber. They have had emails (pay invoices) that have gotten stuck in outbox for two weeks."
With fiber, there are no hold ups, she said.
The other day, Sanders said, her husband Tom, watched a bull sale live without any delays. When he saw the bull he wanted, he put in a bid and purchased it as if he was at the sale itself.
"With broadband the sky is the limit, especially in smaller towns," Mayer said. "It gives them a leg up."
By Brad Staman

KLKN: Two rallies discuss Second Amendment Sanctuary at the State Capitol

LINCOLN, Neb. (KLKN) – Just over two weeks ago, Governor Pete Ricketts signed a proclamation making Nebraska a Second Amendment Sanctuary State. On Friday, people on both sides of the issue held rallies.
Freedom Rally USA, Nebraskans Against Government Overreach and the Nebraska Firearm Owners Association hosted a 2nd Amendment Rally. Over 50 people attended the rally.
Advocates from across the state spoke to the audience. People also held signs and flags supporting the right to bear arms.
"Our Governor Ricketts recently put through a proclamation that made Nebraska a second sanctuary, so we really need our legislation to get their butts together and get through some actual solid legislation that protects us from any federal overreach."
Earlier in the day, those against the proclamation gathered at the Capitol. Those in attendance criticized the government for not accepting immigrant children from the border earlier this month, and then a day later proclaimed the sanctuary.
That rally featured signs supporting immigrant children as well as speakers.
"I don't know that the second amendment is really under any threat at all, and the children who are legally trying to find and seek asylum here and some of them have parents in the country that are

waiting to be reunited with them," Stand in for Nebraska volunteer Penny Costello explained. "They are in danger."
Ricketts' proclamation, which is symbolic only, states that Nebraska "will continue to take any necessary step to defend our right to keep and bear arms."
By Allie Snow

GII: Internships vital to the Grand Island workforce

Last month was National Internship Awareness Month.
Career Edge Organization founded National Internship Awareness Month to celebrate the benefits of internships and the opportunities they provide to students.
In Grand Island, the Grand Island Chamber of Commerce is working to access the numerous benefits that internships can bring to the community workforce, said Cindy Johnson, chamber president.
Johnson said internship programs can be the key to finding future high-skilled employees — a problem that more than 73% of Grand Island businesses say they are experiencing.
"By implementing a program, a business is also establishing a talent pipeline of future interns and employees," she said. "In fact, surveys on internship programs show that more than half of eligible interns are likely to become full-time hires upon the end of their internship."
But, nationwide, internship programs have been hurt by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy, reports the news service Axios.
Axios reported the share of internship postings is down 15% from 2020, and 39% from 2019. But its article also reported that internship-related searches recently are up 38% from 2020, though still 8.3% lower than 2019.
Johnson said internship programs allow employers to test-drive talent and determine if their interns would be a good fit for the work and culture in a full-time role.
She said hiring interns can also benefit a business in other ways than just finding future employees.
"By hiring an intern, full-time staff can delegate their tasks to allow for time to take on more creative high-level work that would otherwise go untouched," Johnson said. "Interns also bring in a fresh, new perspective to the company and can provide insight and individual skills to supplement the full-time team's work."
At the chamber, Johnson said, internships have played an important role in its operation.
She said the chamber hired Courtney Lierman as an intern during her senior year at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Lierman is now chamber vice president in charge of talent pipeline.
Johnson said Lierman's degree in advertising and public relations, along with her personality, work ethic and drive, "fit perfectly with our needs."
"We offered her a full-time position immediately," she said. "We are keeping our fingers crossed that our next intern who starts in May will be equally perfect for our organization."
Developing high-demand, high-skill and high-paying career opportunities in Grand Island has been identified as essential to the future economic growth of our community, Johnson said.
"For years, Grand Island business and community leaders have experienced the challenges of meeting labor force needs without a traditional four-year college or university to attract young people to the area," she said.
Partnering with Wayne State College (WSC) and Grow Grand Island, Johnson said, the Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce has developed a strategy to bring young talent to the Grand Island area by the 2024 school year: The Grand Island Cooperative Internship Program.

She said this co-op program will create a path for students to combine their classroom education with real work experience at an area business.
"Students in the program will have scholarship support from WSC their first three years and then spend their fourth year working full time at a Grand Island business," Johnson said.
She said the co-op program will attract talent to Grand Island and improve the skills of the community's existing workforce.
"If we were able to bring in high-paying or high-skilled jobs, it would cause a ripple effect — increasing wages, creating new jobs and meeting the ever-growing business needs," Johnson said.
Beyond the Grand Island area, she said, Gov. Pete Ricketts and Tony Goins, director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, gave five goals for the state of Nebraska this year.
Johnson said goal No. 2 states the importance of growing the workforce by developing, retaining and attracting talent.
"This issue of strengthening the workforce is not just local, but a statewide priority," she said.
"Internships are just a small stepping stone in the advancement of Grand Island's present and future workforce."
For more information, call 308-382-9210 or go to gichamber.com.
By Robert Pore

NE Farmer: Switzer Ranch named Nebraska Leopold award winner

The Switzer Ranch of Loup County, operated by Bruce and Sue Ann Switzer and their children, Sarah Sortum and Adam Switzer, has been selected as the 2021 Nebraska Leopold Conservation Award winner.
Given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, the award recognizes farmers, ranchers and forestland owners who inspire others with their dedication to land, water and wildlife habitat resources in their care.
In Nebraska, the award is presented annually by the Sand County Foundation, American Farmland Trust, Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska, Cargill, and the Nebraska Environmental Trust.
About the ranch
Sarah Sortum and Adam Switzer are siblings and fourth-generation ranchers committed to the stewardship of Switzer Ranch. They express a land ethic passed down from their parents, Bruce and Sue Ann, by implementing agricultural conservation practices and connecting others with nature.
In addition to custom-grazing beef cattle on 12,000 acres of native prairie, the Switzer family also operates a nature-based tourism business. Calamus Outfitters offers lodging, event space, river float trips, and eco-tours of the Sandhills.
"Our focus really started to shift from being solely a cow-calf operation to being an operation with biodiversity goals about 12 years ago," Sarah says.
To accomplish these goals, the family used the ecological processes that helped shape the Great Plains — fire and grazing. A huge motivator for the family was the rapidly disappearing habitat of native prairie grouse.
"At the time, we didn't realize the plight that grassland birds were in," Sarah recalls. "If this is their last stronghold, we have got to step up and make sure we provide what they need to survive."
With assistance from Audubon Nebraska and the World Wildlife Fund, the Switzers learned about bird counting, bird behavior and other details about the greater prairie chicken and sharp-tailed

grouse. They realized small changes to their ranch management plans could make a big difference for these resident birds that don't migrate elsewhere.

Protecting bird habitat

The Switzers located and documented with GPS the birds' breeding grounds on the ranch. This helped prioritize which areas to target for removal of invasive species that threaten bird habitat. With a life span of about five years for the prairie chickens, the Switzers wanted to be sure they quickly focused on the right pockets of the ranch.

"A lot can happen in five years, as far as damaging a whole generation of birds," Sarah says.

The Switzers received cost-share from the Sandhills Task Force and Nebraska Game and Parks for invasive tree removal and prescribed burns.

With support from local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service staff, they installed wildlife-friendly fencing, added wildlife escape ramps in their watering tanks, and implemented bird and wildlife-friendly haying practices. Land along the Calamus River was placed in a conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy.

The Switzers have met the biodiversity goals they set out to achieve 12 years ago with the use of fire and rotational grazing. They showed that ranchers can create bird and wildlife habitat, while improving water quality, soil health and root systems in the environmentally sensitive Sandhills.

Not only did their efforts lead to an uptick in bird watchers visiting the ranch, but when Audubon Nebraska designated the ranch as an Important Bird Area, it was among the first private properties in Nebraska with that designation.

Always looking to connect others to the importance of grassland bird habitat, the Switzers even played host to a fun and educational Prairie Chicken Festival.

Resiliency is defined on some ranches as the conservation of natural resources. For others, it's ensuring future economic viability. At Switzer Ranch, these attributes go hand in hand.

Announcement of award

The announcement of the award was made by Gov. Pete Ricketts in advance of Earth Day. The Switzers will be presented with the $10,000 award during a ceremony honoring them later this year.

"As Nebraska agriculture continues its excellent work in balancing the need for clean air, water and managing wildlife habitat with the demand for economically sustainable food production, it is inspiring to know the Switzer family has been doing it for generations," says Steve Martin, Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska executive director. "They manage their ranch in a way which benefits the cattle, bird habitat and agritourism all at the same time."

"Cargill understands sustainable beef starts on the ranch. The Switzer family dovetails productive ranch practices to benefit the prairie bird population and their business, making them sustainable into the future" says Sammy Renteria, general manager of Cargill in Schuyler. "We salute their devotion to productive ranching while providing quality habitat for wildlife in Loup County and Taylor."

Mark Brohman, Nebraska Environmental Trust executive director notes, "The Switzer Ranch has demonstrated how an active ranch can diversify and be successful at raising cattle, involve multigenerations, protect wildlife, improve grazing and habitat, and operate a thriving tourism business. Sarah and her family have grown Calamus Outfitters into a premier nature-based operation that showcases central Nebraska to the world and is very deserving of the Leopold Conservation Award."

"As the national sponsor for Sand County Foundation's Leopold Conservation Award, American Farmland Trust celebrates the hard work and dedication of the Nebraska recipient," adds John Piotti,

AFT president and CEO. “At AFT, we believe that conservation in agriculture requires a focus on the land, the practices and the people, and this award recognizes the integral role of all three.”
“Recipients of this award are real-life examples of conservation-minded agriculture,” says Kevin McAleese, Sand County Foundation president and CEO. “These hardworking families are essential to our environment, food system and rural economy.”
Last year, Nebraska landowners were encouraged to apply or be nominated for the award. Applications were reviewed by an independent panel of agricultural and conservation leaders. The 2020 recipient was Ed and Leta Olson of Craig, Neb.
The Leopold Conservation Award in Nebraska is made possible thanks to the generous contributions from American Farmland Trust, Cargill, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska, Sand County Foundation, Farm Credit Services of America, Audubon Nebraska, Lyle Sittler Memorial Fund, McDonald’s, Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska Land Trust, Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, Sandhills Task Force, Tri-State Generation & Transmission Association, USDA NRCS, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, World Wildlife Fund — Northern Great Plains, and Green Cover Seed.
The Sand County Foundation presents the Leopold Conservation Award to private landowners in 22 states for extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation. For more information on the award, visit leopoldconservationaward.org.

LJS: Herbster says he'd focus on tax, school funding reform if elected governor

After a statewide tour that took him into 14 communities, Charles Herbster is preparing to deliver a message that he is the right gubernatorial candidate to lead the way to fundamental tax and school funding reform.
"These systems were built in the 1960s and neither totally fits the needs of the state today," Herbster said during an interview in Lincoln on Thursday following an opening campaign blitz that stretched from Omaha to Scottsbluff.
"That's the greatest challenge," he said. "And people are trying to put a Band-Aid on it.
"I say let's lay everything on the table and decide we're going to sit here together and figure out a total new and revised system for education and taxes."
Nebraska needs to develop a plan for raising state revenue and funding local schools that is more equitable and fair for all Nebraskans, he said, while "making sure the state is much more attractive to keep young people here."
No, Herbster said, he has not asked former President Donald Trump for his endorsement — and he won't do that even though he obviously would greatly welcome it.
Herbster has been closely associated with the former president, serving as an agricultural adviser and an invited participant in White House and Trump social events, including Christmas parties, election night gatherings and events at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida.
He was at Trump Tower in 2015 when the former president rode down the escalator into the history books and four seats away from Rush Limbaugh in the gallery when Trump looked up and awarded Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom during his 2020 State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress.
Herbster also was at the rally that Trump addressed Jan. 6 in Washington prior to the storming of the U.S. Capitol by hundreds of its participants.
"I was sick," he said. "I am absolutely against any type of violence."

Despite his long association with Trump — which he says actually extends back 16 years — Herbster said: "I will never ask him for an endorsement. He will make that decision."
Kellyanne Conway, a close Trump confidante who served as senior counselor to the former president, joined Herbster when he launched his campaign in Fremont on Monday.
If there is an endorsement, Herbster said, yes, presumably there could be a fundraising event or even an opportunity to "take him, my friend, across the state."
And that potentially could impact the dynamics of this GOP gubernatorial contest that is underway more than a year before the 2022 primary election.
Aware that a number of key figures in the Nebraska Republican Party, including close associates of Gov. Pete Ricketts, already are lining up in support of GOP gubernatorial candidate Jim Pillen of Columbus, Herbster said: "I think the state party needs to be fair and equitable toward every Republican candidate."
Herbster already has chosen a lieutenant governor running mate with deep party ties: Theresa Thibodeau of Omaha, former Douglas County GOP chairwoman and a former state senator appointed by Ricketts.
The governor has signaled that he expects to endorse a gubernatorial candidate later. Jessica Flanagain, who managed Ricketts' successful 2018 reelection campaign, is general consultant to the Pillen campaign.
Herbster said he believes that no one is better prepared to "bring the state together" than he is after a career in agriculture and business that has thrived on sales and communication skills.
Herbster operates Herbster Angus Farms in Falls City and is the owner and CEO of Conklin, an agriculture and manufacturing distribution company based in Kansas City, Missouri.
"There's still an issue between the eastern and western sides of the state," he said, and a need to bring the state together.
Herbster describes himself as a born-again Christian and says he is "absolutely in the corner for school choice."
And he said he is prepared for the campaign shots that he knows are coming.
"I was not able to pay property taxes on time for three years while I was trying to make payroll," he said. "The only one I was hurting was me. I paid a very hefty late fine and 14% interest."
There are some speeding tickets, Herbster said, and there will be ongoing accusations that he actually lives in Kansas City.
"I have never lived in Kansas City, although I have a potential second home there that is used as a guest office for people who sometimes come and stay," Herbster said.
"I'm waiting for all the stuff that's going to come," he said, but his approach will be to "just outwork everybody" and to listen.
"When I'm out west, I hear people saying that the people in Lincoln just aren't listening," Herbster said.
"They know they can't get exactly what they want, but they want to feel that somebody's listening."
By Don Walton

Columbus Telegram: Herbster stops in Columbus, talks candidacy for governor

After recently announcing his intention to run for governor of Nebraska, Republican Charles Herbster stopped by Columbus on Thursday morning during a campaign tour.
Herbster explained the three main issues facing Nebraska: The state’s tax base, education and

immigration.
“There's a tremendous opportunity in Nebraska to continue what we already have … and we have a great state, great area -- the center of the food basket of the world,” the fourth generation Nebraskan said. “But I think we've got some things we can do in the state, particularly on taxes, education and immigration. I think all of those are key issues.”
The current tax structure in Nebraska is concerning because of the number of college graduates leaving the state to take advantage of better tax bases in other areas, Herbster said.
“If we continue that, our population is going to go down rather than up, and we have so much resource here in the state to attract businesses to build businesses from agriculture on the west side of the state to manufacturing on the east side of the state,” Herbster said.
State officials have attempted to better the problem but Nebraska’s taxes still aren’t where they need to be, he added. Herbster noted South Dakota’s tax structure and how tax issues have been at the forefront of Nebraskans' minds.
“I look at the exemptions they have, I look at the exemptions Nebraska has, I look at a consumption tax,” he said. “I think there's a whole lot of things we can do to make it somewhat more equitable, and I think people are ready, they're ready to sit down and discuss that and talk about building an entirely new structure that fits 2021 (that) doesn't fit what was taking place in the 1980s or even back in the 1960s.”
As for immigration, Herbster said that “thousands” are now crossing the border into the United States, with a chunk of them ending up in Nebraska, Kansas and North and South Dakotas; that is an ongoing issue that needs focus, he added.
Additionally, Herbster said education is an important topic to him as he’s made philanthropic efforts to help young students, such as a scholarship program.
“We want to work on making sure Nebraska has (a) choice of schools, whether it's private, public, church, whatever choice of education. There's nobody that can make that decision better than parents,” he said.
A Falls City native, Herbster operates Herbster Angus Falls in his hometown. He’s also the owner and CEO of Conklin, an agriculture and manufacturing distribution company.
Notably, Herbster served as chairman of the Agriculture and Rural Advisory Committee for former President Donald Trump.
Gov. Pete Ricketts’ second term ends in January 2023. Also seeking the 2022 Republication nomination is Platte County native Jim Pillen.
Pillen founded Pillen Family Farms in 1993 and followed that with DNA Genetics in 2012; both businesses are now run by Pillen’s children, The Telegram reported April 7. He’s the current chairman of the University of Nebraska Board of Regents and has served on the board of numerous Columbus organizations.
Pillen previously told The Telegram that state leaders must grow the economy and fix property tax issues.
He’s also focused on K-12 education, protecting life, developing infrastructure, protecting the second amendment and supporting law enforcement, according to his campaign website.
“I think Nebraska is the greatest place on the planet to live because of all of the people, and I’m a big believer in collaboration and leadership,” Pillen told The Telegram in early April. “I think leadership and bringing people together to work hard to find common ground is important – it’s important to bring people together. I don’t have every answer, but I know when we bring people together, we can find solutions.”

Herbster said he’s not going to focus on the other candidates in his campaign – just on what he can do for Nebraska.
“Columbus, I know it relatively well – probably not as well as Jim does because I don't live here – but I know it's a city of a lot of manufacturing opportunities, and we need to expand those and make sure that we're making … less regulation, less taxes, more freedom,” Herbster said. “I think everybody in Nebraska, whether you're in Omaha or you're out in Sydney, I think that's what people really want.”
By Hannah Schrodt

Progressive Farmer: Nebraska and EPA Look for Solution

OMAHA (DTN) -- Agricultural corn seed giants started working on a containment strategy as Nebraska environmental regulators began taking stock of the pesticide and fungicide contamination at an ethanol plant that processed treated seeds almost exclusively.
Seed companies stepped in and hired a company to take over environmental cleanup at the AltEn LLC ethanol plant, capable of producing 24 million gallons per year, outside Mead, Nebraska, about 20 minutes from the suburbs of Omaha.
AltEn shut down its plant in early February after the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy (NDEE) issued an emergency order to cease operations at the plant on Feb. 4 following numerous environmental violations. AltEn completed shutdown on Feb. 8.
However, cold weather several days later led a pipe to burst at the plant, causing 4 million gallons of pesticide-filled water to flow downstream.
Records provided to DTN also show state regulators began to query seed companies such as Bayer and Syngenta about the regulations for disposing treated seed, including questions about how to clean up millions of gallons of water in lagoons contaminated with pesticides, and whether millions of pounds of discarded treated seeds should be composted.
Nebraska's attorney general filed a lawsuit in early March to officially shut down the plant. The environmental situation created at AltEn reached a level that Nebraska's unicameral Legislature voted unanimously 48-0 on Thursday for final passage on a bill that would ban ethanol companies from using treated corn seeds in the state. The bill goes to Gov. Pete Ricketts. If signed into law, Nebraska would be the first state to officially ban ethanol plants from processing treated seed.
AltEn is one of just two known ethanol plants in the country that accepted treated seed. The second, in Kansas, is licensed for only 2 million gallons of production and processes significantly smaller volumes of treated seed.
In its efforts to advertise its services as a location to dispose of treated seed, AltEn sent out emails last year stating that it was under "long-term contract" to accept discards from many major seed companies, including Monsanto (now owned by Bayer), Syngenta, Dow (now owned by Corteva), AgReliant and Land O'Lakes (now owned by Winfield United). AltEn advertised it accepted the treated seed at no charge.
AltEn advertised that it was still accepting the treated seed even after state officials had banned AltEn from allowing the leftover wet cake to be used as an area soil conditioner.
DTN has requested interviews with the named companies but those requests were not granted by posting time.
Management and ownership for AltEn also have not responded to repeated requests for interview by DTN.

ADDRESSING THE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Without specifying the potential contamination risks, NDEE on April 29 issued a statement that the department is now working "with the support of the Environmental Protection Agency" to address the environmental issues at AltEn.

"NDEE and EPA are exploring all available options for addressing the environmental issues at the site," NDEE stated.

Jim Macy, director of NDEE, also credited "seed industry representatives" who are now working at AltEn voluntarily to deal with emergency measures to reduce the level of wastewater in lagoons and put in some stormwater measures to prevent discharges from the land piles of distillers grains.

The site has tens of millions of gallons of wastewater filled with high levels of neonicotinoid pesticides and fungicides exceeding EPA safety levels. Another 84,000 metric tons of distillers grains (equivalent to about 10 million bushels of treated seed) are piled on the site. State inspectors are testing soils in and around the site for leaching contamination.

While the water and potential ground contamination came from millions of bushels of discarded seed by the major seed companies at the ethanol plant over multiple years, Macy still credited the industry for "proactive" measures to deal with the current contamination.

"These actions are a crucial next step at the facility as more permanent solutions are investigated," Macy said.

Macy's statement noted that EPA is now working with the state and "discussing a long-term commitment by the seed industry to fully address the environmental issues at the site.

The Nebraska Sierra Club on Thursday sent an action alert to its members, calling on them to demand an investigation into the quantities of pesticides and fungicides in the wastewater and piles of wet cake. The Sierra Club described the situation as a "ticking time bomb."

"I really can't wrap my head around the fact that the seed companies were dumping contaminated seed there for years without realizing there were going to be problems," said Al Davis, a former Nebraska state senator who now lobbies for the Sierra Club in the state. "The seed companies have good scientific engineers that are working for them. Did they know what's going on? It's disingenuous to say they are going to come in and solve all of our problems because they're the ones that really caused the problems in the first place."

Corteva, which owns the Pioneer seed corn brand, told DTN in an emailed statement that it was "fully committed to following all laws and guidelines for the safe use and discard of treated seed."

EPA's VIEW ON TREATED SEED

EPA, the agency in charge of registering pesticides, doesn't track pesticides used in seed treatments the way it does other pesticides. That's because seeds coated with pesticides fall under a legal exemption from EPA monitoring for "pesticide-treated articles," along with products like pesticide-treated lumber. As a result, the only federal laws governing treated seeds are found on the seed treatment product labels, which warn users not to use them for feed purposes and instruct them to dispose of treated seed by burying them away from bodies of water.

Because many pesticide-coated seeds qualify as a hazardous waste material, their disposal can fall under various state laws governing hazardous waste management -- as it has in Mead. A few states, such as Vermont and New York, have also created legislation requiring their state pesticide regulatory agencies to monitor and track treated seeds. But, for the most part, seed companies follow their own industry-created and industry-policed guidelines for proper disposal, found here: https://pesticidestewardship.org/….

A COCKTAIL OF PESTICIDES ON THE MOVE

The chemicals coated on the treated seed found at AltEn are mostly insecticides and fungicides. Neonicotinoids are the most numerous insecticides found at the AltEn facility grounds and in ponds and surface water around the facility. This class of insecticides have been widely used by seed companies to protect a range of crop seeds from soil insects for the past decade. The fungicides are mostly from the QoI (strobilurin) and triazole groups, which are also popular choices for coating on seed to protect it from early season soil diseases. Seed treated with these fungicides and insecticides is now ubiquitous in the corn industry, with more than 90% of corn seed treated upstream by companies before it is sold to retailers and farmers, according to a 2019 Kynetec survey.

After the AltEn pipe rupture on Feb. 12, NDEE began collecting more downstream samples. At least one farm pond five miles from the ethanol plant had tests showing neonicotinoid insecticides, which EPA says are a danger to fish and other wildlife.

Although the insecticides and fungicides are applied to the seed in small amounts, EPA and state regulators in Nebraska have found high concentrations of them in the DDGs, wet cake, wastewater and storm runoff from the AltEn facility. Sampling conducted by the state in 2019 through 2021 has revealed concentrations of neonicotinoids in the facility's lagoons and surrounding land that were sometimes tens of thousands of times greater than levels that academic scientists and regulators have found to be safe for humans, animals and insects, including bees.

For example, in his work with colleagues at Purdue University, entomologist Christian Krupke has found that concentrations of the neonicotinoid insecticide clothianidin (sold as Poncho by Bayer) ranging from 2 to 1,200 parts per billion (ppb) would kill 50% of aquatic insects exposed. In pollen and nectar, concentrations as low as 4 ppb over two days can be fatal to adult honeybees, according to EPA.

For humans, EPA's maximum acceptable levels of neonicotinoids in food and water range from 4 to 70 ppb per day.

In the wastewater lagoons of AltEn, regulators found clothianidin at levels ranging from 7,000 ppb up to 112,000 ppb between April and December 2019. Another neonicotinoid, thiamethoxam (sold as Cruiser by Syngenta), was found at levels ranging from 2,400 ppb to 35,400 ppb in that same time period.

"Those levels are extremely high and likely lethal to any insect," Krupke told DTN. Neonicotinoids are extremely water soluble, meaning that they dissolve easily in water and then remain stable in groundwater, able to travel long distances in it. Even if those amounts lessened as water moved away from the facility in rain, leeching and storm runoff, "it would take an awful lot of dilution to get these concentrations to an environmentally benign level," Krupke said.

When EPA sampled soil and surface water 1 mile downstream from AltEn's facility in early March, clothianidin levels were at 540 ppb. When regulators ventured more than 5.6 miles away from the facility and collected surface water, clothianidin levels still came in at 90 ppb.

In a resident's pond located about 7 miles southeast from the Mead facility, near the town of Ashland, state regulators detected clothianidin concentrations at 50.3 ppb and thiamethoxam concentrations at 60.6 ppb on March 26.

HONEY BEES SOUND THE ALARM ON PESTICIDE EXPOSURE

While federal and state regulators and residents in and around Mead and Ashland are still working to understand the full extent of human and wildlife exposure to these levels, the pesticide contamination at AltEn appears to have had negative effects on nearby wildlife.

For the past four years, bee researchers have watched their honeybee colonies collapse and die off at the Eastern Nebraska Research and Extension Center (ENREC) in Mead, located about 4 miles

from the AltEn facility.
Since 2017, UNL's lab has lost every hive university entomologists have tried to start -- over 36 hives -- affecting the research program by roughly $21,000 for the cost of bees, contaminated equipment, and lost honey revenue, Judy Wu-Smart, a Nebraska Extension entomologist, wrote in a paper she published last August.
The Nebraska researchers' bees have served as the region's canary in the coalmine, Wu-Smart said in her paper. "Bees are biological indicators of the surrounding environment, and unfortunately, pollinator protection policies currently prevents regulatory agencies from investigating these beekills, because the colonies did not die from a misuse of a pesticide application but rather likely from contaminated water and forage (nectar/pollen)," she wrote.
"(T)he inability to keep bees alive around ENREC indicates a greater ... concern highlighting the urgent need to examine potential impacts on local communities and wildlife as well as other research programs at ENREC," she concluded.
By scrutinizing the timing and duration of the die-offs, as well as testing pesticide residue in milkweed at their research facility, the researchers pinpointed AltEn as the source of the contamination, as the cocktails of fungicides and insecticides flowed south through streams, ditches and water channels into and around the beehives.
Water has not been the pesticide contamination's only route of exposure, however. The Nebraska Department of Agriculture has also received reports of geese and other birds, as well as pets, becoming sick and dying after AltEn sold its contaminated wet cake to farmers to apply to their fields as a soil amendment, Wu-Smart said in her paper.
Emails show that as far back as October 2016, Nebraska Extension specialists were raising concerns about AltEn's use of treated seed, but they were told AltEn had the proper air, compost and wastewater permits necessary to operate.
COMPANIES BECOME INVOLVED
Following a records request, NDEE provided DTN with a series of emails involving Bayer and Syngenta.
Within days of the Feb. 12 pipe burst, NDEE legal counsel met virtually with Bayer officials and an attorney who specializes in superfund negotiations and litigation. Talk revolved around the potentially significant environmental emergency related to the disposal of treated seed and the pipe burst.
Bayer representatives on the call included an attorney involved in health, safety and environment and real estate law; Bayer Crop Science state government affairs lead for the south-central United States based in Texas; and a partner with the law firm Spencer Fane who has represented clients across the country on environmental enforcement cases and site cleanups and worked at EPA for 15 years.
On Feb. 21, Macy forwarded an email to Bayer from a company named Clean Harbors. The communication outlined a draft incident action plan to clean up after the pipe burst. The message does not indicate who hired Clean Harbors, but Macy continued to forward emails on the company's cleanup work to staff at Bayer.
A Bayer spokesperson confirmed the company "has been providing resources on the ground since mid-February supporting the State of Nebraska response team as they address the situation at the AltEn ethanol plant. Those efforts have included hiring an environmental remediation company to help AltEn respond to the February spill at the site. We have also commissioned the environmental remediation company to install three holding tanks with a storage capacity of more than 10 million

gallons and begin the process of filtering and processing water in the storage lagoons onsite."
COMPOSTING QUESTIONED
NDEE Environmental Engineer Hillary Stoll also reached out to experts in academia and others, questioning whether composting was an effective way to dispose of treated seed.
Stoll contacted Clyde Ogg, pesticide safety extension educator at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and a contributor to the pesticide stewardship website, asking for basic information about the safety of composting treated seed.
"I noticed at the bottom of the page it says that composting is never recommended for pesticide-treated seed," Stoll said in an email to Ogg.
"Would this also apply to byproducts from an ethanol process with high amounts of pesticides? I have started looking into this but wanted to reach out since you are an expert in this area."
Stoll also was put in contact with a stewardship manager for Syngenta based in North Carolina who trains people who treat the seeds.
In a March 2, 2021, email, the Syngenta manager said a key recommendation to customers is to "never compost treated seed," and "careful planning of the quantity of seed you need is essential since disposal of treated seed may be a problem."

WJAG: Pregnant women OK to get COVID-19 vaccines

LINCOLN - It is being reported that COVID-19 vaccines are safe for pregnant women.
The impact those vaccines have on pregnant women was the topic of a Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services virtual press conference Thursday.
Dr. Emily Patel, Maternal-Fetal Medicine Specialist at Methodist Women's Hospital said there have been over 30,000 pregnant women who have been looked at through the vaccine reporting system in the past couple of months and there haven't been any safety signals.
Patel said there's also pregnant animal data that shows no complications and they're now getting data that shows fetal benefits.
"What we're seeing now and what we have demonstrated is that these newborns to moms who have had the vaccine have antibodies. So the moms are developing those antibodies and then they're crossing over into the fetus and they're born with some level of protection. What that means long-term over the next six months or year and how well that protects them is unknown."
Patel said pregnant women who have yet to get a vaccine and test positive for COVID-19 should let their primary care provider know right away as they might be at higher risk for complications.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

LJS: COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations on the decline. Has Nebraska turned the corner?

COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in Nebraska both dropped sharply last week, signaling that the state might be turning a corner and avoiding a "fourth wave" of the disease.
According to the Department of Health and Human Services, there were 1,745 cases in the seven-day period that ended Wednesday, a decline of more than 30% from the previous week. Over the past three weeks, the average number of daily cases has fallen by almost half, from 491 to 249.
The number of people hospitalized also has declined sharply, dropping from 168 on April 18 to 128 as of Thursday.
The patients who are hospitalized tend to be younger than they were a couple of months ago and

usually are not as sick. At Bryan Health, for example, there has not been a COVID-19 patient who has needed a ventilator in more than two weeks.

While those are encouraging signs, health experts say it's too early to declare victory over the pandemic, which is now nearly 14 months old in Nebraska.

Dr. Mark Rupp, chief of the University of Nebraska Medical Center's infectious diseases division, said it's clear that COVID-19 vaccination rates are reaching a level where they are having a "beneficial effect," but there's still a long way to go.

"I think it's way too early to get complacent and to feel like we are done with this pandemic," Rupp said.

As of Thursday, nearly 56% of Nebraskans 16 and older had received at least one dose of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, and more than 42% were fully vaccinated with two shots of Pfizer or Moderna or one shot of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

In Lancaster County, those numbers are even higher, at about 66% partially vaccinated and 46.6% fully vaccinated.

That's above the 40% threshold that many health experts consider to be a milestone based on the results in Israel, which saw a steep decline in cases once it reached a 40% vaccination rate.

"When you get to somewhere between 40% and 50%, I believe you're going to start seeing real change, the start of a precipitous drop in cases," Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden, told the Wall Street Journal earlier this week.

Dr. Bob Rauner, president of the Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln and chief medical officer of OneHealth Nebraska, said he's "cautiously optimistic" that vaccines are having an effect on COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.

"I think we may be hitting a threshold of vaccination that is working if we can keep it up," Rauner said.

Keeping up the vaccination pace is something that might be difficult, however.

Only about 5,500 Lancaster County residents got a first vaccine dose last week, down from 15,000 the previous week and the lowest total since the week ending Feb. 26.

Total vaccinations, including first and second doses, numbered about 11,500 last week, down from 24,600 a week earlier.

Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department Director Pat Lopez said the county received 8,200 new doses this week but will not be getting any new doses next week because it has enough currently to meet demand.

"We expect to continue to make steady progress in our vaccination efforts, but in smaller increments than we've seen previously," she said.

The Health Department plans to shift to holding smaller-scale clinics in the community in the coming weeks.

"These clinics will provide residents with additional options that help make vaccination accessible, convenient and close to home," Lopez said.

The decrease in the number of Lancaster County residents getting vaccinated mirrors a statewide trend. State health officials said 93,284 doses of the vaccines were administered last week in Nebraska, which was less than half the 211,057 doses the state reported a week earlier.

According to the New York Times, Nebraska has fallen to the middle of the pack in vaccinations, ranking 25th among the states and Washington, D.C., for percentage of people who have had at least one shot. It is a bit higher for percentage of people fully vaccinated, ranking 17th.

Dr. Kevin Reichmuth, a Lincoln pulmonologist, said there was very good demand early on for vaccine

from high-risk groups such as the elderly and people with medical conditions, as well as from health care workers.
And when you combine the number of people vaccinated with those who have had COVID-19 and recovered, the population is getting closer to herd immunity levels, he said.
"I feel really good (about) where we're at," Reichmuth said.
But that does not negate the need for younger, healthier people to get vaccinated, he said, noting that Michigan was in a good place and seeing a large decline in cases before it became the worst hot spot in the U.S. over the past few weeks.
"It's not impossible that we could go backward if people become complacent," Reichmuth said.
A big factor in Michigan's outbreak has been people getting infected by COVID-19 variant strains, something that's showing up more and more in Nebraska.
As of Wednesday, the state Department of Health and Human Services reported 594 known variant cases, more than 80% of which are the U.K. strain of the virus, which is the dominant strain in most of the U.S. That's more than double the number of variant cases from just two weeks ago.
Rupp said vaccines are much more effective against variant strains of COVID-19 than natural immunity is. In fact, he said many of the cases of reinfection he sees in people who have already had the disease are caused by variants.
He also said that the more people who get vaccinated, the more it reduces potential spread of the disease, which makes it less likely that new variants will emerge.
Rauner said a new variant emerging is one of the things he's most concerned about, along with waning immunity in people who had mild cases of the disease and the relaxing of mask mandates too soon.
There are few places outside of Lincoln and Omaha that still require masks, even though transmission rates in most areas are higher than levels recommended to go without masks.
Rupp said case rates across Nebraska are at levels of about 15-20 per 100,000 people and they need to be at 5 or below for masking to no longer be necessary.
Both Rupp and Rauner also believe that masks should remain in schools until vaccinations are available to children.
Rupp said he didn't want to speculate on when that will be, but hopes approval will come sometime during the summer.
Though younger children tend to have milder cases of COVID-19, they still can spread the disease, and Rauner said getting them vaccinated as soon as possible is important.
"If we can get the vaccine to family physician and pediatrician offices, they can concentrate on getting as many kids as possible vaccinated this summer at their school and sports physicals," he said. "If we can do that effectively, we would make a ton of progress toward achieving herd immunity and may be able to delete masks in middle school and high school kids when they come back to school in August."
Even if enough people get vaccinated to reach a level needed to be considered here immunity, it won't mean the end of COVID-19, Rupp said, but the more people who get vaccinated, the more manageable the disease will be.
He said Nebraska's progress so far is a good start.
"Clearly, we're well down the road to getting this to be something we can all deal with and live with," Rupp said.
By Matt Olberding

LJS: UNL sorority enters quarantine after COVID outbreak in house

Members of Alpha Phi at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are being quarantined following a coronavirus outbreak in the sorority.
UNL notified the campus that members of the sorority are quarantined per guidance from the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.
It's the first time since last fall, when several clusters were reported in Greek houses and dormitories on campus, that UNL has asked residents of a housing unit to quarantine.
According to UNL's coronavirus dashboard, there have been 78 positive cases reported since April 14.
A total of 3,017 positive cases have been reported since Aug. 12, 2020, when UNL students returned to campus for the 2020-21 school year.
The overall positivity rate on campus remains low, however, at 0.59%, which is down from 0.66% the previous week.
By Chris Dunker

LJS: Lancaster County reports 27 new cases of COVID-19, fully vaccinated nearing 50%

The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported 27 new cases of COVID-19 on Saturday. Lancaster County has reported a total of 30,973 cases of COVID-19 and 232 deaths since the start of the pandemic. According to the Lancaster County COVID-19 Dashboard, about 47.5% of the adult population -- specifically 116,891 individuals -- is fully vaccinated. The health department reported that 162,999 people have received at least one dose of a vaccine.
Vaccination efforts have shifted from large-scale operations to targeted clinics, including clinics for high school students across the county last week.
Next week, clinics are planned for the Center for People in Need, Airpark and Belmont recreation centers and the Lancaster Event Center. Appointments can also be made for drive-thru clinics at Gateway Mall.
To make an appointment, register at COVID19.lincoln.ne.gov or call 402-441-8006 between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. on weekdays.
By Libby Seline

LJS: Lancaster County reports 32 new cases of COVID-19

The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported 32 new cases of COVID-19 on Sunday. Lancaster County has reported a total of 31,005 cases of COVID-19 and 232 deaths since the start of the pandemic.
For the week ending Friday, there were 247 cases reported in the county, which is down from 300 the week prior.
According to the Lancaster County COVID-19 Dashboard, about 48.7% of the adult population — 119,899 residents — is fully vaccinated. At least 163,356 county residents have received at least one dose of a vaccine.
Next week, vaccination clinics are planned for the Center for People in Need, Airpark and Belmont recreation centers and the Lancaster Event Center. Appointments can also be made for drive-thru clinics at Gateway Mall.

To make an appointment, register at COVID19.lincoln.ne.gov or call 402-441-8006 between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. on weekdays.
By Alex Lantz

GII: More COVID-19 patients hospitalized this week

The number of COVID-19 patients hospitalized in the Central District Health Department area rose from one person last week to six people this week.
Those patients represent 7.23% of available beds. Two of the COVID-19 patients were on ventilators as of Friday.
Central District Health also learned of a COVID-related death on April 17, bringing fatalities in the three-county area to 149.
As of April 24, the positivity rate was 12%. Two weeks earlier, that number was 8%. CDHD Health Director Teresa Anderson says the department's goal is a positivity rate of less than 5%.
CDHD reported 17 new COVID-19 cases this week, an increase of one since last week.
On the bright side, the risk dial dropped from 1.5 to 1.1.
The 14-day case count is at 82, a decrease of two since last week.
CDHD has administered 18,548 vaccinations.
Mary Lanning Healthcare announced Friday that TestNebraska is ending on its Hastings campus.
Terri Brown, director of CDHD Laboratory Services, said there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of people asking to be tested. TestNebraska was initiated at MLH in August 2020 and has provided testing for thousands of patients.
Patients can go to testnebraska.com to find alternate locations for service.
Mary Lanning family care clinics will be offering testing to their patients.
By Jeff Bahr

OWH: COVID antibodies produced by South Dakota cattle to be tested in NIH trial

Human antibodies produced by a herd of South Dakota dairy cattle are being tested as a potential treatment for COVID-19.
The cattle, a Holstein mix, have been genetically modified to have a partially human immune system.
During a clinical trial sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, two different doses of the cow-produced antibodies are being tested in people with mild to moderate COVID-19.
SAB Biotherapeutics, the Sioux Falls biotech firm that developed the antibody-producing technology, announced late last month that the first patient in the trial already had received a dose of the antibodies, a product called SAB-185.
Eddie Sullivan, SAB's co-founder, president and CEO, called the trial a "significant milestone" for the company.
While effective COVID vaccines now are widely available in the United States, he said, they're not the only story. Treatments still will be needed, just as both vaccines and treatments are needed to combat influenza, another virus with a high ability to mutate.
"You need to think of it as bookends," he said of the two strategies.
Indeed, monoclonal antibody therapies have been used throughout the pandemic. But the company's product, Sullivan said, produces a polyclonal response, meaning the antibodies can bind to more than one site on the coronavirus. Monoclonal antibodies, as the name suggests, can bind to

only one. Humans naturally fight disease through a polyclonal response.
That could be important at a time when variants of the coronavirus have begun to outmaneuver some monoclonal antibody treatments. The Food and Drug Administration last month rescinded emergency approval for one monoclonal therapy when used by itself because it had "lost potency" against some variants.
That particular therapy has been credited with helping keep some Nebraska nursing home residents with COVID-19 out of hospitals. The therapy now is recommended for use only in combination with another such treatment, according to an alert the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services sent to health care providers. Other combination therapies also remain available.
Sullivan said the company has tested its product against variants. A recent study, published online but not reviewed by other scientists, indicates the firm's antibodies "do not lose significant activity to many of these variants we're seeing around the world," he said.
The company produces the antibodies by injecting the modified cattle, which look like those found on many Midwestern farms, with a noninfectious portion of the coronavirus. The cattle produce antibodies to fight it.
Because the cows are injected over and over again, the animals build up high levels of the neutralizing antibodies, more than what are found in convalescent plasma donated by people who have recovered from COVID-19 and more than what are found in vaccinated people, Sullivan said.
Previous research by the company indicates the cow-made antibodies produced 40 times more neutralizing activity than the researchers had seen in even the highest convalescent plasma titers.
Convalescent plasma has produced mixed results during the pandemic. In March, the NIH halted a clinical trial of convalescent plasma in treating emergency room patients with mild to moderate COVID symptoms after researchers concluded it was unlikely to benefit that group.
The SAB antibodies are being added to an ongoing NIH trial that also is testing four other possible therapies in patients worldwide, run by an existing research network. A total of 220 patients, 110 at each of the two sites, will receive the product. Their results will be compared to patients who receive a placebo.
The company has been working to develop the technology behind the product for nearly two decades. Support for the development of the product now in trials came through a federal contract.
By Julie Anderson

GII: Setting up Wood River for future success

WOOD RIVER — Two years ago, Wood River residents were still cleaning up their houses after the floods of 2019.
Now, the community has a great new child development center, known as Stick Creek Kids. The center, which opens Monday, expects to welcome 30 kids by the end of the week.
More than 100 people, including Lt. Gov. Mike Foley, turned out for the ribbon-cutting ceremony Saturday on a sunny day in Wood River.
The child care and education center, three years in the making, was the result of a strong community effort, led by the Stick Creek Kids core leadership team.
"We're a mighty force," Elizabeth Troyer-Miller said in opening remarks Saturday. She is the chairperson of the Stick Creek Kids board of directors.
The center is in the former home of the Good Samaritan Society nursing home. Having evacuated its residents, the Good Samaritan Society decided not to reopen after the 2019 flooding.

The building was purchased by Wood River Vision 2020, a nonprofit organization. The Stick Creek administration is an entity under that board.
How much support did the $2 million project receive? The program for Saturday's event listed 119 financial contributors. As part of the effort, the community built a $500,000 endowment.
Troyer-Miller said more than 10,000 hours of time went into the center, much of it by Sara Arnett, a member of the Stick Creek Kids leadership team.
"The people of Wood River stepped up," Foley said.
He said the Wood River effort could serve as a model for the rest of the state.
As a member of an organization with other lieutenant governors, Foley said, he has learned a lot about early childhood education.
The center, he said, will sustain Wood River into the future.
Foley complimented the "visionary" leaders of the project.
"You are determined to keep Wood River growing as a vibrant community," he said.
Rather than being "just a day care," Troyer-Miller said, Stick Creek Kids will provide quality experiences for children. It will give opportunities for kids to grow and learn and for families to thrive.
It's "amazing what we've been able to accomplish," said Wood River Mayor Greg Cramer.
Eight years ago, the 2020 Wood River Vision board was formed. The top three needs identified by that board have been met, Cramer said. The community has a fine aquatic center, a child development center and progress is being made in housing.
Wood River was sad to see the Good Samaritan nursing home leave town, he said. But seeing everybody come together to create Stick Creek Kids "makes me proud."
Marti Beard, associate vice president of early childhood programs for the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, gave her congratulations "to this amazing community."
Beard said child care is "not just a mom issue." A child care and education center allows a community to grow and thrive.
Child care, she said, is about "so much more than babysitting and day care." When young children benefit from early childhood programs, "incredible things will happen." Educating and developing those children will change the trajectory of their lives.
Speakers said the Wood River facility will serve all families.
As a licensed day care provider, subsidies from the state can be provided to families. Stick Creek Kids will also offers grants and scholarships. Those efforts will make the center affordable for families who can't quite foot the bill on their own, board members said.
The child care and education center is licensed to serve up to 80 children. Stick Creek director Kristine VanHoosen hopes to serve 50 or 60 kids in the fall, when school resumes.
In her remarks, Troyer-Miller said Stick Creek Kids was built in response to a "severe child care shortage" in Wood River.
Since the Wood River Vision 2020 board did its community needs survey, two providers have retired and another one closed, she said in an interview. Wood River now has one licensed in-home provider in town and a couple out in the country.
Rather than being in competition with area caregivers, Stick Creek Kids wants to complement them, Troyer-Miller said.
"Because each family has a different need," and for some families, "that in-home experience is exactly what they need," because it meets their children's needs and their scheduling needs, she said.

“We want to work in tandem because we know a center’s not going to be good for everybody,” Troyer-Miller said said.
Recently, when Stick Creek staff members received CPR training, an in-home provider was welcome to join them.
When educational opportunities are given to Stick Creek teachers, other caregivers are certainly invited, Troyer-Miller said.
“So it’s really about collaboration to meet the needs of the community,” she said.
Three Wood River pastors blessed the building, staff and families. They were Matt Troyer-Miller of Wood River Mennonite Church, Craig Stephens of Grace Lutheran Church and Trudy Hanke of First United Methodist Church.
“Lord, we ask that this building be a place where love is received and given, learning happens, friendship blossoms, care is received, acceptance and safety are found,” Matt Troyer-Miller said in his prayer. “We ask that this space be one where dreams are nurtured, creativity is explored and imagination flourishes.”
In addition to Elizabeth Troyer-Miller and Arnett, the Stick Creek core leadership team consists of Chelsie Doane, Katie Gartner, Myriah Leisher, Lindsay Buechler and Mandi Morgan.
Among those recognized were three couples who led the building of the adjacent playground. They are Nick and Pat Lammers, Larry and Peg Krause and Kaye and Cathi Doane.
A quartet from Wood River High School performed the national anthem. The flag was raised by Jim Smith, Stan Bilslend and Dennis and Dan Wagoner of American Legion Post 314.
By Jeff Bahr

Hastings Tribune: Leaders tout plans for new truck stop, motel in Geneva

GENEVA — Roughly two decades ago, construction of a bypass around the city of Geneva on the newly reconfigured U.S. Highway 81 expressway separated many local businesses from the highway traffic that previously had rumbled right past their front doors.
The associated loss of business was hard for some of those establishments, and for the community as a whole, to absorb. Now, however, plans for a new truck stop/convenience store and nearby 12-room motel right along the bypass route may help Geneva reach out and provide hospitality to U.S. 81 travelers once again — and perhaps even draw some of them farther into town for additional commerce.
On Friday morning, developers and local officials were joined on the project site by state dignitaries for a ceremonial groundbreaking to kick off the development — a public/private partnership being led with around $1 million in public infrastructure work and followed up by nearly $3 million in private investment over the next year.
“This is the largest public-private partnership project in Geneva’s history,” said Geneva Mayor Eric Kamler, who welcomed participants and spectators to Friday’s groundbreaking near the corner of U.S. 81 and R Street on the north side of town.
Plans call for a 4,000-square-foot Good2Go truck stop/convenience store to be built by Lichti Bros. Oil Co., which is headquartered in Shickley, said Tim Lichti, president of the company.
The Good2Go station will have separate diesel and gasoline fueling islands, Lichti said. The store probably will have 10-15 employees and be open from early morning to late at night, he said.
Brandon Lichti, who is Tim’s nephew, will be the Geneva store manager.
Tim Lichti said he sees a lot of potential in the location, which is on the west side of the highway and

south of R Street.
The company intends for the store to serve not just highway travelers, but the local population, as well, Tim Lichti said.
“We’re going to depend on both the highway traffic and the local traffic,” he said.
Next door to the south will stand a new 12-room motel to be built by developer Walter Aschoff of Osmond, who is in the construction business and has initiated motel projects in other Nebraska communities.
Tim Lichti said that while the Good2Go and motel businesses will be separate, he and Aschoff have agreed that Good2Go employees will handle responsibilities related to checking in motel guests — which will reduce the amount of labor needed to keep the motel operating.
“It’ll be good for us, too,” Lichti said.
Kamler said the overall project, which is being referred to as “Genesis Drive,” has taken about 2 ½ years to put together — and everyone involved is hoping it leads to additional commercial and eventually residential development filling in to the south along the west side of the highway.
The development is possible because area farmer Robert Galusha was willing to sell the community about 34 acres of his land to help Geneva grow, Kamler said.
The city will build a winding 30-foot-wide street, to be called Genesis Drive, to serve the new development from R Street south. At first, just the northernmost 1,400 feet of the new street will be paved.
The city also will extend all utility services to support the new development area.
Getting the development off the ground included annexation to get all the property being acquired from Galusha into the city limits, Kamler said.
The city’s LB840 sales tax fund for economic development is being used to cover the public infrastructure costs. Property tax increment financing will capture roughly $35,000 annually over the coming years to help replenish that fund, the mayor said.
Earth moving and the street and infrastructure work are beginning now with VanKirk Brothers Construction of Sutton as general contractor. Completion of that work is expected by the end of August.
Tim Lichti said construction of the truck stop will follow.
“We’d like to get started this fall, and it’s be open next year,” he said.
Friday’s program included remarks by Lt. Gov. Mike Foley; Tony Goins, director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development; and state Sen. Tom Brandt of Plymouth, whose 32nd Legislative District includes Fillmore County.
Aschoff and Galusha also said a few words.
Aschoff said that it was people of goodwill working together that kept the development plans on track through all the necessary negotiations and rounds of governmental approval.
“We are excited to be joining the Geneva community here and be part of another project that’s locally partnered,” Aschoff said. “ ‘People’ made it happen.”
Foley and Brandt both mentioned all the development occurring in and around Geneva lately and credited the community for its efforts.
“There’s a lot going on here,” Brandt said. “You’re doing something right.”
City Administrator Kyle Svec said discussions about development on the north side of town have been under way throughout his 16-year tenure in city government, and he’s pleased to see those discussions bearing fruit.
“I’m thankful for all the people who surround me in this process,” Svec said. “I’m anxious to get this

thing started — and I can’t wait for that first cup of coffee.”
By Andy Raun

LJS: State lawmakers reject attempt to send resolution objecting to federal overreach to a different committee

State lawmakers Thursday rejected a motion from Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt to reassign a resolution objecting to federal government overreach to the Legislature's Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee.
Hunt sought to rereference the resolution (LR107) from Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte from the Executive Board, saying the subject matter of the document was the responsibility of the government committee.
The resolution, co-signed by 30 senators, objects to incursions by the federal government into everything from religious freedom and Second Amendment rights to elections, land usage and vaccinations.
Hunt said the majority of the issues raised in Groene's resolution were subjects typically referenced to the Government Committee, and argued lawmakers should adopt her motion to move the bill there.
Sen. Steve Halloran of Hastings, who sits on the Government Committee alongside Hunt, said the Omaha lawmaker wanted to send it to a committee where it would not be advanced to the floor.
He said during a debate last week to pull his resolution (LR14) adding Nebraska to the list of states calling for a constitutional convention of states from committee and onto the floor, Hunt discussed how the Government Committee was set up to kill many bills that came before it.
"I suggest she wants to send it back to Government so a 4-4 tie can kill it," Halloran said.
Hunt said the 4-4 break occurs on bills that affect election procedures and voting rights, where senators on the committee have fundamental differences in how to proceed.
Other senators said they supported Hunt's effort and were concerned that the resolution had been referenced to the Executive Board in the first place.
Omaha Sen. Steve Lathrop said the Executive Board, under the rules of the Legislature, doesn't have purview over the issues raised in Groene's resolution, and warned that lawmakers were diminishing the integrity of the institution.
According to the Legislature's website, the Executive Board has authority over constitutional amendments that govern the legislative process, the eligibility of candidates, senator salaries, term limits, legislative ethics and other matters that involve the Legislature.
"What we're doing here now is trying to pick a committee where this particular resolution will receive favorable treatment," Lathrop said. "This isn't how we ought to operate in this body."
Omaha Sen. John Cavanaugh said he had concerns with the language in the resolution, which he said incorrectly quoted passages from the Constitution and the Bill of Rights that would need major corrections.
"Words have meaning, words matter and we are subject to those words," Cavanaugh said.
After about a half-hour of debate, the Legislature voted down Hunt's amendment on a 24-14 vote.
By Chris Dunker

OWH: Legislature considers study of Platte River flooding, hike in non-resident park fees

LINCOLN — State lawmakers gave first-round approval Thursday to a $2 million study of mitigating flooding and enhancing economic development along the Lower Platte River, as well as around Lake McConaughy in western Nebraska and near Lewis and Clark Lake in northeast Nebraska.

But the 42-2 vote came after some senators raised questions about the high cost of such a study, and whether it will result in action or gather dust.

State Sen. Mike McDonnell of Omaha proposed the study, which, under an amendment adopted Thursday, will be called the "STAR WARS" committee. That was portrayed as a more fun name than its original: the "Statewide Tourism and Recreational Water Access and Resource Sustainability Special Committee."

McDonnell said the study was needed in light of the $3.4 billion in flood damage along the Platte and Missouri Rivers in 2019. That damage, he said, could have been reduced considerably by better levees and other controls along the Lower Platte, from Columbus to Plattsmouth. McDonnell emphasized that the study does not include a look at damming the Platte River — proposals to do that near Ashland have generated controversy in the past.

But a handful of critics questioned the need for such an expensive study.

Columbus Sen. Mike Moser, who voted "no" on the bill along with Thurston Sen. Joni Albrecht, said that the state's natural resources districts already study flood control and development issues, and that this would be "another study to be put on a shelf" and ignored.

"Maybe we should call it 'Noah's ark,'" Moser said, rather than STAR WARS. "It's down to earth. That's where the problem is."

North Platte Sen. Mike Groene also questioned the $2 million cost, which would be used for travel and hiring a consultant. He complained that the study was mostly about preserving a drinking water supply for Lincoln, and questioned why the study wasn't looking at a water issue in his district — diverting Platte River flows to enhance water supplies in southwest Nebraska.

But several senators came to the defense of STAR WARS. Sens. Dan Hughes of Venango said Lake McConaughy has untapped development potential that could be identified by the study. Creighton Sen. Tim Gragert made similar comments about the bluffs along the Missouri River in Knox County.

Lincoln Sen. Mike Hilgers, the speaker of the Legislature, pledged to discuss changes in Legislative Bill 406 before it returns for second-round debate.

Also advanced from first-round debate on Thursday was a bill that would allow an increase in non-resident state park entry permits, from the current $45 a year to $60. Hughes said that most of the extra fee revenue will be used for additional law enforcement and improvements at Lake McConaughy, which has struggled with overcrowded and dangerous conditions on big holiday weekends.

Hughes said that 90% of the state's non-resident park stickers are purchased at Lake McConaughy, which draws huge crowds of Colorado residents to its vast, white beaches.

By Paul Hammel

AP: Rental protections in Nebraska win final OK from lawmakers

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Domestic violence victims who are living with their abuser in a rental property could break their lease and leave without penalties under a bill that won final approval Thursday from Nebraska lawmakers.

Senators passed the measure through the last of three required votes, 43-3. The bill by Sen. John Cavanaugh, of Omaha, includes other tenant protections, such as requiring landlords to give at least

24 hours of notice before entering a tenant's apartment.
The bill was inspired by incidents in Nebraska where women left abusive partners but were forced by their landlord to keep paying rent while their partner remained in the apartment.
It also would require the Nebraska Supreme Court to submit a report to lawmakers every six months spelling out the number of eviction proceedings initiated, the number of landlords and tenants represented by attorneys and the number of evictions granted. The data would be broken down by county, giving lawmakers a better sense of eviction trends outside of the Omaha and Lincoln areas.

OWH: It's official: Joanne Li is next UNO chancellor

A few hours before 40,000 fans made their trek to Memorial Stadium for the Cornhuskers' spring football game Saturday, Joanne Li drew her own fanfare as the University of Nebraska Board of Regents unanimously approved her selection as the University of Nebraska at Omaha chancellor.
In a special meeting held at Varner Hall in Lincoln, University of Nebraska President Ted Carter lauded Li's accomplishments and remarked on her historic selection as the first Asian American to hold an executive leadership position in the University of Nebraska system as well as the first woman of color to be the UNO chancellor when she fully assumes the position on July 1.
Carter noted Li, 56, was selected after a wide-ranging search conducted by a diverse search committee. She was selected as the priority candidate on March 31.
"This is truly an exciting day in the history of the University of Nebraska," Carter said. "We began our search with a clear goal in mind: Find the next superstar to lead UNO into its next chapter of growth and success."
Carter said Li possesses all the qualities the committee sought. Those qualities included a proven leader who is capable of engaging with the university's diverse constituencies, a candidate who understands the university's mission as well as a person who exhibits inclusive leadership and displays a record of advancing equity, access and diversity.
"We have found Dr. Joanne Li as a leader who embodies all of these qualities," Carter said.
Li is scheduled to earn a $430,000 salary, which Carter said puts her on the lower end of the national average of her peers. Carter told The World-Herald other contract details are being worked out.
In a statement, Lee said she was humbled by the feedback she received during a 30-day public vetting period.
"My first task is to continue listening and learning," she said. "Then, together, we'll work to turn our ideas into actions that create even more opportunities for students and families, deepen our connections to our community, and grow the economic and social well-being for Omaha and Nebraska for generations to come. Let's hit the ground running together."
Li's selection is the latest step in a decorated career that most recently saw her significantly turn around the graduation rate as the dean at Florida International's College of Business. Under her watch, the college's graduation rate improved from 29% in 2017 to what is expected to be a 70% rate this year.
"She is absolutely focused on students," Carter said. "I have heard her say countless times that the needs of our students should drive everything we do. That resonated with me. I think it has resonated with the UNO community as well."
Carter said Li brings an empathetic nature to the job and understands the struggles students sometimes face. Li first came to the United States from Hong Kong in the 1980s. Li previously said she was able to complete her first semester of community college only because of a $600 gift from

her best friend.
Li eventually landed scholarships that allowed her to make it through the university system.
"She understands the impact of what having a college education means for a first-generation student," Carter said.
Li will succeed current UNO Chancellor Jeffrey Gold. Gold will continue to be the University of Nebraska Medical Center chancellor and will also become the NU system's executive vice president and provost.
By Dan Crisler

AP: New chancellor chosen for University of Nebraska at Omaha

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The University of Nebraska at Omaha's next chancellor will be the first Asian American to hold an executive leadership position in the state's university system.
The University of Nebraska's Board of Regents unanimously endorsed Joanne Li as UNO's new chancellor on Saturday, the Omaha World-Herald reports. University of Nebraska President Ted Carter said the 56-year-old Li is a proven leader with a record of significant accomplishments. For instance, the graduation rate at Florida International's College of Business, where Li was dean, improved from 29% in 2017 to what is expected to be a 70% rate this year.
"She is absolutely focused on students," Carter said. "I have heard her say countless times that the needs of our students should drive everything we do. That resonated with me. I think it has resonated with the UNO community as well."
Li is set to earn $430,000 a year but other details of her contract are still being worked out. Carter said Li's salary will be at the lower end of the national average of her peers.

OWH: UNL to offer two-week pre-session in January, pushing back spring semester

University of Nebraska-Lincoln students will be offered a two-week, pre-session of courses for early January 2022 that will push the university's spring semester back by one week.
Recently approved by the University of Nebraska Board of Regents, the spring pre-session will run Jan. 3 to Jan. 14. It is meant to help students apply skills and knowledge in career-oriented contexts, prep for upper-level courses and explore topics related to the "Grand Challenges" introduced in the university's strategic plan, according to a press release from UNL.
The Grand Challenges, according to the university's website, "are problems or opportunities of such magnitude that, if addressed, will positively impact society. They have their origins in complex causes and require a combination of transformative, interdisciplinary approaches to solve."
Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, UNL offered a three-week session before the start of the spring semester currently in progress, according to the Lincoln Journal Star. The session was part of a compressed academic calendar intended to reduce safety risks by eliminating extended breaks that students often use to travel.
The 2022 spring pre-session courses may be offered in person or online. Most courses will be offered as zero-, one- or two-credit courses. Any three-credit courses would overlap with the regular semester in order to meet all credit-hour requirements but would be conducted so as not to conflict with regularly scheduled coursework during the spring term, according to the university.
The spring 2022 semester will begin Jan. 18, following Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Spring 2022 commencement will move back one week to May 13 and May 14. The university's spring break will

run March 14 to March 18.
Dates for the 2022 summer sessions will not change.
By Jessica Wade

LJS: Feds pledge $50 million to help remove failed Spencer Dam

The federal government is sending Nebraska $50 million to help remove what's left of the Spencer Dam after its deadly failure during the flood of spring 2019.
The Federal Emergency Management Agency initially announced Friday the $50 million would help the hydroelectric dam's owner, Nebraska Public Power District, "restore the facilities back to pre-disaster design, capacity and function."
But that was wrong, NPPD spokesman Mark Becker said. And he wanted to be clear: "FEMA knows we were never going to rebuild."
Instead, he said, FEMA will send the $50 million to the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency to help the utility pay for decommissioning the northeast Nebraska dam — tearing it out and restoring the river banks. A FEMA spokeswoman confirmed later Friday the funding could be spent on demolition.
Restoring the 90-year-old dam would cost far more than it's worth, Becker said. Spencer Dam generated just three megawatts of electricity; by comparison, NPPD's coal-fired Gerald Gentleman Station near Sutherland generates nearly 1,400 megawatts.
And the utility was in the process of selling the dam — and its water rights — to a group of Natural Resources Districts when it collapsed in March 2019 under the pressure of the Niobrara River, which had swollen with floodwater and broken ice.
The resulting wall of water swept away part of the U.S. 281 bridge, a riverside bar and the home of 71-year-old Kenny Angel.
His body was never recovered, and, in June 2019, a judge declared him dead.
His widow, Linda Angel, sued NPPD and the Department of Natural Resources in October 2019, alleging their negligence led to his death. Specifically, her lawsuit said they failed to properly manage, operate, inspect or test the dam, prevent its collapse or warn Angel about the danger it could fail.
That lawsuit is proceeding, and a pretrial conference is scheduled for January 2022, according to court records.
Becker did not have a cost estimate for decommissioning the dam, and he couldn't say when the work would begin or how long it would last.
"We didn't know how much money we were even going to get," he said. "Once we see some funds, we'll start doing the scheduling."
By Peter Salter

OWH: Nebraska gets $50 million for dam destroyed during 2019 floods

LINCOLN — Federal officials are giving Nebraska more than $50 million to work on the flood-damaged Spencer Dam on the Niobrara River.
The Federal Emergency Management Agency announced the award on Friday. The money is intended to cover 75% of the cost of the project, with the rest to come from state and local sources.
A surge of ice boulders and floodwater overwhelmed the 93-year-old dam during the disastrous

March 2019 flood, causing the structure to collapse and killing a man who lived just below it. Some ice chunks were measured up to 2 feet thick and 20 feet long after the dam's collapse.
Mark Becker, a spokesman for the Nebraska Public Power District, which owns the dam, said nothing has been done with the remains of the structure since then. The Niobrara River has cut a new route around what is left.
He said the district plans to decommission the dam and remove as much of the structure as possible. Detailed plans will be drawn up in the next few months, now that the federal money has been approved.
FEMA's Public Assistance Program provides grants to state and local governments and certain nonprofits to assist them with the response to and recovery from disasters. Specifically, the program provides assistance for debris removal, emergency protective measures and permanent restoration of infrastructure.
The 2019 storm caused major damage across Nebraska. In the case of Spencer Dam, heavy rain on frozen ground followed by a blizzard created a record runoff, which broke up ice on the Niobrara. Large chunks of ice floating in the floodwaters overtopped the embankment and spillway structure and breached the embankment in two locations.
An investigative panel formed by the Association of State Dam Safety Officials concluded in 2020 that while there was nothing dam operators could have done to prevent the dam's demise the night it happened, such a catastrophe should have been foreseen due to a history of similar "ice runs" on the river.
Floodwaters cut a new channel for the river and washed away a tavern, a house and a bait shop as well as a large section of U.S. Highway 281 just below the structure. A new highway bridge was completed in October.
Kenny Angel, who lived in the house below the dam, was swept away by floodwaters and has been declared dead.
By Martha Stoddard

AP: Nebraska gets $50M for dam destroyed during 2019 floods

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Federal officials are giving Nebraska more than $50 million to work on a Niobrara River dam that collapsed during the disastrous March 2019 flooding, killing a man who lived just below it.
The Omaha World-Herald reports that the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced the award Friday. The money is intended to cover 75% of the cost of the project, with the rest to come from state and local sources.
The 93-year-old Spencer Dam was overwhelmed in a surge of ice boulders, with some chunks measured up to 2 feet (0.61 meters) thick and 20 feet (6.10 meters) long. The storm also caused other major damage across Nebraska.
Mark Becker, a spokesman for the Nebraska Public Power District, which owns the dam, said nothing has been done with the remains of the structure since then. The Niobrara River has cut a new route around what is left.
He said the district plans to decommission the dam and remove as much of the structure as possible. Detailed plans will be drawn up in the next few months, now that the federal money has been approved.

OWH: WWII Blitz brothers among honorees at 'Honor and Remember' event Monday

Twins Leo and Rudolph Blitz of Lincoln were born together, grew up together, and died together at age 20 when the ship they served on was sunk at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

And finally, in 2019, they were buried together in their hometown after Defense Department anthropologists identified their remains, which had been buried in Hawaii for decades in graves marked "unknown."

Now, the twins from the ill-fated USS Oklahoma are being honored and remembered together, too.

On Monday, Nebraska's Honor and Remember chapter will present a pair of the organization's Gold Star flags — each inscribed with one of the twins' names — to Kris Blitz Shelledy, Leo and Rudolph's niece.

The ceremony will take place at 11:05 a.m. at The Pines Country Club in Valley, followed immediately at noon by the "Swing for Nebraska Fallen Heroes II" golf scramble, a fundraising event for the nonprofit Honor and Remember group.

"I'm looking forward to it. But it's almost like reliving it again," said Shelledy, formerly of Omaha, who now lives in New Market, Alabama. "It warms my heart that other people care about what happened."

The Honor and Remember flags were created by George Lutz of Chesapeake, Virginia, after his son, Pfc. George A. Lutz II, died in Iraq. Lutz conceived and created the flags to "Honor and Remember" service members who gave their lives as a result of war. He later added "Honor and Sacrifice" flags for the families of first responders who die in the line of duty.

The flags are free to families who request them through the website Honorandremember.org. The cost of about $400 per flag is paid for through donations. The Nebraska chapter has presented nearly 200 of the flags so far, said Jim Meier, the chapter's director.

The recipients of 56 of those flags will join the ceremony for a roll call of the fallen, reciting the name of their loved one while holding the flag. They represent service members who died in every conflict from World War I through Iraq and Afghanistan.

The list includes friends, family or representatives of 1st Lt. Jarvis Offutt (namesake of Offutt Air Force Base), Marine Pfc. Edward "Babe" Gomez and Lance Cpl. Miguel Keith (both Medal of Honor recipients) and Ens. Nile Kinnick (winner of football's Heisman Trophy), who were all from Omaha.

The 34 golf teams in the scramble will each compete in the name of one or more of the fallen warriors. Some of them will include a relative.

Most of the past year's events included a dinner for the Gold Star families along with a walk and an outdoor event, such as a concert.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, last year's dinner had to be canceled. Several months later, Meier said, the event was rescheduled as a charity golf tournament because that could be conducted more safely outdoors. He said it was a success.

"We were encouraged, both by the golfers and the families, to do it again," Meier said.

Barb Yllescas-Vorthmann of Treynor, Iowa, lost her son, Capt. Robert Yllescas, in Afghanistan in 2008. She is a leader of Gold Star Families of Iowa and Nebraska. She said the families enjoy the event and take comfort in one another's company.

"We have each other to lean on. This is our way of healing," she said.

The Blitz family suffered for decades, knowing little about the fate of twins Leo and Rudolph. They were two of 12 children of Henry John and Marie Christine Blitz of Lincoln.

The brothers dropped out of high school and joined the Navy together May 4, 1938. Both were

assigned to the USS Oklahoma, a 1916-vintage battleship based at Pearl Harbor.
On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, as many as eight Japanese torpedoes struck the Oklahoma on its port side. Within minutes the ship rolled over at its mooring, killing 429 sailors and Marines — nearly one-third of the crew.
Only 36 bodies were initially identified; most were trapped below decks and their remains recovered months later, when the ship was refloated and salvaged. The mud- and oil-soaked bones were buried together, and a postwar effort to identify more of the men failed. Ultimately they were reburied in 61 caskets at Honolulu's Punchbowl Cemetery.
The Navy informed the Blitz family on Christmas Eve 1941 that Rudolph was dead and Leo missing, though Rudolph's remains were never turned over. There's evidence that Rudolph was mistakenly buried as an unknown because of a clerical error during the fear and confusion that followed the Pearl Harbor attack.
Years later, Harry Hanson, a sailor assigned to the same duty station as Rudolph, wrote that they had been together as the attack unfolded but became separated. He believed Rudolph had gone below decks to find Leo.
"I never saw him again," Hanson wrote.
Shelledy said the Blitz family was profoundly affected by the twins' deaths — particularly her father, Robert Blitz, who was 13 at the time. He joined the Navy at 17 and made it a career.
"It was because of the twins' deaths — that's why he went in," she said. "He had a vendetta. He wanted to avenge his brothers."
Robert Blitz died in 1992.
After years of requests by USS Oklahoma survivors, the Defense Department disinterred the unidentified remains from the Punchbowl in 2015 and brought them to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Lab at Offutt Air Force Base for identification.
The Blitz brothers were identified and buried in a family plot at Lincoln Memorial Cemetery in 2019. Their only surviving sibling, Betty Pitsch, said at the time she remembered her brothers "with tears in my eyes." She died a year later, at age 94.
Shelledy said the Blitz family held a large family gathering at the time.
"It was bittersweet," she said. "It kind of unleashed feelings and emotions that you didn't know you had."
Of the 394 USS Oklahoma sailors and Marines who were buried as unknowns, 340 identifications have now been announced as of Friday — including 33 in the past two months.
On Monday, Carrie Brown and Carrie LeGarde, two of the anthropologists involved in the Oklahoma ID project, will stand with Shelledy as the Honor and Remember flags are presented to a relative of two of the sailors they helped identify.
"It means a lot that somebody else cares," Shelledy said. "That they see the importance in recognizing those who lost their lives."
By Steve Liewer

OWH: A town renewed: Factory in tiny DeWitt, Nebraska, putting tools on the market again

DEWITT, Neb. — As 1,300 tons of force pounded steel into tools here last week, every bang was a welcome sound for a southeast Nebraska town eager to get back into the manufacturing world.
Just two weeks ago, Malco Products launched sales of its Eagle Grip line of locking pliers, produced

in the same plant that turned out the similar Vise-Grip tools for generations.
Vise-Grip had been a source of community pride since William Petersen invented the signature product and opened the plant in 1924. But that pride took a hit back in 2008, when corporate owner Newell Rubbermaid outsourced production of Vise-Grips to China. The move cost about 330 employees their jobs and left the town of almost 500 people searching for an identity.
Malco, a 70-year-old company based in Annandale, Minnesota, has been working since 2016 to acquire the old Vise-Grip factory and start producing the new Eagle Grip line of industrial tools in DeWitt.
Malco President Rich Benninghoff said it's the start of a new era for his company.
"Reinvigorating the DeWitt facility has been a full-team company effort," he said. "There's been a lot of collaboration and team involvement in getting the products to the shelves."
The four Eagle Grip products launched so far are currently available on Amazon. Benninghoff said plans are in the works to sell Eagle Grip products through other retailers.
The DeWitt plant formally reopened in October 2018 with a town celebration. Since then, Malco has invested tens of millions of dollars into renovating the factory, purchasing the equipment and materials and, of course, hiring a local workforce.
"It took us from 2018 until now to get to the quantity and quality that we liked and wanted to sell," said Eric Peterson, the company's director of sales and marketing.
Malco's investment was bolstered by a matching $500,000 grant from the state's Nebraska Advantage program.
For the DeWitt community, the Eagle Grip product launch completes the journey back to being a place of manufacturing prowess.
"When the town found out somebody was interested in that building, there was a buzz that has been going on ever since," said Randy Badman, a 72-year-old lifelong DeWitt resident who serves as a consultant to Malco. "Everybody was so excited."
DeWitt residents and Eagle Grip employees say Malco's employment practices have reinforced their optimism. Malco has provided workers with salaries, benefits and incentives, along with the family atmosphere they once enjoyed under the Petersens' ownership.
"Malco is so identical (to the Petersen family), it's actually scary," said Badman, a former tooling manager for Vise-Grip. "The Malco company treats their employees just like the Petersens did. They make you feel so comfortable."
Those who work at Eagle Grip are not just employees, but also investors. Each employee has an ownership stake in Eagle Grip, allowing them to earn bonuses each quarter and year, provided that the company meets its goals.
While the days are long gone when the majority of DeWitt's workforce could count on a job at the local factory, Malco has vastly exceeded the state's requirement that the company hire 30 employees within three years of the October 2018 reopening. Just 2½ years later, about 60 employees are on the Eagle Grip payroll. Fifteen of those employees worked for Vise-Grip.
Crediting the strong work ethic of Nebraskans, Peterson said Malco looked to fill a void in the market, which had been saturated by locking pliers shipped from overseas — tools derided as cheap by local employees — but offered few by American manufacturers.
"There was a pretty severe outcry for high-quality locking pliers again," he said. "We saw that as an opportunity."
The company's products have already drawn five-star Amazon reviews. Eagle Grip employees say customers can expect quality from their products.

“We might even be above where we used to be” under the Petersens’ ownership, said former Vise-Grip and current Eagle Grip employee Lyle Fink, 55. “These tools are the strongest on the market.”
Fink cited advances in technology and materials for the improved products. The factory produces and ships about 300 to 600 tools each day.
“For the average person, these could be the last tools you’ll ever need to buy,” said plant manager Kurtis Voelker.
As Malco intends to launch five more Eagle Grip products throughout the year, other businesses in DeWitt have also benefited from the factory restarting production.
Connie Fishburn, manager of the downtown convenience store DeWitt Quick, indicated that the increased business sparked by factory employees is allowing her to explore different items to sell, including craft beer.
“It’s definitely good to see production come back and not see the building sit empty anymore,” she said.
Village Clerk and Treasurer Moria Holly said that it’s too soon to say exactly what kind of impact Eagle Grip will have on the town’s tax revenue but that the plant is almost certain to improve the fiscal health of a town that, according to Badman’s estimations, has seen property tax valuations decline by about $8 million since the plant closed 13 years ago.
“The fact that the factory is there will increase our property valuations,” said Badman, who has served 31 years on the Village Board.
University of Nebraska-Lincoln economist Eric Thompson said DeWitt’s recent rebound fits into a larger story about the manufacturing industry in Nebraska, which is projected to add 3,200 jobs this year after losing 2,200 in 2020.
The state has about 100,000 manufacturing jobs.
“It’s wonderful news they were able to find a new tenant for that facility in DeWitt,” Thompson said. “But it isn’t uncommon to find new tenants for facilities that fall out of use. The experienced, skilled workforce is still there.”
Last year in Nebraska, according to Thompson, the average manufacturing floor employee earned $40,560 per year.
“Those manufacturing facilities generate middle-class jobs,” he said.
DeWitt residents are glad to have the local factory up and running again.
“It’s nice to have employment back in town,” Holly said. “I know it’s been a huge relief for a lot of people who live in DeWitt to have that workforce back in town.”
By Dan Crisler

OWH: Metro Community College offering free courses to Nebraska high school students

Metropolitan Community College has unveiled a tempting offer for Nebraska high school students who want a jump-start on college credits.
The college’s Board of Governors approved a resolution Tuesday to use federal COVID-19 relief money to cover tuition and books for Nebraska high school students taking courses this summer.
Enrollment in the college took a hit last summer as the pandemic raged, and officials hope their offer will pull in thousands of students.
The college saw about a 15% drop in summer enrollment from 2019 to 2020, said Bill Owen, the college’s vice president for strategic initiatives.
They hope to make that up.

“If we’re truly in recovery mode, and we hope we are, we think we’ll see a return to those numbers,” he said.
Typically, high school students who enroll in the college’s CollegeNow program pay $33 per credit hour — half the full rate.
This summer, students will be allowed to attend courses for free. Students will be responsible for tools or other required supplies.
The CollegeNow program is designed for high school students to jump-start their college education. Each class is taught by faculty on campus or online. College officials are paying for the program with federal money from the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund.
CollegeNow courses are transferrable to colleges and universities, but credit acceptance is up to the receiving school, Owen said.
With the University of Nebraska at Omaha and other regional institutions, those transfer paths are well defined, he said.
Metro also has relationships with hundreds of universities and colleges, and largely the general education requirements, like English, math and social sciences, will transfer, he said.
“So if a kid already knows I’m going off to the university this fall but I want to get a head start, they’re going to want to take classes that are on that transfer path,” he said.
The pandemic caused many high school students to fall behind or miss out on the CollegeNow offerings, said Chuck Chevalier, associate vice president of secondary partnerships and enrollment management.
“This initiative will help students reach their academic and career goals, despite setbacks caused by COVID-19,” Chevalier said.
A 10-week summer session will start June 6 and end Aug. 16. There will also be two five-week sessions, one running June 6 to July 12, the other July 13 to Aug. 16.
Whether a student gets high school credit for taking the course is up to the high school, he said.
By Joe Dejka

LJS: Ord man sues the city for filing lawsuit against him over letters to city officials

An Ord man is suing the town for his attorney fees and is seeking punitive damages for filing a lawsuit against him last year to try to get him to stop writing letters and emails to city officials and the police department that they called "burdensome."
The city lost the suit. Now, Guy Brock is suing them.
In the lawsuit filed this week in U.S. District Court of Nebraska in Lincoln, Brock's attorney, J.L. Spray, said during the last decade Brock has had a practice of writing letters to the city of Ord and its elected representatives related to city government.
On March 4, 2020, the city filed a lawsuit against him in Valley County District Court seeking a restraining order or an injunction to stop him from "sending communication of any kind to the City of Ord and the Ord Police Department unless directly related to a city service or other city function related specifically to the Defendant and his property," City Attorney Heather Sikyta wrote in the complaint.
She said Brock's letters and emails had "increasingly become harassing and burdensome" to the city and the police department.
In them, he alleged wrongful conduct by city officials, employees and police officers that she said either were unfounded or had already been handled internally.

On Oct. 21, 2019, Ord Police Chief Jay Welch sent a letter to Brock telling him his constant harassment must stop.
But Brock kept writing, Sikyta said. First on Dec. 5, 2019, to Mayor Dan Petska about a ballot initiative regarding police services. Then, on Jan. 29, 2020, to Welch asking about a traffic stop earlier that month.
She said unless the judge stopped Brock, he would cause "great and irreparable" damage to the reputation of elected officials, city employees and their family members.
On May 12, 2020, Valley County District Karin L. Noakes granted Brock's motion to dismiss the lawsuit, finding that the facts the plaintiff alleges were "insufficient as a matter of law."
In the lawsuit filed this week, Brock sued the city, the mayor and city attorney alleging they retaliated against Brock for exercising free speech and petitioning his elected and appointed representatives.
Spray said Brock was forced to hire an attorney at his own expense "in order to defend his rights to speak freely and to petition his government."
He said Brock's letter-writing was protected by the First Amendment, and the city's actions were meant to chill Brock and others from engaging in constitutionally protected activities.
"By virtue of his rights to freedom of speech and to petition his government, Mr. Brock has a clearly established right to be free from suits filed against him by state actors attempting to restrain those rights or retaliate against him for exercising those rights," Spray wrote in the new lawsuit.
He is seeking $2,686 that Brock spent on attorney fees, plus punitive damages to punish the city.
Sikyta didn't return a request for comment on the lawsuit.
Ord is a town of 2,300 people about 60 miles northwest of Grand Island.
By Lori Pilger

OWH Editorial: Omaha police should adopt early release of body camera footage

Last month's tortured release of police video of an Omaha officer shooting Kenneth Jones showed inconsistencies and unnecessary complexity in policies and laws related to making such footage public.
The Omaha Police Department and the Nebraska Legislature have work to do if they are to meet their stated goals of real transparency in such cases. With heightened public attention — and tension — about police shootings, it's important that these issues be addressed.
Jones was shot and killed by an officer on Nov. 19 after ignoring orders and reaching in his pocket for a gun during a traffic stop.
The case was reviewed by a grand jury, which declined to indict the officers involved.
Police Chief Todd Schmaderer, who advocated strongly for both body cameras for his officers and for a 2016 law intended to make grand jury deliberations transparent, promised in November to release the video after the grand jury work was done.
But when it came time for that, what the public initially got instead was a lot of legal nuance. The Police Department at first denied written requests to release the video even after the grand jury decision was made public, even though it has absolute discretion to do so.
The district court clerk then scheduled a viewing of the video for reporters and some members of the public but denied broader distribution because the 2016 law says "no copies of exhibits or transcripts shall be made available."
The next day, the Police Department released the video, citing a different law that it said required

the release since the clerk had disclosed its contents.
The problem with all this is that both the body cameras and the grand jury law are meant to create transparency, accountability and public faith in the process for evaluating police conduct.
Under the clerk's interpretation of the law, that office would need to continually schedule private showings of grand jury material to any member of the public who wished to see it at any time. That creates an undue burden on both the public, which pays for every aspect of police work, and the clerk's office, which has plenty of other work to do.
The Legislature should revisit this provision and simply allow release of grand jury material if no indictment is returned.
More immediately, Omaha police should create a policy with extreme bias toward releasing video footage in such cases as soon as possible — as a number of other departments do.
Footage from police shootings in Columbus, Ohio; suburban Minneapolis; and Chicago, among others, were made public soon after shootings just last month.
Omaha police can do so, too. Deputy City Attorney Bernard in den Bosch told World-Herald reporters that, while investigative records can be withheld, no state law prevents a government agency from releasing body camera footage or other public records at any time.
"The Police Department always has the ability to release it," in den Bosch said. "At the end of the day, if we pick and choose what we release, then we're going to be accused of acting in a biased manner."
Exactly. But the department already chooses to release still images from footage — in effect cherry-picking bits that it wants the public to see.
In these fraught times, withholding video only raises suspicions that the police have something to hide. It's critical that the department be consistent and show that it continues to merit our trust.

OWH Editorial: The timing is right to create a pedestrian-friendlier Old Market

Omaha History Detective Bob Marks, who has been writing a weekly column for The World-Herald, hit the nail on the head Sunday: "The only thing detracting from the ambiance of the Old Market is the automobile."
He proposed closing Howard Street to vehicle traffic from 10th to 12th Streets, and 11th Street from Harney to Jackson, but the specific details aren't as important as the concept, which we strongly encourage the city and Old Market merchants to study.
Omahans properly love and take pride in the Old Market, which 50-plus years ago was a pioneering conversion of warehouses and industrial space into urban shopping and nightlife.
It's been a draw for locals and visitors all that time, as it's evolved from something of a curiosity and hippie hangout to a family friendly destination that manages to be both gritty and upscale. The Old Market is a spot to find Star Wars figures, snarky T-shirts and real art; to grab an ice cream cone, a local brew or have an anniversary dinner.
That's a charming and quirky mix, but the district also is a bit down in the mouth, with vacant and worn spots. It faces competition from Aksarben Village, the reviving Blackstone and north downtown areas; old neighborhoods such as Dundee and Benson; and coming developments such as the rebuilt Crossroads and Heartwood Preserve.
These next couple years are a particularly opportune time to refresh the Old Market, as commerce rebounds from the pandemic and the city reworks Gene Leahy Mall and its riverfront, adding a science museum and numerous new features.

Those attractions, set to be completed in 2022-23, will bring residents and visitors downtown anew. Without much expense, as Marks pointed out, the Old Market could offer an enjoyable, fresh experience — a strolling shopping, dining and entertainment district without the awkward dance pedestrians must do now with cars rolling through or cruising for parking places.

We know this works, and we know it's pleasant. Cities large and small all over the world offer such areas. Boston; Boulder; Iowa City; Aspen; Burlington, Vermont, and many other communities have created wonderful pedestrian malls.

Imagine dining not adjacent to Howard Street, but in the center of Howard Street, or playing cornhole on 11th. Winter could feature ice sculptures and a holiday festival with enclosed pop-up shops.

Cars trolling for parking spots account for about a third of vehicles in congested areas and contribute heavily to pollution and greenhouse gas emissions — while you might be trying to enjoy a meal al fresco. Care for a little carbon monoxide with your appetizer?

That's not to mention the steady noise from tires on the Old Market's charming bricks, the periodic roar of motorcycles or monster trucks, and the joy of listening to someone's fender-shaking bass while trying to carry on a conversation.

Details can be worked out among merchants and the city. Deliveries can be arranged. Electric shuttles could be available — and could be an entrepreneurial opportunity — for those who need help navigating a few blocks from abundant nearby parking.

We can boost the Old Market's ambiance and relevance as a keystone of a vital downtown. This clear opportunity is before us.

OWH Lance Morgan: My uncle was denied burial in Sioux City because he was a Native American

Nebraska's history is filled with interesting stories about Native Americans. Perhaps the most well-known is the story of Ponca Chief Standing Bear, who was tried in court in 1879 for returning to his homeland to bury his son against federal orders. The U.S. attorney had argued that Standing Bear was not a person under the law.

Standing Bear is famously quoted as saying in court, "I am a man." The court agreed for the first time that an Indian is a person. Representing Nebraska, a statue of Chief Standing Bear is on display in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall.

The Omaha Tribe also has a great historic figure. Dr. Susan La Flesche was the first female Native American doctor, and she opened a hospital on the Omaha reservation in 1913. While Dr. La Flesche's achievements as a physician are remarkable, she was not considered an American citizen because of her race. For her many accomplishments, she will soon have her own statue on Nebraska's Centennial Mall in Lincoln.

I am a member of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. We have lots of great figures from our historic and modern era, and I want to share one that is important to me and the Winnebago people. My great uncle was U.S. Army Sgt. First Class John Rice. He was awarded the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart for his heroism in the Pacific Theater in World War II. For his extraordinary actions leading a squad of soldiers in one of the opening battles in Korea, he was awarded the Korean Service Medal, United Nations Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Korean Presidential Unit Citation and the Republic of Korea War Service Medal.

At age 36, Sgt. Rice was killed in action in Korea on Sept. 6, 1950. His remains were not returned to

his wife until the summer of 1951. His wife, Evelyn, was a White person living in Sioux City. She searched for a place to bury her husband and was turned down by the local cemeteries because Sgt. Rice was a Native American.

Mrs. Rice did finally secure a plot in a private cemetery when the employees assumed that because she was white that Sgt. Rice was too. During the service, my great uncle received full military honors with a three-volley salute. The service had not yet concluded when one of the employees of the cemetery noticed several Native Americans in attendance. Upon discovering Sgt. Rice was a Native American, the service was halted. The widowed Mrs. Rice was forced to endure the indignity of removing her husband from his own grave and leaving the cemetery with his body.

Harry Truman was president in 1951. He heard what happened and chastised the "White only" policy of the local cemetery. He ordered the remains of Sgt. Rice to be brought to Arlington National Cemetery for burial with full military honors.

Sgt. Rice was a war hero and made the ultimate sacrifice for his country. However, his death fighting for his country mattered less than his status as a Native American when it came to burying his body. I can only imagine the trauma that his widow and our relatives experienced when they were forced to remove this Winnebago patriot from his grave. Their anger, indignation and pain are impossible for me to fathom.

My grandfather served in World War II. My father served in the Vietnam War and I also served in the U.S. Army. While in the Army, I served with people from rural Nebraska, the backwoods of Louisiana, the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and even a guy from Bulgaria who joined the Army so he could become a U.S. citizen. The U.S. military is a melting pot of people from all backgrounds and cultures. We were just American soldiers. When someone is shooting at you, nobody cares about your skin color.

Our country has come a long way on race relations since Chief Standing Bear's trial and Sgt. Rice's funeral, but we clearly still have work to do. We must remember these painful stories, acknowledge the past, and work together toward a better future where we are all just Americans.

Lance Morgan is a member of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska and the CEO of Ho-Chunk Inc. He is a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Harvard Law School.

OWH Midlands Voices: What a challenge Omaha-area educators have met during the COVID crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted students' lives — emotionally, socially and academically. After schools closed in the spring of 2020 when COVID-19 first shook our world, one study found that the math achievement of students dropped five to 10 points from the fall of 2019 to the fall of 2020. The role of teachers in helping students navigate these challenges and continue to learn has been critically important. Teachers have loyally faced the additional challenges of COVID-19 while balancing its impact on their own lives.

With Teacher Appreciation Day on Tuesday, it's an appropriate time to recognize the impact that teachers have on the lives of their students. These impacts are always important and significant, but perhaps never more so than in the past year.

Looking back at the 2020-2021 academic year, there were countless ups and downs, unknowns, and sometimes overwhelming uncertainty. There were times when we as a society and community didn't know if, when and how to get students and teachers back into the classroom. In my 48 years in education, I don't recall anything impacting education like the COVID-19 pandemic has. Yet,

educators persevered. Teachers found ways to engage students during remote learning, transitioned their lessons from face-to-face to remote format and then back again, and kept the health and safety of their students at the forefront.

At Avenue Scholars in particular, our teachers and staff have worked hard to help students overcome individual barriers and continue to develop academically, personally, and from a career readiness standpoint. Our career coaches have safely but steadfastly continued to provide students with in-person support, despite the risks of the pandemic. They've visited job sites to help students secure work and assess on-the-job performance, and even made home visits to provide students with necessary items, including technology devices to help them remain connected during the pandemic.

We greatly appreciate these efforts, along with those of the dedicated teachers and staff in our nine partner high schools and Metropolitan Community College. To all educators in the Omaha metro area, your work has made a positive impact in students' lives — thank you!

While teachers' work is greatly appreciated, there is still much to be done. Despite the hard work and commitment of our teachers, the pandemic has negatively affected the learning and well-being of many students. These impacts will be felt long after the pandemic ends. Just as has been the case during the pandemic, students need their teachers more than ever. We cannot thank educators at every level enough for their heroic work and for what will be asked of them going forward.

I want to encourage our community to continue supporting our local teachers by showing gratitude and providing encouragement.

Kenneth M. Bird, Ed.D., has served since June 2008 as the president and chief executive officer of Avenue Scholars, a nonprofit entity that serves youth education in Omaha. He was superintendent of Westside Community Schools from 1992 until 2008.

OWH Midlands Voices: Action needed to remedy systemic racism in education

Are we ready to talk about how systemic racism is showing up in schools?

For us to advance as a society, it is necessary to do the work of confronting instances of racism. Educational institutions are especially pivotal in leading this work, as this is where the primary investments in our human capital begin. The work of equity, and specifically racial equity, must take place before our young people grow into their own positions of power. We must do actual work to safeguard an equitable and just future. If we are to confront racism in a more authentic way, the change must happen in the courts, in the classrooms and, most of all, in the policies and systems constructed around them.

As part of an organization whose mission is to confront prejudice, bigotry and discrimination, we have a duty to respond following a series of incidents that reveal how racism is showing up in our education system. Recently we saw the opposition to a book introducing the concept of racial justice at the elementary level. It was disheartening to see immediate capitulation by the school district to reassure white parents, and also to hear comments like "Do we really need 8-year-olds to be fighting for racial justice?" The answer is yes. We as adults, have perpetuated an unjust system. If we are committed now to real equitable culture change, it starts yes, with 8-year-olds.

In the last month, we have heard about racial slurs being used by spectators at more than one high school basketball game and racial microaggressions used by a university basketball coach when speaking to his team of mostly BIPOC players. These are, of course, not the first times that statements like these have been made in our schools. Yet the fact that we are currently seeing a

social climate where they are deemed newsworthy finally points to an acknowledgment that racism needs to be confronted. However, the notion that racism is still being treated as just a matter of fact is the message that educational institutions are perpetuating and conveying in their inability to truly unpack why these incidents occur on their watch.

The question we ask is, without this media reckoning, would these issues have been swept under the rug yet again?

However, the responsibility does not rest solely on school district leaders and coaches but also on the shoulders of the educational system as a whole. When incidents such as these occur, it is not the end of the job to say someone was wrong. We must examine the system, as it informs and even produces our day-to-day language and social interaction. Upon that examination it becomes glaring how this can result in a person feeling secure enough to make overtly or indirectly racist statements with no forethought of the consequences for themself or their audience.

In the interest of what Nebraska looks like in the years to come — whether it is a place that all people would want to live, raise their families, put down roots — the work towards racial equity must begin in earnest. We have to do better now, so that the ones who look to our example can also do better in the future.

Tena Hahn Rodriguez is business development manager and Dominic Green is programs and faculty manager with Inclusive Communities. Inclusive Communities serves Nebraska, Iowa and the region by directing its efforts in the areas of youth, community and workplace human relations, and leadership programming to achieve our mission of confronting prejudice, bigotry and discrimination.

LJS Editorial, 5/2: City election will shape the path ahead -- so vote in it

On Tuesday, Lincolnites have the opportunity to exercise the most important right in our democracy by casting a ballot that will help determine, in part, which path the city should take for the next four years.

Tuesday's contests for Lincoln City Council, Lincoln Airport Authority and Lincoln Board of Education haven't drawn the attention of a mayor's race or state and national contests that elect governors, state senators, members of Congress and presidents.

But, practically, those who are elected Tuesday will have far greater impact on the daily lives and pocketbooks of Lincolnites as they will address everything from property tax rates and public safety to remote learning and potholes.

Many general election ballots have already been cast by mail or in early voting at the Lancaster County Election Office. In the April primary, more than two-thirds of the 44,725 votes were cast early. A similar percentage is expected in the general election.

That total came to 25% of Lincoln's eligible voters. In contrast, in May 2020, 41% of those registered voted in the primary election. Last November, that number increased to a record 78%.

While it is unlikely that Tuesday's election will reach the 50% mark, an increase in voter turnout that would break 33% turnout would be a good mark for local elections that, in fact, could be determined by a few votes.

That is particularly the case in the Lincoln City Council race where the difference between the second and fourth place finishers was just 600 votes. Three at large council members will be chosen Tuesday.

Over the last month, the Journal Star editorial board has interviewed candidates for the contested races via Zoom and considered information and positions the candidates contributed to the Journal

Star's Voter's Guide. Those interview videos can be viewed along with the voter's guide at journalstar.com.

From those interviews and the voter's guide, the editorial board has made the following endorsements:

* For Lincoln City Council, the board endorses the three incumbents, Sandra Washington, Roy Christensen and Bennie Shobe along with Lincoln-Lancaster County Planning Commission member Tom Beckius.
* For Lincoln Airport Authority, the endorsements go to John Olsson and Nicki Behmer.
* For the Lincoln Board of Education, the board endorses incumbents Kathy Danek and Don Mayhew in contested races, along with incumbents Barbara Baier and Lanny Boswell, who are running unopposed.

Polls are open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday. Take the time to vote to make your voice heard for the good of the community.

LJS Editorial, 4/30: Spring Game shows return to normal is getting nearer

The world is ready to mingle again, ready to break curfew after a yearlong grounding. It's ready to resume the life we used to know.

That's exciting. And a bit scary. Lest we forget that breaking curfew most times was followed up by another round of being grounded.

That said, tread lightly. Nobody wants a return to normalcy more than we do, but we'll never stop preaching caution.

And so Saturday might feel like a gameday -- albeit, the annual glorified scrimmage, but always a suitable reason to pull out the grill, toss a few bags and enjoy a few cold ones -- this is really just a test run to see if we'll be able to handle a little more in September.

More than 42,000 fans -- about half of capacity -- will be allowed inside Memorial Stadium on Saturday for the Red-White Spring Game, making it the biggest mass gathering in Nebraska in about 18 months.

While it's an outdoor event with fresh air and warm temperatures, we continue to urge everyone to follow the directed health measures put in place by the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.

Do the right things by wearing a mask, maintaining proper social distancing practices and showing the same kind of patience and responsibility that has allowed us to curb the coronavirus's spread in recent months.

With more than 41% of the state fully vaccinated, Nebraska is on its way to getting back to taking part in the things we once took for granted.

Still, make no mistake. Saturday's spring game is only a test, the next progression on the road to what we really want -- full houses allowed inside Memorial Stadium in the fall.

That happens only if we handle this weekend properly and show that the gathering of thousands won't create a super-spreader event.

We are optimistic about the prospects.

Other parts of the world are already moving forward. In New Zealand, more than 50,000 showed up to a concert last weekend to officially announce to the world that the island nation had officially beaten COVID-19.

The world is waking up. It's ready to party -- and so are we, just as we turn the calendar to May and the quickly approaching summer months.
Saturday's spring game is not just a test for the Husker Football team but to see how we as fans handle a Husker Saturday. It's also a litmus test for other activities planned in the coming months.
The University of Nebraska-Lincoln announced this week that Jazz in June, the annual outdoor event, will take place every Tuesday evening on the grounds of the Sheldon Art Museum.
The downtown music venues are also gearing up for live shows. Their schedules are quickly filling up, and Zoo Fest, the annual outdoor music festival held each July, is ready for a return.
In short, it's not hard to envision a return to life as we once knew it in the near future.
But responsibility is still required. And it begins on Saturday with the spring football game.

LJS Local View: Together, we can begin to undo harm of Whiteclay

The closure of Whiteclay's beer stores on April 30, 2017, was a significant victory for those wishing to stop Nebraska's complicity in the flow of cheap beer onto the dry Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. But it was only the first step. Since the beer store closures, little has been done by Nebraskans to mitigate the harm inflicted on Oglala Lakotans by decades of Whiteclay beer sales.
Our research shows that drunken-driving crashes and fatalities are down in Sheridan County since the closure of Whiteclay's beer stores. So are felony case filings. Whiteclay's violence and vagrancy did not migrate to other Nebraska border towns, contrary to assertions made by those who fought to keep the beer stores open. Sales tax revenue is up throughout Sheridan County since the beer stores closed, including in Whiteclay, where tribal members once again feel safe to shop for groceries.
While there are many reasons to celebrate the closure of Whiteclay's beer stores, there remains so much work left to be done. Oglala Lakotans who were permitted to drink on Whiteclay's streets have returned to Pine Ridge. But too many still have not received treatment for their trauma or their addiction. Too many still lack adequate economic opportunities. As Nebraskans and former Nebraskans, we can do more.
Over the past two years, we have secured 50 acres of property on the south end of Whiteclay. Our objective is to create a footprint where Nebraska's public health institutions can collaborate with Oglala Lakotans and other Native health care professionals to bring long-term restorative services to an unincorporated town with 12 residents whose four beer stores were once responsible for the sale of over 3.5 million cans of beer every year.
One parcel, the former Lakota Hope Center, is currently being utilized by Anpetu Luta Otipi, the Oglala Lakota Nation's comprehensive alcohol substance abuse and treatment program. There are opportunities for public health institutions, such as the Creighton University School of Medicine and University of Nebraska Medical Center, to sublease space on the property, including three tiny houses that could be finished out and rented on a short- or long-term basis.
Another parcel consists of 45 acres of undeveloped land directly across the street. This past winter, leaders executed a memorandum of understanding with Thunder Valley Community Development Corp., a tribal corporation whose mission is to empower Lakota families to improve the health of their communities through the strengthening of their cultural identity. Thunder Valley has already successfully developed a 34-acre tract of land in Pine Ridge that provides vocational training, language preservation programs and a pathway to home ownership to Oglala Lakota residents. Through this memorandum of understanding, our intent is to transfer to Thunder Valley these 45

acres in Whiteclay for the purpose of creating a campus that could include outpatient substance abuse treatment services, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing and other restorative services for those working to overcome addiction. World-class services and facilities, owned and operated by a tribal entity.

One last parcel has been reserved for the creation of a history center and outdoor memorial to honor those whose lives and life potential were cut short by Whiteclay beer sales. The history center would not only create employment opportunities in the area but also serve as a meeting place for Natives and non-Natives seeking to collaborate on a variety of topics, including the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women.

Whiteclay's beer store closures were a source a pride for many Nebraskans. Keeping beer stores from returning to Whiteclay should not be left to chance. Working with Oglala Lakotans to create a restorative campus in Whiteclay is the best way to ensure those beer stores remain closed. But it will only happen if Nebraska's state senators, public health institutions and benefactors step up and answer the call. Real mitigation means making real commitments to those tribal entities that are working to make Whiteclay's restorative campus a reality.

The COVID pandemic may have slowed our progress over this past year, but it has not diminished our drive. We are as determined as ever to help Oglala Lakotans create a restorative campus in Whiteclay that will transform the narrative of this unincorporated town from a place of death and destruction to a place of hope and healing. Together, we can begin to mitigate the past harm done by this place.

John A. Maisch is an associate professor of legal atudies at the University of Central Oklahoma. The Nebraska native served as Oklahoma's liquor prosecutor and produced the documentary "Sober Indian | Dangerous Indian" about Whiteclay's beer sales.

LJS: So many questions for governor

As Nebraskans contemplate our next governor, I find myself wondering if we'll ever get to the bottom of the St. Francis debacle.

How can things go so wrong and result in no serious accountability in government? Why was Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh shut out of the investigative committee when her research into the problem was the genesis of that committee? Why did a legislator who doesn't want the investigation get appointed as a member?

Besides not knowing as much about the problem as Cavanaugh, were there other criteria for choosing these committee members? Is there some commonality we're missing that the press might tease out?

Or I look to the unfortunate residents of deep-red Mead and Saunders County, which makes me wonder how many directions "loyalty" goes in politics. Perhaps just one. AltEn is our Flint, our second Asarco, and it's being handled in the same manner as the first: with plausibly deniable incompetence and casual disregard for the Nebraskans affected.

Oh well, there's always the Superfund.

Should a governor protect the citizens? Or should he or she use the office to spread politically charged misinformation and try to downplay proven public health measures during a global pandemic?

Should the governor promote "the common weal"? Nebraska had long squandered a chance to expand Medicaid to low-income residents with matching federal funds, a move numerous studies

have shown would shore up vulnerable rural healthcare systems and thereby protect the health of rural Nebraskans.
The people finally had enough and petitioned Medicaid expansion into law. Nebraskans; are you wondering where it is almost three years later?
So many questions. So few answers. Maybe when your party locks up the state government, answers become voluntary?
We could ask ...
Gregory Wees, Omaha

LJS: Ricketts tips playing field

Gov. Pete Ricketts is at it again. During his term as governor, he has personally financed his chosen candidates for Nebraska's legislative body in order to suit the Trumpublican agenda.
Now he intends to allow only selected media outlets to attend his press conferences. His office has denied NOISE Omaha press credentials claiming that they are "an advocacy organization funded by liberal donors." His newly developed application questions whether applicants are free of “real or perceived” conflicts of interest, declines involvement in political activities and resists pressure from lobbyists or interest groups.
Will he not grant credentials for local television stations owned by Sinclair Media (KFXL, KHGI, KPTM, KXVO, etc.), not to mention all of the local radio stations that air ultra-right talk show hosts? A 2019 study in the American Political Science Review found that "stations bought by Sinclair reduce coverage of local politics, increase national coverage and move the ideological tone of coverage in a conservative direction relative to other stations operating in the same market.
Apparently, this is Governor Ricketts' idea of maintaining journalistic integrity.
Steve Kellogg, Lincoln

LJS: Kids caught in political fight

Govs. Pete Ricketts and Kim Reynolds have opted out of helping little migrant kids. I have some comments.
Since the federal government will be paying for the children’s care, helping those kids will have little or no impact on the state’s resources devoted to children.
Ricketts claims to be a good Catholic and Christian. Does he think Jesus would have rejected these children when they clearly need help? Act like the Christian you claim to be, sir.
Nebraska is well known as a welcoming community that steps up and assists poor immigrants year after year. We have agencies that have a lot of experience in this realm. These kids didn’t come into the country legally, but these are children with extremely limited options. They are desperate and need our help.
Their decision is clearly political and ignores the humanitarian aid that is needed now. As long as they can oppose the president and his representatives, it looks like anything goes no matter who suffers — even little children.
William Hunt, Lincoln

AP: What's behind the growth slump? Takeaways from census data

The first batch of once-every-decade data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows a United States that is growing less quickly but still seeing its population shift to the South and the West.
The data released last week was relatively basic — containing national and state-level population figures and details of how they affect states' representation in Congress. Still, it contained some surprises and pointed to some consequential trends.
More sluggish growth ahead?The U.S. population grew to 331 million, a 7.4% growth rate from the last time the Census Bureau counted every person in the country, in 2010. Those may sound like big numbers, but it's actually the second slowest rate of population growth the census has ever recorded, just behind the 7.3% growth in the 1930s.
That decade's slowed growth was rooted in the Great Depression. Our past decade's sluggish rate had similar beginnings in the long shadow of the Great Recession. The drawn-out recovery saw many young adults struggling to enter the job market, delaying marriage and starting a family. That dealt a blow to the nation's birthrate. Then the pandemic hit last year and made matters worse.
But while U.S. population growth recovered after the Great Depression, demographers are not optimistic it will pick up anytime soon. Most forecast even slower population growth in the decades to come. Americans are getting older — the median age in the U.S. is 38, up one year from 37 in 2010. Immigration had been dropping even before the pandemic effectively shut it down. And many Republicans have largely turned against the idea of immigration, legal or illegal, a new political barrier to the country adding more population quickly.
"Unlike the Great Depression, it's part of a process where we're likely to keep having slow growth," said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.
That has potentially grim consequences for the nation's future.
"The big demographic advantage the U.S. once enjoyed over other rich nations has evaporated," John Lettieri, president of the Economic Innovation Group, tweeted after the census data release. "Now there are more Americans 80 and older than 2 or younger."
The great migration continuesThe U.S. population may be growing more slowly but it continued its 80-year-long trend of shifting to the South and the West.
Florida, Montana and North Carolina each saw enough growth to add a congressional seat, while booming Texas gained two. Colorado and Oregon also gained new seats, while Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania lost seats.
The snapshot tells a familiar story: Americans have moved out of the industrial Midwest and Northeast, chasing jobs, more affordable housing, growing new suburbs and vibrant cities.
But, strikingly, the longtime symbol of Americans' search for the new and the next wasn't part of that story. California's growth rate wasn't enough to retain its 53-seat delegation in the House. The nation's most populous state lost a congressional seat for the first time in its history, a fact that is already forcing debate over whether Democrats' control of state government is to blame.

AP: US vows again to ban menthol flavor in cigarettes, cigars

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. health regulators pledged again Thursday to try to ban menthol cigarettes, this time under pressure from African American groups to remove the mint flavor popular among Black smokers.
The Food and Drug Administration has attempted several times to get rid of menthol but faced pushback from Big Tobacco, members of Congress and competing political interests in both the Obama and Trump administrations. Any menthol ban will take years to implement and will likely face

legal challenges from tobacco companies.
Thursday's announcement is the result of a lawsuit filed by anti-smoking and medical groups last summer to force the FDA to finally make a decision on menthol, alleging that regulators had "unreasonably delayed" responding to a 2013 petition seeking to ban the flavor.
The deadline for the agency's response was Thursday. The FDA said it aims to propose regulations banning the flavor in the coming year and declined to speculate on when the rule would be finalized. The action would also ban menthol and fruity flavors from low-cost, small cigars, which are increasingly popular with young people, especially Black teens.
"We will save save hundreds of thousands of lives and prevent future generations from becoming addicted smokers," said Dr. Janet Woodcock, the FDA's acting commissioner.
She cited research estimates that banning menthol would prevent 630,000 tobacco-related deaths over 40 years, more than a third of them among African Americans.
Menthol is the only cigarette flavor that was not banned under the 2009 law that gave the FDA authority over tobacco products, an exemption negotiated by industry lobbyists. The act did, though, instruct the agency to continue to weigh banning menthol.
The flavor's persistence has infuriated anti-smoking advocates, who point to research that menthol's numbing effect masks the harshness of smoking, likely making it easier to start and harder to quit.
The mint-flavored cigarettes are overwhelmingly used by young people and minorities, particularly Black smokers, 85% of whom smoke menthols. That compares to about a third of white smokers.
"The science is there, the data is there, so why are these products still on the market?" said Carol McGruder of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council.
Her group sued along with Action on Smoking and Health, the American Medical Association and the National Medical Association, which represents Black physicians. After the FDA announcement the groups promised to keep pushing for swift implementation: "this is not the end of this fight, only the next stage."
For decades, companies focused menthol marketing and promotions on Black communities, including sponsoring music festivals and neighborhood events. Company documents released via 1990s litigation also show companies viewed menthol cigarettes as good "starter" products because they were more palatable for teenagers .
"There was a specific, intentional focus on creating the next generation of smokers by making menthol cigarettes available in those communities," said Dr. Nia Heard-Garris, who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics' group on minority health and equity.
In the late 1990s, new restrictions banned cigarette advertising from billboards, public transit and most event sponsorships. Companies shifted more promotions to retail locations like gas stations and convenience stores, which researchers have shown are heavily concentrated in Black neighborhoods
About a third of all cigarettes sold in the U.S. are menthol and its elimination would be a huge blow to tobacco companies, including Altria and Reynolds American, maker of the leading menthol brands, Newport and Kool. With the slow decline of smoking, tobacco companies have been diversifying into alternative products, including electronic cigarettes and tobacco pouches. But those ventures still account for a tiny slice of industry sales.
A spokeswoman for Reynolds American said the company would submit evidence countering FDA's proposal.
"Published science does not support regulating menthol cigarettes differently from non-menthol," she said in a statement.

An Altria spokesman said in a statement that “criminalizing menthol” would have “serious unintended consequences.”
The FDA stressed Thursday that its ban would only apply to manufacturers, distributors and retailers, not individuals.
Smoking can cause cancer, strokes and heart attacks and is blamed for 480,000 deaths each year in the U.S. About 14% of Americans smoke cigarettes, with rates roughly even between white and Black populations. But Black smokers are less likely to successfully quit, a trend that the U.S. Surgeon General and others have attributed to menthol cigarettes.
Menthol occurs naturally in mint plants. Known for its cooling effect, the chemical is used in cough drops and other medicines. Cigarette makers began adding the chemical in the 1920s after realizing it reduced the throat hit of cigarettes.
Past government efforts targeting menthol have faced opposition from lawmakers from traditional tobacco states like North Carolina, but also some members of the Congressional Black Caucus, many who have received campaign contributions from cigarette makers.
Some caucus members warned that banning menthol would create an illegal market for the products, subjecting Black communities to increased law enforcement.
But calls for action have been growing and last year the House of Representatives voted to ban the flavor with support from the majority of Black members. The bill stalled in the Republican-controlled Senate after President Donald Trump made clear he opposed the measure.
The FDA's attempts to get rid of menthol have repeatedly been delayed or derailed by forces inside and outside government.
In 2011, an outside panel of FDA advisers recommended banning menthol after concluding that it increases smoking among young people and minorities and makes it harder for them to quit. But cigarette makers challenged the findings in court, claiming some panel members had conflicts of interest they hadn't disclosed.
In 2013, the FDA conducted its own internal study and reached similar conclusions, but the Obama administration did not move ahead with a ban.
Under the Trump administration, FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb tried to again restart the process but it was never greenlighted by the White House.
Massachusetts and California have passed laws banning menthol. But California’s ban was suspended in January after a legal challenge backed by tobacco companies; the issue is on the ballot next year.

LA Times: New CDC mask guidance draws clear line between vaccinated and unvaccinated Americans

In the eyes of U.S. health officials, there are two groups of people: those who are vaccinated against COVID-19 and those who are not. And they’re stepping up their efforts to get unvaccinated Americans to switch sides.
New guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding when people can safely shed their masks make the benefits of vaccination abundantly clear. Instead of focusing on the serious and potentially deadly risk of COVID-19 to those who aren’t immunized, they emphasize the extent to which those who are can return to an almost-normal life.
“Over the past year we have spent a lot of time telling Americans what they cannot do, what they should not do,” Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, said in a briefing Tuesday. “Today I’m

going to tell you some of the things you can do — if you are fully vaccinated."
Walensky painted a detailed picture of the greater freedom vaccinated Americans can safely enjoy compared with their unvaccinated peers. She and other health officials hoped that doing so would incentivize those who haven't yet rolled up their sleeves to change their minds and get their shots.
"If you are fully vaccinated, things are much safer for you than those who are not yet fully vaccinated," Walensky said, emphasizing the divide. "This guidance will help you, your family, and your neighbors make decisions based on the latest science and allow you to safely get back to things you love to do."
The upside of immunization includes outdoor reunions with extended family and al fresco dining with friends — all without wearing a mask.
With a mask, vaccinated people can safely attend crowded concerts and sporting events, watch a movie inside a real theater, and take a high-intensity exercise class. None of those activities are considered safe for people who aren't vaccinated.
President Joe Biden, who got his first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in December, spelled out his administration's message in a briefing on the North Lawn of the White House.
"The bottom line is clear: If you're vaccinated, you can do more things more safely," he said. "Go get the shot."
The new message could give the country the booster shot it needs to prevent the country's vaccination campaign from losing too much steam. More than 54% of all adults in the U.S. have now received at least one shot of COVID-19 vaccine, and more than 37% are fully vaccinated, according to the latest figures from the CDC.
But there's still a long way to go to achieve herd immunity. That will occur when so many people are immune to the coronavirus that it won't be able to find new hosts to infect and the outbreak will peter out. Experts estimate that up to 85% of the population will need to be vaccinated to reach that protective threshold.
Officials also feel a sense of urgency to get the country vaccinated before more dangerous coronavirus variants have the opportunity to take hold and spread.
A highly contagious variant from the United Kingdom already has become the dominant strain in the U.S., but it is vulnerable to COVID-19 vaccines. Other variants of concern have shown some resistance to vaccines and treatments.
Yet vaccination rates have slowed in recent weeks. According to CDC data, the seven-day moving average of daily vaccinations peaked well above 3 million per day on April 11, but dropped to just above 2.5 million last week.
Around the country, some communities are showing such little interest in the vaccines that officials have turned down shipments. About half of the counties in Iowa stopped asking the state for new doses, and roughly three-quarters of counties in Kansas have declined new shipments at least once over the last month. Officials in Mississippi asked the federal government to ship vials in smaller packages so that unused doses don't go to waste.
"We're at this point … where we have greater supply than we have demand," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said last week.
The Biden administration has responded by offering more financial and technical assistance to states, ramping up media campaigns and sending more vaccine directly to primary care physicians. The new messaging adds to that.
"There's always been a push to get people vaccinated," said Dr. Timothy Brewer, an infectious disease expert at UCLA. The CDC's updated guidance represents "more of a carrot approach."

For instance, the CDC used to tell everyone that restaurant dining was safer when seated outdoors than indoors. Now it says vaccinated people can safely dine together outside without wearing masks but warns those who are not vaccinated that the same meal would be moderately risky, even with masks on.

Likewise, eating and drinking indoors is safe for vaccinated people who wear masks, but not for unvaccinated people no matter how many precautions they take.

Heading inside for a spin class, pilates workout or date with a treadmill used to be discouraged for everyone. Now such workouts are deemed safe for vaccinated people who wear masks but are still unsafe for those who lack the protection of the shots.

Drive-in movies and DIY backyard theaters used to be preferred across the board. As of Tuesday, vaccinated people alone have the CDC's blessing to return to movie theaters with masks.

Vaccinated people with masks are also cleared for indoor worship services — and can even sing in a choir. Without the vaccine, neither activity is considered safe.

"I am optimistic that people will use this information to take personal responsibility to protect themselves and to protect others," Walensky said.

Dr. Monica Gandhi, an infectious disease specialist at UC San Francisco, commended the CDC for giving vaccinated people more leeway.

"Loosening restrictions as we go along can serve as a motivating factor to get vaccinated for those still on the fence," she said.

The science supports the move, Gandhi and others said. For instance, she pointed out that coronavirus transmission is roughly 5,000 times less likely to occur outdoors than inside.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, cited laboratory studies, clinical trials and vaccine rollouts to argue that the more Americans are vaccinated, the safer they'll be.

Real-world data from Israel, where more than half of the population is fully protected by the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, show that the shot is highly effective against the U.K. variant that is prevalent here.

And in the U.K., where more than 60% of adults are fully vaccinated, a campaign that employs the Pfizer-BioNTech shots along with ones made by Moderna and AstraZeneca has kept the virus at bay. In both countries, "as the vaccine doses increase, the cases come down," Fauci said.

The same is likely to be true for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, though more data are needed, he said.

It did not take long for the president to start leading by example. At his Tuesday briefing, Biden wore a mask as usual as he walked to a microphone, then removed it to make his remarks.

But in a shift, he kept it off as he walked back to the White House.

Smiling broadly, the president said he wouldn't put it back on until he went inside.

By Amina Khan and Karen Kaplan

AP: Iowa turns down 71% of available vaccines on weak demand

DES MOINES (AP) — Iowa is turning down nearly three quarters of the vaccine doses available to the state from the federal government because demand for the shots remains weak.

The Iowa Department of Public Health and Safety said the state asked the federal government to withhold 71% of the 105,300 vaccine doses that were available for the week of May 10. This is the second week in a row that the state has asked the federal government to hold back part of its

allocation of vaccine doses.
Department spokeswoman Sarah Ekstrand told the Des Moines Register that 88 of Iowa's 99 counties have told the state that they don't need all or part of their weekly vaccine allocations for that week. That's an increase from the 80 counties that declined vaccine shipments for this week and the 43 counties that declined all or part of their allocations last week.
"As we have shared before, these counties are doing exactly the right thing by only accepting the volume of vaccine that they can confidently administer," Ekstrand said.
Demand for the vaccines appears to have peaked in early April across Iowa when the state set a record by giving 51,322 shots in one day. By last week, the highest daily total of vaccines given was only 23,159.
As of Saturday, 56.5% of all Iowa adults had received at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Ryan Kopsa
Digital Communications Manager

Office of Governor Pete Ricketts
OFFICE 402-471-1974
CELL 402-890-2467
ryan.kopsa@nebraska.gov
governor.nebraska.gov | **Facebook** | **Twitter**