From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
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Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
CORN	Apr 2021	6.60	12.00	08:18
CORN	Oct 2021	5.20	-25.00	08:17
SOYBEANS	Apr 2021	14.89	-35.00	08:16
SOYBEANS	Nov 2021	12.62	-66.00	08:15
WHEAT	Apr 2021	6.61	-35.00	08:14
WHEAT	Jul 2021	6.61	-35.00	08:14

MLB: Ynoa homers, K's 9 in Braves' shutout rout
Braves – 10
Cubs – 0

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NCN: Gun rights advocates gather in Norfolk
WOWT: Unemployment payback: Staffers say Nebraska labor department knowingly overpaid, wrongly approved claims
NET: Tax Credits For Private/Religious School Scholarships Blocked In Legislature
NTV: Sasse and Fischer react to Biden's address
NET: As Vaccination Rates Decline In Nebraska, COVID Expert Says The Hard Work Is Ahead
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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 so-called "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 only be required when proposed growth in property taxes is higher than 2% plus local growth in property valuation. 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 so-called 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 upwards 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

UNK News: Governor signs state budget package, including university funding

LINCOLN – The University of Nebraska system will receive increased funding, a new scholarship program for students in high-need areas will continue, and NU and the state will extend a successful deferred maintenance partnership under a two-year budget package signed Monday by Gov. Pete Ricketts.

Ricketts approved the 2021-23 state budget package with no line-item vetoes. His signature clears the way for a two-year tuition freeze across the NU system and provides critical investments in the new Nebraska Career Scholarships program as well as a long-term building maintenance initiative that will help ensure safe, quality facilities for students, faculty and staff.

“Gov. Ricketts’ approval of the state budget package sends a strong message of support for access, quality education and workforce growth in Nebraska,” NU President Ted Carter said. “The historic investments included in this budget will benefit students, families and Nebraska taxpayers for generations to come.

“We are especially grateful for the governor’s leadership on the Nebraska Career Scholarships, which are already helping our state retain more top talent for the workforce. The University of Nebraska is in a position of strength as we emerge from a challenging period, and that is thanks in great part to our elected leaders who recognize the critical importance of affordable, excellent higher education for the people of our state.”

The university sought, and the Legislature and governor fully funded, modest 2% increases in state funding each of the next two years.

The state’s support also allows for an across-the-board tuition freeze for 2021-22 and 2022-23.

Additionally, the budget package includes continued funding for the Nebraska Career Scholarships, a

new state program providing scholarships for Nebraska students pursuing degrees in high-need areas such as engineering, math, IT and health care.
The governor's approval also will extend through 2061-62 an NU-state partnership on deferred maintenance to address building renewal and repair needs across the campuses.
The university's 900 buildings represent 70% of the state's building assets. More than one-third of NU facilities are 50 years or older, and the system's total deferred maintenance needs are estimated at $800 million.
Carter praised elected leaders for their long-term investment, noting that by capitalizing on historically low interest rates, the deferred maintenance plan will save Nebraska taxpayers about $1.5 billion over its 40-year duration.
By Tyler Ellyson

Scottsbluff SH: Gubernatorial candidate Charles Herbster visits area with Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway

As he makes his case across the state, Nebraska gubernatorial candidate Charles Herbster stopped in Scotts Bluff County Tuesday.
Herbster shares a lot in common with his friend, Donald Trump. By next November, he's hoping to share a little more.
In a recent interview, he told the Star-Herald he's been watching the Biden administration in its first 100 days and he's seen enough. It's what's compelled him to run.
"I'm just really, really concerned about where this country is headed. I can't believe what we've had happen in 85 days," he said.
So far, Herbster is one of two candidates throwing his hat in to replace Gov. Pete Ricketts to head the state. University of Nebraska Regent Jim Pillen also officially launched his campaign earlier this month. State Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha has said he's strongly considering a run, setting up a Republican battle royal to replace Ricketts.
On Monday, Herbster drove to Scotts Bluff County as part of a tour of the state. While talking with voters in Gering, Herbster said his first two questions had nothing to do with division outside the state and everything to do with the internal regional divide between east and west.
"I can certainly fix (the east, west divide) as governor," Herbster said. "It's just bringing people together, and talking things through."
Herbster pointed to his success in business as proof of his ability to get disparate groups together.
"There's no reason, in the state of Nebraska, that we should be divided between the west and the east. We got to work on that. That can be fixable. We just need to sit out and talk," he said.
Born in Falls City, Herbster is the CEO of Conklin Company based in Kansas City, Missouri. He purchased Conklin in 1992 after working at the agribusiness and home products company for several years. Through it all, Herbster said he's a hard worker.
"If you work really, really hard, I tell people, it's what to do with the second eight hours of the day that makes the difference. I'm much like (Donald Trump), I sleep about four hours a night," Herbster said.
In the early days of his campaign, Herbster has associated himself with Trump and the 45th president's policies. Conway, a senior adviser to Trump, traveled with Herbster on his tour.
For Herbster, closeness with the former president is more than political posturing. Herbster said he and Trump have a friendship spanning 16 years. Herbster said he was in New York City at Trump

Tower in 2016 when Trump announced his first run for president.
“I watched him come down the escalators,” Herbster said. “I said to everybody that I knew that he would be the next president of the United States.”
Herbster said he admires Trump’s accomplishments, even if doing so alienates some voters.
“I can assure you that, my loyalty to what he achieved, what he did, his willingness to put up with all the crap ... I would never, in any way, back away from my support and loyalty for the president,” Herbster said, referring to Trump.
Despite being about 1,500 miles to the Mexican border, Herbster said immigration would be a critical focus of his campaign and administration.
“We got to build a damn wall. You can’t have a country if you’re going to let everybody keep coming in,” he said.
Herbster said the reemergence of immigration on the southern border as a national issue prompted him to run for governor.
“If we think those people are just gonna stay in Texas, in Arizona, we live in a glasshouse, those people are coming to Nebraska,” he said.
Herbster said a governor’s responsibility was two-fold. First and foremost, a governor is supposed to lead the people of their state, he said.
“But secondly, we’re at a point in America where governors are going to have to be conservative individuals with a strong backbone. And they’re going to have to push against federal government overreach,” he said.
As Herbster’s campaign continues into the primary, he may not have the support of the outgoing governor. On Wednesday, Ricketts told a Lincoln TV news station that he’s worked to grow business in Nebraska but the same can’t be said for Herbster.
“Charles Herbster chose to put the headquarters for his main company in Missouri. I think that makes it hard to make the case you’re committed to Nebraska,” Ricketts said.
Despite the potential opposition, Herbster was optimistic.
“We may, we may not succeed,” Herbster said. “But I think we got a good chance.”
By Justin Garcia

NP Telegraph: Gubernatorial candidate Charles Herbster visits North Platte

About 20 North Platte-area residents listened to Republican gubernatorial hopeful Charles Herbster during a Wednesday afternoon roundtable at Equitable Bank in North Platte.
Herbster, a Falls City cattle feeder and businessman, announced his candidacy Monday in Fremont to succeed term-limited GOP Gov. Pete Ricketts in 2023.
His North Platte appearance was part of an initial swing through Nebraska, members of his campaign said earlier this week.
“Like President Donald J. Trump, I am a Nebraskan businessman who created thousands of jobs nationwide,” Herbster said in an email after Wednesday’s event. “I want to bring that experience and approach to Lincoln. More jobs means more money for the state. We need to completely overhaul our state’s tax system and explore every option to reduce taxes while fully funding education. That includes exploring a consumption tax. I want to make real positive changes for ALL Nebraskans.”
Herbster operates Herbster Angus Farms in Falls City and is owner and CEO of Conklin Co., an agriculture and manufacturing distribution business based in Kansas City.

He's the second declared Republican candidate for next year's governor's race, joining University of Nebraska regent and former Nebraska football player Jim Pillen of Columbus. No Democrats have declared thus far.
Other likely GOP candidates include state Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha and former Gov. Dave Heineman of Fremont, according to the Omaha World-Herald.
Heineman held the governor's office for a record 10 years from 2005 to 2015, when Ricketts succeeded him.

Scottsbluff SH: ESU #13 breaks ground on Panhandle Beginnings Day Treatment school

TERRYTOWN — Months after the Panhandle Beginnings Day Treatment Center began treating children, ESU-13 held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the center.
The center, located in the Carpenter Center, helps students facing mental health crises that prevent them from continuing their education or place them in harm's way, according to ESU-13 officials. Instead of attending regular classes, students can learn and heal safely at the Day Treatment Center.
"One thing that I find remarkable is the energy that you're able to gather here in the Panhandle for this," Nebraska Department of Education Commission Matthew Blomstedt told a gathered crowd of school administrators on Wednesday.
The effort to erect the multi-million dollar Day Treatment Center stemmed from a coalition of prominent community leaders. Rick Myles, Scottsbluff Public Schools superintendent, told Gov. Pete Ricketts via a letter that the need for mental health treatment was great.
"In Scottsbluff (schools) alone, that's about 40 or so students of our 3,500 who, at any given time, find themselves in need of a therapeutic day treatment school setting to help them safely overcome their challenges," Myles wrote in the letter.
During the ribbon-cutting, Myles told the crowd of about 100 that he hopes the center lives up to its name.
"I hope for the sake of those kids that need you and the families ... that you will see this as a beginning and that these people will be an inspiration for more to come in the future," he said.
State Sen. John Stinner, of Gering, played the part of the middle man. Stinner connected ESU-13 with The Sherwood Foundation, an Omaha-based charity that funds projects geared toward increasing access to services, increasing access to civic life and promoting social justice. Stinner helped secure a $2.1 million grant for ESU-13.
"I was surprised at the size, actually," Stinner told the Star-Herald in December, adding that the distance between Omaha and Scottsbluff can create a boundary.
Stinner prepared video remarks for the ribbon cutting. He said he hopes the Day Treatment Center catches on as a model across Nebraska.
The process for enrolling into the Day Treatment Center requires a referral from the school district, Katherine Carrizales, ESU-13 director of psychological and behavioral health, said. Once she receives the referral, she said she and a team review the referral. Once in, students spend up to 90 days in the program.
At the ribbon cutting, Carrizales told the story of Riley, a recent student of the center. She said Riley was an adolescent student who came to the center because they refused to go to school and hadn't left their house in months.
"Before we knew it, the protective layers of (Riley's) maladaptive behaviors had been peeled away," Carrizales said. "This youth had met their treatment goals and was ready to return to their home

school district."
Andrew Dick, ESU-13 administrator, said the ribbon cutting was slated earlier. However, the surge of COVID-19 cases late last year pushed the ribbon cutting into the summer.
He told the Star-Herald that the center had one classroom that could support six to eight students at a time. Next year, he said the center will have two classrooms and add a third the following year.
By Justin Garcia

Stateline: Republican Governors Block Unaccompanied Migrant Children

FORT WORTH, Texas — The federal foster care system was unprepared to house the record nearly 19,000 unaccompanied children who came to the United States in March, so the Biden administration asked some states to temporarily house them.
Republican governors in Iowa, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota and Wyoming said no.
The governors claim that unaccompanied children would displace those already in state foster care or limit states' ability to make new placements.
"Nebraska is declining their request because we are reserving our resources for serving our kids," Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said in an April 13 news release. "I do not want our kids harmed as the result of President Biden's bad policies."
But federal officials note that care providers for unaccompanied children are paid via federal grants and operate separately from state child welfare systems.
Caring for unaccompanied children does require some limited state resources, because states license and monitor foster care providers contracted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the federal agency in charge of housing unaccompanied minors.
However, there currently are no federally funded foster care providers for unaccompanied minors in any of the five states where Republican governors have expressed concerns, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services records analyzed by Stateline show.
The children who have been placed there are most likely being taken in by family members, according to Mary Miller Flowers, senior policy analyst for child protection at the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, an advocacy group based in Chicago.
The issue of unaccompanied minors will continue to roil states as immigration remains one of the most potent political issues for many Republican governors. Some states, such as Texas, are pushing to end the Biden administration's policy allowing migrants, including unaccompanied children, into the country while they await hearings.
"The heartbreaking humanitarian crisis on our border was created by the Biden Administration," tweeted South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster shortly after issuing an executive order on April 12, directing state-licensed foster care facilities to reject the placement of migrant children. "Sending unaccompanied migrant children from the border to states like South Carolina only makes the problem worse."
Ricketts and McMaster's offices did not answer requests for comment.
But the Trump administration reduced the number of beds for unaccompanied children and closed government requests for bids to provide shelter and services, according to government grants and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services bed capacity data analyzed by Stateline.

A Lack of Beds

Law enforcement encountered 18,663 unaccompanied children at the U.S.-Mexico border in March, the highest number of any month on record for this group of migrants, according to U.S. Customs

and Border Protection data analyzed by the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.
After apprehension, unaccompanied children are by law supposed to spend no more than 72 hours in Customs and Border Protection custody before being transferred to the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. This transfer is particularly important because CBP facilities are ill-equipped to hold children, especially for long periods of time, according to Flowers.
To deal with the surge, HHS has opened about a dozen Emergency Intake Sites and Influx Care Facilities in California, Texas, Michigan and Pennsylvania. These sites, located inside convention centers, fairgrounds and military bases, do not have to be licensed by the state and are meant to hold unaccompanied children only for a short period of time while they are tested for COVID-19, quarantined and placed with a vetted family member or sponsor.
In more than 80% of cases, the child has a family member in the United States, according to HHS. Finding long-term foster care for those who don't have a sponsor falls on the Office of Refugee Resettlement and its network of more than 200 providers in 22 states.
Foster care providers who care for unaccompanied children include the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, BCFS Health and Human Services, Upbring, and Urban Strategies.
While the number of unaccompanied child migrant arrivals fell during the early months of the pandemic, the arrivals began to grow in August and accelerated after a court ordered the Trump administration in November to exempt unaccompanied children from the Title 42 expulsion order. That order authorizes the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to suspend the introduction of persons into the U.S. to protect public health, according to the CDC website.
Predictably, the number of unaccompanied minors crossing the border subsequently rose, but the Trump administration did not build the capacity to accommodate them, Office of Refugee Resettlement bed capacity data shows.
On Feb. 28, the Office of Refugee Resettlement had 13,612 available beds, according to the latest HHS data. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the bed space for unaccompanied children had been reduced, according to Jennifer Podkul, vice president for policy and advocacy at Kids in Need of Defense, an advocacy group that provides pro bono legal representation for child migrants.
HHS data analyzed by Stateline shows there was a capacity of about 16,000 beds for unaccompanied minors in fiscal 2019 that was reduced to about 13,000 by the end of that fiscal year. In 2020, several standing announcements requesting bids for new providers of shelter and services for unaccompanied children that would allow HHS to ramp up capacity were closed and have not been reopened, according to HHS records.
Instead, Office of Refugee Resettlement care providers in various parts of the United States who care for a small number of unaccompanied children in foster homes have been looking to expand their number of foster parents, particularly ones who are bilingual, according to an emailed statement from HHS.
"It could take over a year for a child's case to make its way through court," said Podkul. "That's why it's so important for ORR to have foster care families to provide short-term and longer-term foster care."

Blocking Unaccompanied Children

Between October 2020 and February 2021, the Office of Refugee Resettlement placed a total of 10,596 unaccompanied children with sponsors in 47 states and in Washington D.C., according to the latest HHS data. Texas had the most placements, 1,460, followed by Florida with 1,078 and New York with 1,060. South Carolina received 142, Nebraska 109, South Dakota 20 and Wyoming four.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement does not have any providers in Iowa, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota or Wyoming, the states whose governors have refused to take the children. That means the children placed in those states most likely went to family members rather than federally funded foster homes licensed by the state.

But the Republican governors have said they are taking a stand to block the Biden administration from placing children in their state.

"This is not our problem," said Iowa Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds on the "Need to Know with Jeff Angelo" program on April 8, according to an Associated Press report. "This is the president's problem. He's the one that has opened the border and he needs to be responsible for this and he needs to stop it."

Multiple requests for comment from Reynolds went unanswered.

"South Dakota won't be taking any illegal immigrants that the Biden Administration wants to relocate," tweeted South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on April 14. "My message to illegal immigrants ... call me when you're an American."

Noem's office declined to answer emailed questions from Stateline. "Gov. Noem is fulfilling her duty to keep the people of South Dakota safe," said a statement provided by Noem's office. "State resources will not be used to house illegal immigrants."

"I want to state clearly and unequivocally that the State of Wyoming will not participate in relocation or housing efforts of illegal immigrants or unaccompanied minors, and I have made our position clear to Federal officials," tweeted Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon on April 16.

Multiple requests for comment from Gordon went unanswered.

'Deterrents Don't Work'

The most recent attempt to block unaccompanied children and other migrants came in the form of a lawsuit filed by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican, on April 22. The lawsuit requests that the Biden administration reestablish the Title 42 rule to expel all migrants, including unaccompanied children, arguing that allowing migrants "potentially infected with COVID-19" to enter the country is a risk during the public health crisis.

On Nov. 18, a federal judge ruled that unaccompanied migrant children could not be expelled under Title 42. An appeals court in January ruled that the federal government could resume expelling unaccompanied children, but in February the Biden administration amended the Title 42 order to exempt them.

"The law does not permit any policy that turns away anyone under 18 that arrives at the border unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian. That's a federal law," said Leah Chavla, senior policy advisor for migrant rights and justice at the Women's Refugee Commission, an international group advocating for the rights of refugee women, children and youth.

In March, the commission along with four dozen advocacy organizations wrote a letter to President Joe Biden after reports that Department of Homeland Security officials were considering using the Title 42 policy to expel 16- and 17-year-old unaccompanied children at the southern border.

As of April 28, the Biden administration was returning most single adults and many families trying to enter the country illegally under Title 42. These two groups comprise more than 90% of those encountered by federal agents, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

At least 37 of the 44 facilities licensed by the state of Texas to care for migrant children reported COVID-19 cases in March, affecting 258 kids and teenagers in shelters overseen by both Texas Health and Human Services and the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement. An additional three migrants tested positive in state-licensed foster care, according to reports from Houston Public

Media.
Earlier this month, Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott ordered an investigation of child abuse and neglect inside an HHS Emergency Intake Facility in San Antonio. Abbott said the state had received multiple complaints, including allegations that children who had tested positive for COVID-19 were not being separated from those who had tested negative.
Texas state officials did not reply to requests for comment.
"It's hard to tell how grave the situation at the border is without being there, but one thing we do know is that deterrents don't work, they only make the problem worse," said Chavla.
"I think the numbers we're seeing make it clear that these children will continue coming here seeking our help even if we turn them away temporarily," she added. "Cruel policies like Title 42 or family separation only hurt our soul as a nation."
By Kristian Hernandez

Houston Chronicle: Gov. Greg Abbott and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to share stage in Orlando on Thursday

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis will share a stage in Orlando on Thursday on national television.
Abbott and DeSantis are among five governors who will be featured to discuss the response to COVID-19 in their states. The hour-long townhall meeting will be on FOX News Channel starting at 9 p.m. CST.
Abbott and DeSantis, both Republicans mentioned as potential presidential candidates in the future, have taken very different approaches to the pandemic. DeSantis lifted statewide COVID restrictions in September - a full six months before Abbott followed suit and ended all of Texas's restrictions.
Abbott has taken criticism from some Republicans in Texas who say he moved too slowly in re-opening the state. Among those critics has been Allen West, the chairman of the Republican Party of Texas, who is a former Florida congressman. West was part of a rally in front of the governor's mansion in Austin in October blasting Abbott for "executive overreach" with his COVID-19 containment orders.
Beside Abbott and DeSantis, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves and Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts will be part of the event, "The Ingraham Angle Town Hall: Red State Trailblazers." The forum will be moderated by The Laura Ingraham.
By Jeremy Wallace

KETV: DCHD: Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine available at drive-thru clinic starting Thursday

OMAHA, Neb. — The Johnson and Johnson COVID-19 vaccine is set to be available at a COVID-19 vaccine clinic in Douglas County starting on Thursday.
According to a news release from the Douglas County Health Department, the single-dose vaccine will be available at the Metropolitan Community College Fort Omaha campus drive-thru vaccine clinic on Thursday.
The health department said this will be the "first large community clinic" in Douglas County to offer the Johnson and Johnson vaccine since the use of the vaccine was stopped about two weeks ago.
According to the news release, reservations for the clinics can be made

at www.douglascountyhealth.com.
DCHD said that walk-ins will also be welcome at the clinic.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services will operate the clinic and will provide a calendar of what days the Johnson and Johnson vaccine is available.
According to the DCHD, the Moderna vaccine will also be available on certain days.
Those who have questions can call (402) 444-3400 on Thursday to contact the health department's COVID-19 information line.

LJS: Hy-Vee now offering COVID-19 vaccine without appointment

Hy-Vee has become the first local COVID-19 vaccine provider to offer the shot without an appointment.
The Iowa-based supermarket chain announced Wednesday that all of its pharmacies are now offering vaccinations on a walk-in basis. The company said people still can sign up for appointments if they want to.
Hy-Vee spokeswoman Christina Gayman said while demand is still pretty high in larger cities like Lincoln, it has tapered off in rural areas. She also said vaccine supply is in good shape now that vaccine manufacturers have had time to catch up.
The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported Tuesday that 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.
Those numbers mirror 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.
As of Wednesday, Lancaster County reported that 66% of residents age 16 and over have received at least one dose of the vaccine. The county reported 53 new coronavirus cases, but no new deaths. Those hospitalized locally with COVID-19 include 21 county residents.
The local Health Department plans to start doing smaller clinics in more targeted areas rather than holding mass clinics at Pinnacle Bank Arena, although it has not yet announced any walk-in clinics.
Hy-Vee was one of the first providers to start offering vaccine in Lincoln as part of the Federal Retail Pharmacy program. Since then, the company has been joined by several large chains, including Walmart, Walgreens, CVS and Costco.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Nebraska's private, parochial school backers try and fail again on scholarship tax credits

LINCOLN — The latest attempt to use state tax breaks to help more low-income students attend private and parochial schools failed in the face of a filibuster Wednesday.
Nebraska lawmakers fell four votes short of ending the filibuster on Legislative Bill 364, introduced by State Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn. The bill would provide tax credits to people or businesses that donate to a designated private or parochial school scholarship fund.
The vote came after eight hours of passionate, sometimes personal, sometimes angry debate that

ranged from the comparative merits of public and private education to constitutional law and the best ways to help Black and Latino children living in poverty. The bill will not return this year.
Linehan, who has pushed for similar bills in previous years, argued that the measure must pass if Nebraska wants to provide opportunities for every child in the state. She said the bill would give educational choices to more students whose families don't make enough to pay private school tuition.
"In America, a child's opportunity for education should not depend on income or zip code," she said.
Linehan cited one of her greatest concerns as the gap in achievement scores between students of color and White students. She argued that the chance to attend private or parochial schools could help students improve their academic performance.
Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha, one of two Black members of the Legislature, joined Linehan in arguing for the bill. He said education is key to the American promise but students in his community have waited too long to see improvements in their public schools.
"My parents are asking for at least the option," he said. "I know parents are asking for something because what we're doing now is not working."
Sen. Terrell McKinney of Omaha, the state's other Black lawmaker, opposed the bill, although he said people contacting him were split 50-50 on the issue. But he said he has heard from several people in his district who experienced racism and discrimination in private and parochial schools.
He also said that going to a different school would not change other aspects of a student's life, such as going to bed hungry or not having decent shoes or having to move frequently.
"Giving a scholarship does not erase that the kid is living in poverty," he said. "I just don't see it as being the solution."
Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha made similar arguments. She said more children could benefit if the state spent the same amount of money on expanding food assistance or housing subsidies or other programs that help low-income families.
Some opponents raised questions about the legality of supporting parochial schools, even indirectly, under the Nebraska Constitution. Others objected to the idea of giving larger tax benefits to people donating to these scholarships than they would get for donating to other charities, such as food banks.
"This is a bill that is a gift to the wealthy under the pretense of helping the poor," said Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha.
As advanced from the committee, the bill would allow scholarship donors to get income tax credits worth up to half of their tax bill each year, with the total amount of credits capped at $5 million a year. The money would have to be used to pay tuition for students whose families qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.
During debate, Linehan offered to limit annual donations to $5,000 per person or $10,000 per corporation and to allow people to get tax credits for only 75% of their donations. She also offered to put a five-year sunset on the program.
She said the tax credit scholarships could pay for an estimated 400 to 700 students to attend private schools, depending on the tuition amount of each school.
The Revenue Committee also added parts of another bill, introduced by Sen. Tom Briese of Albion, to LB 364. The language added from Briese's bill would provide income tax credits for donations that promote early childhood programs. Those credits also would be capped at $5 million a year.
Jeremy Ekeler with the Nebraska Catholic Conference decried the vote, saying that the 20 senators who did not vote for cloture had "prioritized politics over parents' rights." But he also said it was a

step in the right direction to have a full day of debate about the issue.
By Martha Stoddard

LJS: Filibuster defeats plan to create tax credits for private school scholarships in Nebraska

Opponents of a bill creating a tax credit for Nebraskans who donate to scholarship funds for private school students once again defeated the proposal through a legislative filibuster.
Despite offers of compromise from sponsor Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, the Opportunity Scholarships Act (LB364) was pushed off the agenda after backers failed to secure 33 votes to invoke cloture.
How they voted
A bill (LB364) to create tax credits for donations to private school scholarship funds failed to gain the 33 votes needed to invoke cloture on Wednesday:
Yes (29) — Aguilar, Albrecht, Arch, Bostelman, Brewer, Briese, Clements, Dorn, Erdman, Flood, Geist, Gragert, Groene, Halloran, B. Hansen, Hilgers, Hughes, Kolterman, Lindstrom, Lowe, McDonnell, Moser, Murman, Sanders, Slama, Stinner, Vargas, Wayne.
No (18) — Blood, Bostar, Brandt, J. Cavanaugh, M. Cavanaugh, Day, DeBoer, Friesen, M. Hansen, Hilkemann, Hunt, Lathrop, McCollister, McKinney, Morfeld, Pahls, Williams, Wishart.
Present, not voting (2) — Pansing-Brooks, Walz.
Under the bill, taxpayers could receive credits up to 50% of their annual income tax liability, with the scholarships going toward tuition and fees for low-income students who elect to attend a private school.
As introduced, the state would have provided $10 million in tax credits annually, but an amendment from the Revenue Committee — which Linehan leads as chairwoman — reduced that yearly cap to $5 million.
The Revenue Committee also amended a bill (LB531) from Sen. Tom Briese of Albion that created a similar tax credit program for Nebraskans who donate to early childhood education programs.
Linehan said both programs would help families find the right educational fit for their children, and wasn't about stoking division between public and private schools.
Over eight hours of debate on Wednesday, opponents attacked Linehan's bill as diverting state funds to private schools — which some said was potentially unconstitutional under state law — and an unneeded tax incentive for wealthy Nebraskans.
Still others said the bill did nothing to address issues of poverty, which several lawmakers said were responsible for lower educational attainment in the state's schools.
Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt, who introduced an amendment to prohibit funds from going to any organization that discriminates on the basis of race, gender, sexual identity or disability, said the bill would hurt public education in Nebraska.
"If families choose to send their children to those schools, that's their prerogative," Hunt said, "but don't tell me the state should subsidize that."
Sen. Wendy DeBoer of Bennington raised concerns that LB364 provided more in tax benefits to Nebraskans that contributed to private school scholarship funds than food banks or medical research.
"The problem isn't the program these dollars are going to," DeBoer said. "It's that this is a kind of tax loophole my constituents asked me to come down here and not create."

Several senators, including Adam Morfeld of Lincoln and Steve Lathrop and Tony Vargas of Omaha, said instead of creating an incentive to donate to private schools — something they pointed out happens regardless — the Legislature should work to improve deficiencies in the public school system.

Lathrop criticized backers of the bill who said it would have helped close the achievement gap in low-performing school districts by expanding the educational options for students.

"We've stuffed money into property tax relief," Lathrop said. "We didn't talk about the achievement gap during the property tax relief bill."

Instead of creating a bevy of new tax breaks this year, as the Legislature is on track to accomplish, Lathrop said state lawmakers should have been looking at ways to reduce class sizes, better engage parents and provide more funding to schools.

But Sen. Justin Wayne, who had opposed similar bills in recent years, said families in his North Omaha district couldn't wait for their schools to turn around.

"Choice is about the privilege of having the dollars to make that choice," Wayne said, likening the program to a life preserver that could immediately help change the trajectory for hundreds of students.

Emerging as a leader among the backers of Linehan's bill, Wayne was routinely given time on the microphone to try and persuade opponents.

He told the Legislature about his family's choice to send their children to a private school rather than the public schools in his neighborhood, and at one point, challenged other senators to send their kids to school in North Omaha.

Sen. Mike Flood of Norfolk, who recently retired from the Children's Scholarship Fund of Omaha, which provides financial assistance to help children attend private K-12 schools, said families should be given every tool to do what's best for their children.

"For some kids, in certain situations, this is their chance for something different," Flood said. "It's a very personal choice for someone who wants to enroll their son or daughter in a school like this."

Linehan said she was willing to work with other lawmakers to address their concerns, and indicated she was ready to limit the amount of tax credits individuals and organizations could receive, put an end date to the bill, and work on the anti-discrimination language proposed by Hunt.

Her offers were rejected, however.

Shortly before 7 p.m., Linehan invoked cloture, but fell four votes short of shutting off debate and forcing a vote on the bill and its amendments, effectively killing it for the year.

By Chris Dunker

AP: Private school tax credit proposal stalls in Nebraska

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A proposal to indirectly subsidize private K-12 schools in Nebraska by offering tax credits to scholarship donors stalled on Wednesday after opponents blocked the measure with a filibuster.

Backers in the Legislature fell four votes short of the 33 they needed to force a vote on the bill, which effectively sidelines it for the rest of this year’s session.

Supporters pitched the measure as a way to give low-income students more choices if a public school doesn’t meet their needs, but the measure drew sharp opposition from others lawmakers, who argued it would divert tax dollars away from K-12 public schools and other priorities.

The bill’s sponsor, Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Omaha, said she was willing to compromise with further

limits on the benefits taxpayers could claim and a possible expiration date for the program, but she complained that lawmakers were using parliamentary tactics to keep those changes from coming to a vote.

“A child’s opportunity for an education should not be determined by a family’s income or ZIP code,” Linehan said.

The bill would allow donors to claim a dollar-for-dollar tax credit equal to their total contribution, up to half of their total tax liability for the year. Donors also could also carry forward unclaimed portions of the credit and apply them to their tax bills over the next five years. The total credit available would be capped at $5 million a year.

The credit would be nonrefundable, so donors couldn’t use it to get money back from the government.

Sen. Justine Wayne, of Omaha, said the tax credit would create an incentive for donors to contribute and open up more educational opportunities to students who are struggling in public schools but can’t afford to leave.

“What we’re doing right now is not working,” Wayne said. “It’s time to start upsetting the apple cart to make change.”

Opponents blasted the measure as a tax benefit that favors the wealthy, who have more disposable income to donate. They also painted it as a backdoor way to steer public money into private schools, an idea that hasn’t gained much traction despite Nebraska’s conservative leanings.

“If families choose to send their children to these schools, that’s their prerogative,” said Sen. Megan Hunt, of Omaha. “But don’t make the state subsidize these schools.”

Sen. Wendy DeBoer, of Omaha, said tax credits aren’t as transparent as a direct payment from the government, and she noted that the credit would be far more generous than other tax write-offs for donations to churches, food pantries and other charities. DeBoer said the bill would effectively allow donors to dictate how the government spends part of their tax money.

“If I wanted to give 50% of my tax liability to build roads, or to work on property taxes, or anything like that, I don’t have that option,” DeBoer said. “I can’t tell the government how to spend 50% of my tax liability, but we’re setting that up here, and I can’t get over that.”

By Grant Schulte

LJS: Legislative resolution challenges federal authority on elections, vaccine passports

Thirty-one senators have signed a proposed legislative resolution objecting to a wide range of federal actions, including any election reform that usurps state control over elections, while affirming individual rights to "decide what, if any, vaccination is necessary" to protect individual and family health.

The resolution (LR107) was signed by 30 senators who are Republicans and a single Democrat, Sen. Mike McDonnell of Omaha, with Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte listed as the lead sponsor.

Its preamble pledges to reaffirm their oaths to defend the U.S. Constitution "against every act of aggression, whether foreign or domestic, including every act of unconstitutional abuse of power."

The resolution states that "the inevitable consequence" of such actions would be to "obliterate completely the rights of sovereignty by the several states and to destroy the rights and liberties of the people."

Specific reference is made to protecting Second Amendment gun rights and opposing "federal government actions which seek to punish traditional religious beliefs about the sanctity of life and

sexual mores."
The resolution states that "we express distress at the prospect of proposed federal legislation designed to usurp the election process that was constitutionally left primarily to the legislatures of the several states."
"We explicitly reject the idea of vaccine passports," the document states, along with "federal mandates that restrain a person's right to peaceably assemble or restrict their freedom to travel or conduct commerce."
The resolution was referred to the Legislature's executive board for action, and Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha subsequently filed a motion to send it to the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee for consideration.
By Don Walton

LJS: Pandemic delayed development of legislative relationships, senators say

Necessary health and safety restrictions placed on the Nebraska Legislature by the coronavirus reduced or delayed development of relationships that normally help shape legislation, two state senators told a Lincoln Chamber of Commerce briefing on Wednesday conducted via Zoom.
"It placed freshman senators in a really tough position," two-term Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha said, because they had to wait to develop the personal relationships that can be a key factor in achieving legislative success.
"There were some members (of the Legislature) that I had no conversations with for the first couple of months," freshman Sen. Eliot Bostar of Lincoln said in answering a question posed by Bruce Bohrer, executive vice president and general counsel for the Lincoln Chamber.
"Everyone has something to teach me," Bostar said.
And that occurred in the two committees he serves on during the two months or so that senators were essentially limited to committee hearings and largely isolated from other legislators, he said.
"We care about each other," Bostar said in summing up some initial impressions, and "when we disagree, we have fun doing it."
In addition to the delayed opportunity for new senators to listen and learn from senior members of the body, Lindstrom said, pandemic restrictions have denied all senators the opportunity to step out into the Capitol Rotunda to visit with lobbyists and representatives from organizations who gather there when the Legislature is in session.
"I find it therapeutic to go out there," Lindstrom said, and listen to information and viewpoints provided by both sides of an issue.
One of the lessons that freshman senators are about to learn is the need for persistence, he said. His bill (LB64) that would phase out the state income tax levied on Social Security income has been a two-term effort.
In answer to another question, both senators said they are hearing differing guesses about the new economic projections that will be forthcoming from the Nebraska Economic Forecasting Advisory Board on Thursday.
That forecast is used by the Legislature to craft the state's budget and will have an impact on remaining spending decisions.
"Appropriations Committee members are guessing less revenue, and Revenue Committee members are saying more," Lindstrom said. "I would think higher."
By Don Walton

Iowa Capital Dispatch: US Supreme Court hears high-stakes arguments in biofuels case affecting Iowa, Nebraska

Oil refiners and biofuels interests squared off in oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court on Tuesday in a case with large implications for Iowa and Nebraska.

As is usually the case, the justices grilled lawyers from both sides before submitting the case for a decision later, most likely in a couple of months or more. Hollyfrontier Cheyenne Refining LLC v. Renewable Fuels Association addresses questions over whether small refineries can request exemptions to the Renewable Fuel Standard.

The standard sets the amount of biofuels that must be blended into gasoline and diesel. Small refineries are granted hardship exemptions in some cases.

Iowa and Nebraska are the top producers of ethanol, made with corn. Iowa is the also the top producer of biodiesel, made with soybeans.

Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller and Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson led an effort to file an eight-state amicus brief with the Supreme Court supporting the Renewable Fuels Association. The association argues that the exemptions should not be granted in cases where they haven't been in place continuously.

The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in January 2020 ruled that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had issued exemptions to the biofuels mandate to refineries that didn't qualify. The small refineries have argued they face financial ruin if they are forced to buy ethanol and biodiesel at the levels demanded by Congress.

After indicating he would support farm interests, then-President Donald Trump allowed EPA to approve 85 exemptions that cost the biofuels industry 4 billion gallons in sales. President Joe Biden's administration supports the 10th Circuit decision.

Peter Keisler, lawyer for the refiners, argued that the federal rules allow an application for a hardship exemption "at any time."

He said the key is the word "extension," and justices spent time exploring what Congress meant by its language.

"No dictionary defines 'extension' to require continuity," Keisler told the justices. "Congress has used the term elsewhere when it's specifically authorizing the resumption of benefits," he added.

When Chief Justice John Roberts asked Keisler if a new refinery could apply for an "extension" of the Renewable Fuels Standard exemption, Keisler said yes. "Our key point would be the preferred reading of 'extension' does not require continuity," Keisler said.

Responded Roberts: "I'm not sure that's the strongest position."

Later, Justice Sonia Sotomayor noted the use of the word "temporary" in the regulation. "Doesn't the use of the word 'temporary' in the provision at issue suggest the other side's reading more than yours?" she asked.

Keisler said another part of the regulation suggests an exemption application can come "at any time."

Christopher Michel, assistant to the solicitor general of the Department of Justice, said Congress' language was clear, offering an extension to those that already had exemptions.

"EPA cannot grant something that does not exist," Michel said. "That is the ordinary, common sense meaning of the statutory text," which was meant to promote the biofuels industry while giving small refineries time to comply, he said.

“Simply put, if Congress wanted to adopt the generally available exemption petitioners advocate, it would not have enacted the scheme it did here,” Michel said. “That scheme does not doom small refineries to failure. The vast majority of small refineries, including the petitioners’, have successfully complied with the RFS in many prior years.”

Roberts suggested the terms in the regulation could be seen as ambiguous. “You’re not arguing that this term is plain or unambiguous, right?” he asked.

Responded Michel: “We’re not arguing that it’s unambiguous, but we do think that this is clearly the more ordinary use of the term in common parlance. The Court’s decisions have said it will apply the ordinary meaning of the statute unless there’s a good reason not to.”

Justice Stephen Breyer addressed the issue from a stance of “marketable rights” and the challenges refineries face when the prices of credits tied to the biofuels standards vary widely.

“And so, from the point of view of a marketable rights program, your interpretation seems to turn it into a kind of chaos,” Breyer said.

Michel said there was “complete clarity” that the blanket exemption would be available for the first five years of the Renewable Fuel Standard, which became effective in 2005 and was amended in 2007. “I don’t think there is chaos here,” he added.

Matthew Morrison, representing the Renewable Fuels Association, argued against the exemptions.

“EPA’s unauthorized carve-outs have resulted in billions of dollars of lost revenue to biofuels producers, devastating the rural economies,” Morrison said.

“Petitioners’ suggestion that there should be a permanent safety value to excuse them from their compliance obligations is belied by the text and the structure of the statute. It is antithetical to Congress’ goal of increasing the volume of renewable fuel in the nation’s transportation system,” Morrison added.

In a press release, Miller, the Iowa attorney general, called the case “critical to Iowa’s renewable fuel industry.”

“We think we have the stronger argument: that Congress intended to advance renewable fuels, and not freely grant exemptions to small refineries. The plain, common sense meaning of the statute language prevails, in our opinion,” he said of the amicus brief from the states.

Miller said the exemption cost the biofuels industry $2 billion in demand.

By Perry Beeman

OWH: Westside students' reenactment of Floyd killing 'hurtful,' 'unacceptable,' officials say

Westside High School students could face consequences for reenacting the arrest and killing of George Floyd inside the school building and then posting a photo to social media, a district spokeswoman said Wednesday.

Spokeswoman Brandi Paul said she couldn’t comment on student disciplinary matters, however the image, which she described as “incredibly hurtful,” was made in the school and disrupted the learning environment.

“Bottom line, if it disrupts that learning environment, there are consequences to those actions,” she said.

The picture shows a Westside High student kneeling on another student’s neck.

According to district officials, the students involved indicated that they were willing participants, and no one was hurt.

The students told officials that their intention was to reenact the Floyd killing after seeing something online, but they said that they did not have ill intent.
On April 20, a jury convicted former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin of murder and manslaughter for pinning Floyd to the pavement with his knee during an arrest.
The death of Floyd, who was Black, touched off protests and violence.
The students shared the photo in a group Snapchat, and it was then shared beyond that private group, officials said.
Administrators arriving at school Wednesday were notified by students about the posting, Paul said.
The district also received emails about it, she said.
The district then sent messages to alert families and students.
“We want them to know, especially at the high school level — these are young adults — (and) have open, honest conversations about this,” Paul said.
Last summer the district created a WE-Side Council, a group designed to promote inclusion and ensure that every person who comes to the district’s buildings are loved and supported, Paul said.
She said district officials feel they’ve been making progress in a variety of areas that they hope will cause change over the long run.
“But today is a reminder that, man, we’ve got a long way to go. And I don’t think that’s just for Westside, I think that’s everywhere.”
Even though the kids involved indicated that they had no ill intent, that doesn’t negate the impact of what they’ve done, she said.
“We certainly don’t want to imply that we’re negating the severity of this by any means,” she said.
“We don’t know what was in their head at the time. They didn’t indicate to us that they had clear reasons for why they did this.”
Whatever the purpose, she said, “it’s unacceptable.”
“It is unacceptable for their classmates, for their teachers, for our culture and what we’re trying to achieve at school,” she said.
In letters to families and students, officials said the students “made a very poor choice and their actions were unacceptable.”
Officials, in their letters, said Omaha police were notified.
“We are working to address this at all levels,” said the letters from Westside Principal Jay Opperman and Director of Student Services Robert Aranda. “Our top priority is ensuring the safety and well being of all students and staff in our building today — and every day. We are vigilant for any disruption that may occur as a result of this, and we will respond accordingly.”
They indicated that administrators and counselors would be available to support students and staff.
By Joe Dejka

OWH: 114-year-old Omahan is now oldest living American, but she doesn't care

Omahan Thelma Sutcliffe doesn’t give a hoot about being America’s oldest living person, but she bristles at the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.
“She’s just looking forward to the day that I can finally eat with her in the dining room again,” said Luella “Lou” Mason, a longtime friend. “She tells me, ‘I know we have to go by the rules, but I don’t like it.’ “
Sutcliffe, born Oct. 1, 1906, and Mason became friends while living at Elmwood Tower near 52nd and Leavenworth Streets. They have remained close since Thelma moved in 2017 to Brighton

Gardens senior living center near 93rd Street and Western Avenue.
The Gerontology Research Group said Sutcliffe became the nation's oldest living person and seventh-oldest in the world on April 17 when Hester Ford, a 115-year-old woman, died in North Carolina. The second-oldest American is Maria Branas Morera, who was born in California on March 4, 1907. She now lives in Spain.
"I'm happy (Brighton Gardens) is keeping things locked down because it's keeping everyone healthy, but Thelma is as determined as ever to do what she wants to do," Mason said. "She asks me every time I visit, 'Are you going to eat with me today?' It breaks my heart that I can't."
Until visitors are allowed in the dining room, Thelma is taking all her meals in her room. Mason, who has Sutcliffe's power of attorney, calls the senior living center 24 hours ahead of time to schedule visits. Sutcliffe's hearing and sight are fading, Mason said, but her mind is still "very sharp."
Sutcliffe received her COVID shots at the earliest opportunity, Mason said. Testing her for the coronavirus, however, proved to be a non-starter.
"They went in to test her for COVID and they told her that I had approved the test," Mason said. "She looked at (the swab) and looked up at the person holding it and said, 'You're not going to be sticking that thing up my nose. You can tell Lou to stick it up hers.' "
At 114 years of age and 209 days as of Wednesday, Sutcliffe has lived through two World Wars, the 1918 flu pandemic and countless other calamities. Married in 1924, her husband, Bill, died in the 1970s. The couple had no children. A 93-year-old nephew living in Arizona typically visits her on her birthday.
Mason said Sutcliffe brushes off talk about her longevity, including her status as the nation's oldest person. She is "very particular about her appearance," Mason said, and doesn't allow photos unless everything is just right.
"As far as her age, she doesn't believe in worrying at all," Mason said. "She always says, 'What good does it do to worry?' I think that's how you live to be 114 years old."
By Kevin Cole

LJS: Officials awaiting more details on Biden's plan for free community college

President Joe Biden said he would expand access to higher education as part of his $1.8 trillion American Families Plan unveiled on Wednesday.
In an address before an abbreviated joint session of Congress, Biden said his providing four more years of public education would "change the dynamic" for many Americans.
Education "is the overwhelming reason that propelled us to where we got in the 20th century," Biden said, adding America was the "best-educated, best-prepared nation in the world."
Along with expanding early childhood education, Biden proposed offering two free years of community college, a plan expected to cost $109 billion.
Greg Adams, the executive director of the Nebraska Community College Association, which enrolls more than 56,000 full-time and part-time students, said he would wait for more details, but added he was "not sure how practical" the president's plan is.
The early outline of the plan did not indicate which students would be covered, or whether states would be expected to provide a match, as in a 2015 proposal put forward by President Barack Obama.
According to the Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, the combined cost of tuition and fees across all six of Nebraska's community colleges — before federal and state grants,

fee waivers and other financial aid — was $66.7 million last year.
The coordinating commission estimated the state would need to appropriate between $15.5 million and $17.6 million as a match to the federal government's contribution, depending on how part-time and dual credit students were counted.
The American Families Plan would also increase the maximum Pell Grant award by $1,400, which the Biden administration said would provide more financial aid to low-income students seeking a college education.
In Nebraska, more than 34,000 students attending Nebraska institutions received a Pell Grant in the 2019-20 school year, according to the coordinating commission.
The average amount received: $3,930.
Adams said Congress should look at expanding Pell Grants to help part-time or nontraditional students pursue a certificate or associate's degree.
"There are some gaps Congress could do something about that would have a real impact in Nebraska," Adams said.
Roughly three of every five community college students are enrolled part-time, Adams said.
Allowing students pursuing a CDL certificate or to reenter the workforce after time away to apply for and receive a Pell Grant would fill an unmet need in the state.
By Chris Dunker

OWH Editorial: Landfill scamming revelation is a huge failure by Douglas County

Government has a responsibility to meet a fundamental test: It must carry out its services efficiently and justly. And it must make sure its actions build trust with the public.
If the court upholds the criminal charges filed against five county landfill employees and two business owners, Douglas County government will have failed that test on both counts. That would be a major failure by local government, and county officials must take action to prevent such abuses for the future.
Under the scheme, some landfill employees allegedly showed favoritism toward certain dump truck owners, who had to pay a mere $20 or $26 flat fee instead of the proper hundreds of dollars. The owners, authorities charge, then compensated the landfill workers with cash, gift cards and even hams.
No one knows the exact amount stolen. One estimate put the amount at $350,000 over a three-year period. And the abuse may have stretched across decades. Some employees told the Sheriff’s Office that the abuse extended back to 1995 — which would amount to a staggering long-term dereliction of duty by Douglas County government.
According to the legal filing, some landfill employees skewed the landfill computer system so that it gave a false reading of individual trucks — lowering their weight by tons. In some cases, the employees allowed trucks to drive by the scale without weighing.
When Waste Management, which handles garbage pickup in unincorporated Douglas County, conducted an internal investigation, it found that over 12 weeks, five employees lowered one company’s dump fees 336 times. That would equate to about $350,000 over three years.
This major revenue loss — which, again, apparently is impossible to accurately access — deprived major funds to not only the landfill property owner and the trash contractor but also to the county government and the state. Hardworking county taxpayers will hardly be pleased at how this alleged scamming siphoned off revenues that could have supported the county budget.

In the wake of this alarming situation, Douglas County officials must take action. The County Board needs answers from Kent Holmes, supervisor of Douglas County Environmental Services, on why oversight was so lax for so long. The county must adopt new procedures and monitoring protocols to ensure responsible conduct. The Legislature should consider taking a look at the state law on felony theft, since the statute of limitations currently is limited to three years.

It's rare for Douglas County government to have a scandal of this financial magnitude and scale of embarrassment. That's all the more reason for the county governmentto demonstrate now that it's taking action on needed fronts — to provide answers, hold people accountable, tighten procedures and rebuild the damage to the public trust.

OWH Erica Wassinger: Nebraska won't grow its startup community without encouraging entrepreneurs

As Nebraska's startup community evolves to its next phase, we have one constant requirement: Someone needs to find and kiss frogs so our state can get to those rare Prince or Princess Charmings.

The state's startup ecosystem is going through another round of growing pains — but the good news is that the ecosystem is growing.

Several startups are celebrating exits. New funds, including Proven Ventures, are forming to offer early-stage capital to founders. And established corporations and business leaders are participating more intentionally.

But we need still more starts. It's really simple math: More net-new starts mean more successful startups later.

As one local CEO likes to say, we need 500 starts to get to our goals.

How do we ensure more starts?

A November 2020 Kauffman Foundation report on "pre-entrepreneurship leavers" — people who had a specific business idea but decided not to proceed — found that before a new entrepreneur emerges in the ecosystem, they are most likely to:

Talk to a friend or colleague about their idea.

Research the market.

Have conversations about how to finance the concept.

Identify — and, in some cases, get early commitment — from first customers.

Consult an expert in their industry or venture.

Here's how we can give rise to more starts with intentionality at the starting line:

Focus on talent.

This work involves strong communication about the earliest phases of starting up. We need to highlight all founders with all kinds of backgrounds in all industries at all stages of starting up. The work to encourage more talent to carry their ideas forward is everyone's responsibility. And, by all means, if you're not the target customer for an entrepreneur's idea, don't squash it!

Identify problems worth solving.

Every great company starts as a problem looking for a solution. As a state, we have a tremendous amount of potential to innovate in our core industries. And we can lean into our business community's natural tendencies to band together to win. It all starts with a simple series of questions about what isn't working or isn't working well enough. Go a step farther: open source those problems and allow our state's emerging founders to solve them.

Offer an on-demand starting line.
If inspiration strikes an entrepreneur, organizations need to be ready to provide support. I'm a big believer that startups don't start on a set calendar date. As a state, Nebraska needs to be poised to support entrepreneurs in real time — from the moment they begin their Google search to startup.
Make grant programs available.
Our state's economic development department has a tremendous program through the prototype grant, but those grants require matching funds. Many entrepreneurs come to a screeching halt — interested customers, well-defined first product, strong team — when they cannot secure this much-needed R&D capital. It's especially difficult for women and our state's people of color, who have well-documented pay gaps, to compete in this matching grant game.
Ensure early customers are willing to participate.
As I have said in past columns, early customers to a startup are like the sixth (wo)man on a basketball team. These young companies must have allies in the build of their product. These startups offer a front-row to innovation for first customers, a strong talent pipeline and potential opportunities to grow new lines of business. I'm encouraged to see the Greater Omaha Chamber establish a First Customer Network to ensure entrepreneurs and the broader business community have open lines of communication.
It's important to note the distinct difference between capturing existing startups and funneling them through growth-related programs. It is another entirely to have programs that start new startups. Across our state, whose focus is on starting startups?
Erica Wassinger is a general partner at Proven Ventures, a Burlington Capital fund.

GII: Legislative action enabling casino opening

These past weeks have been an exciting time in Grand Island. We've finally gotten past the cold of winter and had the announcement for Fonner Park's casino partner. In Lincoln, we are on the home-stretch of the legislative session.
This Monday marked day 67 of the 90-day legislative session and, assuming everything remains consistent, we should be finished with the session on our scheduled date of June 10. We've approved the budget and begun to focus our attention on legislation with taxing implications, including legislation limiting property tax levies and reducing the tax burden on Nebraska retirees.
LB371, my bill allowing casino facilities to consider operating when a nearby fair is ongoing, has passed and been signed by Gov. Pete Ricketts. I appreciate the governor's affirmation of this bill and the work that went into its passage, especially the help of Chris Kotulak and Mark Landis. LB371 will come into effect after the 2021 State Fair, so we will be able to fully preclude the implications of the old statutory language once the new casino facility is built.
On that note, I'd like to congratulate Fonner Park on the successful announcement of their casino partnership with Elite Casino Resorts of Iowa. The act of identifying the best possible partner for Grand Island and Fonner Park was a timely and involved process, and it's abundantly clear that the leadership at Fonner rose to the challenge and made a great choice for their casino partner. Casinos are an international business and are within an industry filed with multinational corporations that are prepared to open another formulaic facility whenever the opportunity arises. These casinos are by no means subpar facilities, but when it comes to Grand Island, a company that knows Nebraska and is prepared to fully engage with the community is obviously preferable. Elite Casino Resorts is that locally-oriented company, and I am excited to see how their operations in Grand Island flourish

over the next few years. Furthermore, we should be proud of the fact that the architect who designed the casino, Nathan Casteel, is originally from Grand Island.
LB224, my other bill that has progressed through the full Legislature, was also signed by Gov. Ricketts. LB224 is my bill that removes the requirement that an appointed county surveyor, should one not be elected, must reside outside of the county they serve. LB224 was an intuitive change and is another step toward clearing the way for counties to make the best choices for their own operations.
As we approach the end of the 2021 legislative session, my staff and I are turning our attention to interim studies and 2022 legislation. If you have a recommendation for an interim study, a research project that typically looks into an aspect of state government or state statute and how it can be improved, please reach out to my office. We only have a limited window for the introduction of interim studies, May 19 being the deadline, so any suggestions should be made within the next week or two. Please also reach out if you have proposals for 2022 legislation.
As always, contact me with your support, opposition or questions on any legislative bill or issue. My legislative aide, Gerald Fraas, and administrative assistant, Amanda Johnson, are also available to assist you with matters related to the state of Nebraska and the Legislature. You can follow along with the Nebraska Legislature at www.nebraskalegislature.gov.
Ray Aguilar
Sen. Ray Aguilar of Grand Island represents District 35 in the Nebraska Legislature.

OWH: Nebraska and Iowa congressional members react to Biden's address to Congress

Nebraska and Iowa lawmakers issued statements Wednesday reacting to President Joe Biden's first joint address to Congress.
Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said that in his address, Biden "laid out a policy wish list that he wants Americans to pay for through major tax hikes."
"This is not fair to hardworking Nebraska families, communities, and small businesses," Fischer said. "The American people expect the president to keep his word, deliver on his inaugural promise of bipartisanship and unity, and work with a 50-50 Senate to build consensus."
In advance of the address, Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, a Republican representing Nebraska's 1st District, criticized the reach of the federal government under Biden.
"Our earlier bipartisan emergency measures to turn the corner on this harsh pandemic should not become an excuse for a hostile takeover by the federal government of every aspect of American life," Fortenberry said.
"The question about the President's expansive spending proposals outlined tonight is not whether we spend or not, but what makes sense," he said. "Getting past COVID and 'returning to normal' also means returning to normal governance and normal government expenditures."
Iowa's two Republican senators, Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst, criticized the lack of bipartisanship in the early days of the Biden administration.
"President Biden campaigned on unifying a divided nation," Grassley said in a statement. "Part of that means working with a Congress divided right down the middle. Thus far he's done very little to back up his words from the campaign trail, and he's stood by while others in his party use divisive rhetoric that only serves to further inflame discord in our nation."
In a video response, Ernst criticized the lack of bipartisan support for a COVID relief package passed earlier this year.

“Instead of working with Republicans to pass a COVID relief bill, President Biden ignored efforts by Senate Republicans to seek a bipartisan solution and fast-tracked trillions of dollars in non-COVID spending in a strictly partisan fashion,” Ernst said.
“And now, President Biden is blowing up a traditionally bipartisan issue — infrastructure — and is looking to pass a partisan, over 2 trillion dollar package that spends less on roads and bridges than it does on elements of the Green New Deal and other progressive priorities.”
By Jessica Wade

AP: Biden's declaration: America's democracy 'is rising anew'

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden declared that “America is rising anew” as he called for an expansion of federal programs to drive the economy past the coronavirus pandemic and broadly extend the social safety net on a scale not seen in decades.
Biden's nationally televised address to Congress, his first, raised the stakes for his ability to sell his plans to voters of both parties, even if Republican lawmakers prove resistant. The Democratic president is following Wednesday night's speech by pushing his plans in person, beginning in Georgia on Thursday and then on to Pennsylvania and Virginia in the days ahead.
In the address, Biden pointed optimistically to the nation's emergence from the coronavirus scourge as a moment for America to prove that its democracy can still work and maintain primacy in the world.
Speaking in highly personal terms while demanding massive structural changes, the president marked his first 100 days in office by proposing a $1.8 trillion investment in children, families and education to help rebuild an economy devastated by the virus and compete with rising global competitors.
His speech represented both an audacious vision and a considerable gamble. He is governing with the most slender of majorities in Congress, and even some in his own party have blanched at the price tag of his proposals.
At the same time, the speech highlighted Biden's fundamental belief in the power of government as a force for good, even at a time when it is so often the object of scorn.
“I can report to the nation: America is on the move again,” he said. “Turning peril into possibility. Crisis into opportunity. Setback into strength.”
While the ceremonial setting of the Capitol was the same as usual, the visual images were unlike any previous presidential address. Members of Congress wore masks and were seated apart because of pandemic restrictions. Outside the grounds were still surrounded by fencing after insurrectionists in January protesting Biden's election stormed to the doors of the House chamber where he gave his address.
“America is ready for takeoff. We are working again. Dreaming again. Discovering again. Leading the world again. We have shown each other and the world: There is no quit in America,” Biden said.
This year’s scene at the front of the House chamber also had a historic look: For the first time, a female vice president, Kamala Harris, was seated behind the chief executive. And she was next to another woman, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.
The first ovation came as Biden greeted "Madam Vice President.” He added, “No president has ever said those words from this podium, and it’s about time.”
The chamber was so sparsely populated that individual claps could be heard echoing off the walls. Yet Biden said, “I have never been more confident or more optimistic about America. We have

stared into an abyss of insurrection and autocracy — of pandemic and pain — and 'We the People' did not flinch."

At times, the president plainly made his case for democracy itself.

Biden demanded that the government take care of its own as a powerful symbol to the world of an America willing to forcefully follow its ideals and people. He confronted an issue rarely faced by an American president, namely that in order to compete with autocracies like China, the nation needs "to prove that democracy still works" after his predecessor's baseless claims of election fraud and the ensuing attack on the U.S. Capitol.

"Can our democracy overcome the lies, anger, hate and fears that have pulled us apart?" he asked. "America's adversaries – the autocrats of the world – are betting it can't. They believe we are too full of anger and division and rage. They look at the images of the mob that assaulted this Capitol as proof that the sun is setting on American democracy. They are wrong. And we have to prove them wrong."

Biden repeatedly hammered home that his plans would put Americans back to work, restoring the millions of jobs lost to the virus. He laid out an extensive proposal for universal preschool, two years of free community college, $225 billion for child care and monthly payments of at least $250 to parents. His ideas target frailties that were uncovered by the pandemic, and he argues that economic growth will best come from taxing the rich to help the middle class and the poor.

Biden's speech also provided an update on combating the COVID-19 crisis he was elected to tame, showcasing hundreds of millions of vaccinations and relief checks delivered to help offset the devastation wrought by a virus that has killed more than 573,000 people in the United States. He also championed his $2.3 trillion infrastructure plan, a staggering figure to be financed by higher taxes on corporations.

His appeals were often emotive and personal, talking about Americans needing food and rental assistance. He also spoke to members of Congress as a peer as much as a president, singling out Sen. Mitch McConnell, the Republicans' leader, to praise him and speaking as one at a professional homecoming.

The GOP members in the chamber largely stayed silent, even refusing to clap for seemingly universal goals like reducing childhood poverty. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina said, in the Republicans' designated response, that Biden was more rhetoric than action.

"Our president seems like a good man," Scott said. "But our nation is starving for more than empty platitudes."

The president spoke against a backdrop of the weakening but still lethal pandemic, staggering unemployment and a roiling debate about police violence against Blacks. He also used his address to touch on the broader national reckoning over race in America, urging legislation be passed by the anniversary of George Floyd's death next month, and to call on Congress to act on the thorny issues of prescription drug pricing, gun control and modernizing the nation's immigration system.

In his first three months in office, Biden has signed a $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill — passed without a single GOP vote — and has shepherded direct payments of $1,400 per person to more than 160 million households. Hundreds of billions of dollars in aid will soon arrive for state and local governments, enough money that overall U.S. growth this year could eclipse 6% — a level not seen since 1984. Administration officials are betting that it will be enough to bring back all 8.4 million jobs lost to the pandemic by next year.

A significant amount proposed just Wednesday would ensure that eligible families receive at least $250 monthly per child through 2025, extending the enhanced tax credit that was part of Biden's

COVID-19 aid. There would be more than $400 billion for subsidized child care and free preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.
Another combined $425 billion would go to permanently reduce health insurance premiums for people who receive coverage through the Affordable Care Act, as well a national paid family and medical leave program. Further spending would be directed toward Pell Grants, historically Black and tribal institutions and to allow people to attend community college tuition-free for two years. Funding all of this would be a series of tax increases on the wealthy that would raise about $1.5 trillion over a decade. Republican lawmakers in Congress so far have balked at the price tags of Biden's plans, complicating the chances of passage in a deeply divided Washington.

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