From: Shelburn, Andrew
To: Shelburn, Andrew
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 5-09-22
Date: Monday, May 9, 2022 8:46:51 AM

AG VALLEY CO-OP

Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	May 2022	7.62	-15.00	07:45
Corn	Oct 2022	6.65	-45.00	07:45
Milo	May 2022	7.17	-60.00	07:45
Milo	Oct 2022	6.55	-55.00	07:45
Soybeans	May 2022	15.02	-103.00	07:45
Soybeans	Oct 2022	13.85	-70.00	07:45
Wheat	May 2022	11.03	-85.00	07:57
Wheat	Jul 2022	11.03	-85.00	07:57

TV and Radio

NCN: Last minute 'Beauty Pageant' ad elevates Ricketts-Herbster brawl (no video)
NCN: Remark your Herbster-Slama calendar (no video)
CNN: Trump came to Nebraska to defend candidate facing sexual misconduct allegations, but voters aren't so sure either of those things will matter on Tuesday (no video)
NPM: Farmers in the Plains Are in 'Dire Straits' Due to Drought, Wildfire Conditions

Governor

Jewish Press: Nebraska Becomes First State to Inaugurate Jewish American Heritage Month
OWH: Nebraska medical marijuana backers planning low-budget, grassroots petition push
Columbus Telegram: Nebraska officials wait on final ruling
LJS: Don Walton: Current Nebraska state senators have had unique legislative experience
OWH: Nebraska's GOP primary for governor: The power of Trump, switching parties and negativity
LJS: Republican governor candidates race to the wire
AP: 2022 midterms: What to watch in Nebraska, West Virginia
Nebraska Examiner: Evnen faces two challengers in GOP primary for Nebraska Secretary of State
Nebraska Examiner: Herbster, Pillen in dead heat in Nebraska GOP governor's race, analyst says
Washington Examiner: 'We think for ourselves': Nebraska GOP governor candidate expects victory without Trump endorsement

Coronavirus

OWH: Books, buses, bleachers and bathrooms: Schools have long shopping list with federal 'rescue' aid
OWH: How are Nebraska school districts spending federal COVID relief?

State, Local and Regional

OWH: Rains have eased drought and fire risk in Nebraska — for now

OWH: Douglas County election commissioner predicts potential record-breaking turnout for primary election

OWH: Nebraska Democrats make bid to become early presidential primary in 2024

OWH: Court hearing scheduled for June in Herbster, Slama legal battle

OWH: Nebraska health officials report 9 cases of liver illness in children

LJS: Former Jefferson County deputy among six officers who have certifications revoked

Opinion

OWH Editorial: Optimism found in selection of new Greater Omaha Chamber leader

OWH Editorial: Tuesday is the Nebraska primary. Don't forget to vote.

OWH Midlands Voices: The secret is in Nebraska's topsoil — and regenerative practices

OWH Public Pulse

1. Thanks for zipping it
2. Learn the merge
3. Benefits of Omagro
4. Aggressive marketing
5. Alternative transportation
6. Student loan debt
7. Protect abortion rights
8. Gaslighting governor

LJS Editorial, 5/8: 4 lessons learned from debate over Wilderness Crossing development

LJS Letters

1. Support end to Yemen war
2. Mental health a top priority
3. What planet does Page live on?
4. Keeping faith in human nature
5. Station needs bicycle racks

National/Federal

Nebraska Examiner: State Sen. Tony Vargas, Alisha Shelton square off in Omaha-area Democratic U.S. House primary

Montana Free Press: Railroaders quit after BNSF institutes ‘draconian’ attendance policy

AP: Many US urban areas to become rural

Jewish Press: Nebraska Becomes First State to Inaugurate Jewish American Heritage Month

Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts made an historic decision on Israel’s Independence Day, during a celebratory event at the Nebraska Capitol Building, to inaugurate May as Jewish American Heritage Month in the State of Nebraska. The governor led the nation in becoming the first American state to do so.

He also proclaimed the official adoption by the State of Nebraska of the International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism, bringing the number of American states that have adopted or endorsed the IHRA Definition to a total of 27, plus the District of Columbia.

A majority of American states now officially recognize the definition.

"We've seen a disturbing rise in antisemitism across the country," said Governor Ricketts. "Here in Nebraska, we're not immune to it. Someone painted a swastika on a synagogue here in Lincoln. We see this rise in antisemitism and must be aggressive in combating it. We must let people know we will stand against hate.

"When we see antisemitism we have to take very strong steps immediately to combat it. That's why we want to make this proclamation to recognize the Jewish community's contributions to Nebraska and the nation."

Israel's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Oded Forer sent a letter of appreciation to Governor Ricketts for his adoption of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism and for the deep ties between Israel and Nebraska.

The letter was read at the event, in which he also commended the "significant gesture to recognize the deep and substantial contribution Jewish Americans have made and continue to make to Nebraska in particular and to the United States as a whole."

The event was cosponsored by the Combat Antisemitism Movement (CAM), a leading proponent of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism which has worked to have it adopted and endorsed in the US and around the world.

Other partners included the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Hadassah The Women's Zionist Organization of America, the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History and the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law.

Representatives from each of Nebraska's eight synagogues, and the Jewish Federation of Omaha were in attendance as well.

"With the State of Nebraska's endorsement, the majority of U.S. states have now adopted the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, which is now a tipping point for its success, meaning that only a minority of states have yet to do so," said Elan Carr, a Board Member of CAM, and former US Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating antisemitism.

"While there remains resistance to the IHRA Definition, it is a minority voice and is becoming increasingly drowned out by decision-makers and opinion-shapers across the US and the world who are placing their authority behind it and leaving less room for antisemites to espouse their hate and intolerance."

Nebraska Holocaust survivor and philanthropist Milton "Milt" Kleinberg said, "I'm Jewish and I have always loved the free state of Nebraska. I could have taken my business to Texas, but Nebraska is home, and our governor is a friend."

Other speakers included Consul General of Israel to the Midwest Yinam Cohen, and Nebraska Secretary of State Robert Evnan.

Nearly 900 entities around the world have adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism since 2016, including 37 nations, such as United States, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia and France, according to a report released this year by CAM.

By Hani Levi Julian

OWH: Nebraska medical marijuana backers planning low-budget, grassroots petition push

LINCOLN — Leaders of a medical marijuana petition drive announced plans Friday to mobilize supporters for an unprecedented all-volunteer signature-gathering effort.

State Sen. Anna Wishart of Lincoln, the petition drive's co-chairwoman, said the shift in strategy was forced by the loss of two major donors, which left Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana without the $1 million needed for a more traditional signature-gathering effort.

But, in an online press conference, she said the volunteers and families who have been working on the effort refused to quit.

"We have come too far and have too much support to give up," Wishart said. "It will be unprecedented for a petition to be successful without a traditional paid signature drive, but if any campaign can do this, it is Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana.

"We collected over 196,000 signatures in 2020 during a global pandemic," she said. "We have an 80% approval rating across the state. I truly believe that where there is a will, there is a way."

The group hopes the way will be through tapping Nebraskans who want to see medical marijuana as an option in the state. The strategy will be to encourage registered voters to seek out places to sign petitions, as well as to volunteer to collect signatures themselves.

Wishart said petitions will be made available at some 100 businesses across the state for people to sign during regular hours. The businesses include a number of vape and CBD shops, as well as health food stores and others. A list and map of those businesses is available at: nebraskamarijuana.org/sign.

People also will be encouraged to set up local drive-through signing events, which could be as simple as a table at the end of a residential driveway. Or they can volunteer to collect signatures at public events, such as the College World Series or a local farmer's market.

The last petition drive to make the ballot without paid circulators was a proposed constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage. The drive succeeded because of networks of church volunteers. The amendment passed in 2000 but has since been declared unconstitutional.

In late March, leaders of the medical marijuana petition drive announced the loss of two people who had been expected to make a major contribution to the current legalization campaign. One of those donors, who contributed to the group's last effort, died in a plane crash, Wishart said. A second person was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

At the time, Wishart expressed confidence the group could meet its $500,000 fundraising goal by May 1. But they reported donations of only $53,792 through April 25, with $14,467 given in the last month.

In 2020, the campaign raised about $2.5 million overall, securing more than 182,000 signatures — well above the number needed to put the issue on the ballot. Though it surpassed the requirement, it was disqualified by the Nebraska Supreme Court for containing more than one subject.

This time around, the campaign is proposing two petitions for new laws, which require valid signatures from 7% of registered voters by July 7 to make the ballot.

Based on May 3 voter registration figures, that means each needs nearly 87,000 valid signatures statewide. The total needs to include signatures from 5% of registered voters in 38 of Nebraska's 93 counties.

Crista Eggers, the statewide campaign coordinator and the mother of a child with drug-resistant epilepsy, said the group has collected about 25,000 signatures on each petition so far. That includes 1,213 gathered within the last 24 hours.
One petition would protect patients with serious health conditions from being arrested for possessing and using limited amounts of marijuana when recommended by health care providers. The second would create and regulate a system for producing and distributing cannabis for medical purposes.
The division of the two petitions is based on the legal issues outlined in the 2020 state high court decision.
Legalization efforts have faced opposition from Gov. Pete Ricketts, who has called marijuana a "dangerous drug." His office did not respond Friday to a message seeking comment about the petition drive's announcement.
Earlier this year, the governor appeared in an ad sponsored by Smart Approaches to Marijuana Nebraska, a group that opposes legalization. In the ad, Ricketts argued that the only difference between "medical" and "recreational" marijuana is the terminology.
Representatives from two other major petition drives reported Friday that their respective signature-gathering efforts are going well. Sen. Terrell McKinney of Omaha, a sponsor of Raise the Wage Nebraska, said he expects to have an update in a couple of weeks on the petition to increase the state's minimum wage.
Roscoe Ricketts, an associate with the political consulting group Axiom Strategies, said the Citizens for Voter ID petition drive is "on track" for hitting its signature target. The petition seeks a constitutional amendment requiring people to show valid photo identification before voting. Roscoe Ricketts is the governor's son.
By Martha Stoddard

Columbus Telegram: Nebraska officials wait on final ruling

Nebraska officials are reportedly waiting for a final ruling to be released from the U.S. Supreme Court before potentially proceeding with another attempt to ban abortions in the state.
A leaked draft of a ruling from the Supreme Court suggests the possible overturning of Roe v. Wade. The draft, which was leaked May 2 by Politico, comes from the case Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, which challenges Mississippi's ban on abortion after 15 weeks.
A final ruling in the case is expected in June or July.
Chief Justice John Roberts confirmed the draft as authentic on May 3.
The World-Herald reported this week that if the Supreme Court's opinion remains unchanged from the leaked draft, Gov. Pete Ricketts would call for a special session in hopes of passing a law that would ban abortion in Nebraska.
Several officials noted the urgency behind waiting for the final ruling.
State Sen. Mike Moser of Columbus said Ricketts addressed the matter during a town hall held in Columbus earlier this week, which Moser had also attended.
"They're waiting for the official word from the Supreme Court as to what the ruling is and then at that point, they'll look at whether they want to call a special session," Moser said. "He's been talking to the speaker, Mike Hilgers, about the situation, how to move forward."

Nebraska Right to Life Executive Director Sandy Danek expressed similar comments.
“We don't have an official decision from the court and the leak, very discouraged about that,” Danek said. “No matter where you're at on this issue, this unprecedented breach of the court's confidentiality is very disturbing. So it makes it somewhat bittersweet.”
Nebraska state law allows abortions up to 20 weeks after conception, according to the Omaha World-Herald.
This past legislative session, which ended last month, a “trigger” bill that would have prohibited abortions in the event of Roe v. Wade being overturned failed to pass. The bill – LB933, which was co-introduced by Moser – would have made it a crime for health care professionals to perform an abortion but would allow it if the mother’s life was in danger.
“Nebraska needs to have a law establishing would abortion be legal or not, and if it is at what level so that's why the governor then will call a special session and we will look to take that same bill back to the pro-life senators,” Danek said. “…It would probably be a bill very comparable to what we tried to pass last month, and we'll have to try again.”
Danek noted that there’s a projected 50-50 split in the number of states that would either outlaw abortion or keep it legal at some level. Nebraska, she added, is projected to outlaw it.
“Ultimately this is about protecting women and their children,” Danek said. “I have been commonly saying that a woman should not have to feel pitted against her own child when in an unplanned pregnancy and that we should be offering her support for whatever her challenges are so that she can make a life-affirming decision.”
Columbus Women’s Healthcare declined a request to be interviewed.
Sarah Stoesz, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood North Central States, said in a provided statement that the organization’s doors remain open and will every day for abortion care for as long as legally possible.
“This leaked opinion is horrifying. We all knew the day could come that safe and legal abortion would be decimated in our country, and now we are facing that reality. It is true that individual Americans may have different moral views on abortion, and this is exactly why the strong majority of people in our country believe that this decision must be left up to individuals themselves,” Stoesz said.
"We will not accept this decision without a fight—we are ready and will mobilize, organize, and stand up in every corner of our land. Our voices will be heard. And Planned Parenthood will never, ever abandon our patients. Planned Parenthood is here for good.”
By Hannah Schrodt

LJS: Don Walton: Current Nebraska state senators have had unique legislative experience

If you measure the legislative experience in terms of variety of challenges, current members of the Nebraska Legislature certainly are getting their money's worth.
Perhaps two special sessions, one already in the books to complete redistricting tasks that occur only once every decade, and another that may be in the works if the U.S. Supreme Court proceeds to overrule Roe v. Wade, leaving it to the states to determine abortion rights.

And there was a legislative session conducted in the midst of a pandemic with safeguards in place. And a legislative session overflowing with an abundance of revenue and opportunity, with more than a billion dollars of federal pandemic recovery assistance to allocate along with a surge of unanticipated state revenue.

This has been a unique legislative experience for the senators who have held office during this period of unusual challenge and opportunity.

It doesn't pay much, it requires personal sacrifice and some very long days, but being a member of the Legislature is a treasured experience for state senators and perhaps especially so in Nebraska where both the one-house system and the nonpartisan feature give each individual senator unique power.

They are uniquely independent from party dictate, punishment or reward within this legislative system. No majority or minority leaders; no partisan whips; no party agenda or party caucuses; no gubernatorial dictate or control unless an individual senator decides to cede his or her own independence.

The Legislature loses important and talented senators every election year, but this year's losses are going to be unusually large and impactful.

Gone at the end of the year will be some of the best and the brightest, independent thinkers and doers who, in former Sen. Kathy Campbell's words, were the kind of senators who parked their party jerseys at the door.

Just as she did.

For those who remain, this rather dramatic change in membership opens up new opportunities for individual senators to grow and to lead.

And you can spot some of them already.

* * *

Following selection of a Republican gubernatorial nominee on Tuesday, Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue will move into a share of the political spotlight that has shone almost exclusively on the GOP primary race as attention pivots to the Republican and Democratic nominees.

With the support of her party, the two-term state senator has a clear path to the Democratic nomination in a two-candidate primary race. And then comes the really hard part.

Winning a statewide contest in Nebraska is a daunting challenge for a Democrat today, but she's a fighter and as a former member of the city council in Bellevue she has identified an issue that she hopes might have some special appeal for rural voters as she begins the struggle for statewide votes.

Blood has proposed a constitutional amendment that would require the state to pay the full costs of any new programs or increased levels of service imposed upon local governments, all generally known as unfunded mandates.

That would make certain the new costs are not borne by local property taxpayers.

Democratic nominees for statewide office are competitive in metropolitan Omaha and Lincoln today, but they run into a buzz saw west of Lincoln where property taxes are the paramount issue.

Blood was born in McCook and graduated from high school in Hastings and will try to connect with rural Nebraska voters as she competes against heavy odds.

The urban-rural political split in Nebraska is increasingly dramatic.

In 2018, both Gov. Pete Ricketts and Sen. Deb Fischer trailed in their re-election bids in both Omaha and Lincoln while former Rep. Jeff Fortenberry ran behind in Lincoln and Rep. Don Bacon lost in Omaha.

But they were all re-elected with strong Republican support outside the big cities.

In 2020, President Trump lost in both Lincoln and Omaha in his bid for re-election while both Fortenberry and Bacon once again trailed behind their Democratic challengers in the major cities in their districts.
But all three won with Republican votes outside the two cities.
Here was the Trump vote in western and central Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District: Trump, 222,179; Joe Biden, 65,854.
Finishing up
* You won't find his name in print, but Donald Trump has an invisible presence on the ballot in Nebraska on Tuesday. His trip to the state to support Charles Herbster, along with a follow-up tele-rally, tests his current political strength and influence in a highly competitive Republican gubernatorial primary election and is being closely tracked by national media.
* Plenty of healthy growth and development in Lincoln, including construction of new high schools and ongoing redevelopment downtown, but it sure would be nice to begin to see visible progress now in redeveloping the Pershing Center block.
* Whether you like the approaching U.S. Supreme Court decision on the challenge to Roe v. Wade or not, there's rather clear evidence that recent court nominees were either misleading, or much worse, in suggesting to senators that the decision was settled law under the legal doctrine of stare decisis during their confirmation hearings.
* The Nebraska Democratic Party is vying to be one of five states chosen to host the earliest Democratic presidential primary elections in 2024.
By Don Walton

OWH: Nebraska's GOP primary for governor: The power of Trump, switching parties and negativity

Nebraska's Republican gubernatorial primary on Tuesday will not only answer the basic question of who stands a good chance of leading the state: It'll provide a window into the mindset of the state's Republican primary voters, including to what extent they're influenced by former President Donald Trump.
It'll also test the sway of, by some accounts, an unprecedented barrage of negativity — and whether the Republican Party, flush with thousands of voters who switched their party registration, can coalesce in the wake of a divisive primary.
At least one prominent Republican, Gov. Pete Ricketts, expressed some reluctance regarding that last question, depending on the outcome.
By most accounts, the race is down to three candidates: Conklin Co. CEO Charles W. Herbster, hog producer and University of Nebraska regent Jim Pillen and State Sen. Brett Lindstrom.
Former Sen. Theresa Thibodeau, who entered the race months after the others, has consistently come fourth in polling, with enough of a share to affect the outcome but not enough to be considered a front-runner. She also trails in fundraising, with a significant gap separating her from the other three.
Especially in a national context, eyes are on Herbster, who has long touted his ties and loyalty to Trump and echoes his rhetoric. The former president's endorsement gave his largely self-funded

campaign an early boost and ultimately came to define it.
"The biggest issue that's in play right now — in my opinion, probably going to decide the race next Tuesday — is the Trump endorsement," former Gov. Dave Heineman said, noting that Trump has particularly strong support outside the Omaha-Lincoln corridor.
The former president has sought to exert his influence in the party by selectively endorsing scores of candidates across the country.
In the Indiana and Ohio primaries last week, all 22 Trump-endorsed candidates won, according to Politico, including in Ohio's contentious Republican primary for U.S. Senate. In that race, four leading candidates vied for the endorsement. Trump backed "Hillbilly Elegy" author JD Vance, and he emerged victorious.
Polls from the last few months showed a tight GOP primary race in Nebraska. And Herbster is facing allegations from eight women, including a Republican state senator, who say he groped them at events in recent years. He has denied the allegations and sued Sen. Julie Slama for defamation. She countersued, alleging battery.
In the wake of those allegations, Trump visited Nebraska for a rally with Herbster. Thursday, Trump returned virtually for a brief, dial-in "tele-rally" where he vouched for Herbster and said he's innocent.
Multiple women accused the former president of sexual assault, but that did not prevent Trump from carrying Nebraska in 2016 and winning all but one of the state's five electoral votes in 2020.
"With your vote for Charles in the primary, you can give a stinging rebuke to the RINOs (Republicans in Name Only) and sellouts and losers who are so poorly representing your state," Trump said Thursday.
The impact of Trump's endorsement in this race, especially amid serious allegations, isn't certain. But several observers of Nebraska politics told The World-Herald it's a key reason, if not the sole reason, that Herbster has stayed competitive.
"Primary voters, in particular, pay attention to what President Trump has to say," Heineman said. "And, when he endorses a candidate, it's a big plus. Is it enough? Hey, we'll know on Tuesday night."
Kevin Smith, chair of University of Nebraska-Lincoln's political science department, sees a larger narrative.
"The way that I see this is: This is a tale of different wings of the Republican party kind of duking it out in the primary," he said.
While Herbster's loyalties are to Trump, Pillen is backed by Ricketts, the highest-profile Republican in Nebraska and a dominant force in the state party, as well as the Nebraska Farm Bureau. People may consider him a business and establishment candidate, though Pillen rejects that label.
Lindstrom has presented himself as a traditional conservative with experience, who's not beholden to either of those camps. His biggest endorsement is from Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert.
"If I'm Charles Herbster, I worry that the floor of Trump supporters is also my ceiling, that I haven't attracted any new voters," political consultant Perre Neilan said. "Jim Pillen is 'slow and steady wins the race,' and Brett has found his narrow path of those looking for a younger, fresh face as an alternative to the far right."
All three candidates have been the target of negative advertising, which has flooded the race at a volume that observers said is unprecedented in modern times. Many of the ads have come from third-party groups, including one that received nearly $1.3 million from Ricketts in March and April. That political action committee, Conservative Nebraska, focused on Herbster at first, then shifted focus to target Lindstrom with claims that he's not a true conservative. Last week, it came out with

two new anti-Herbster ads.
The impact of the negative ads is another unknown — and that's especially true of Lindstrom, said Philip Young, a political consultant and former executive director of the state GOP. Lindstrom has been a frequent target in recent weeks, but vowed early on to run a positive campaign.
Former U.S. Rep. John Cavanaugh, a Democrat, said he had never seen candidates repeatedly accuse their competitors of illegal activity as they have this cycle. He mentioned an ad from the Herbster campaign that targeted critical race theory in the context of Pillen's time as regent, which had no factual basis.
"I just find the whole process of the Republican primary advertising to be horrific," Cavanaugh said. "It's certainly unprecedented."
Heineman said voters are frustrated by all the negativity and suggested it may result in lower voter turnout (Secretary of State Bob Evnen's rough prediction is 35% voter turnout, which would nearly match the state record of 35.1% for a gubernatorial primary). Heineman commended Lindstrom for running a positive campaign.
"The campaigns have been more about why you shouldn't vote for the other guy, instead of 'Why should you vote for me?' " he said. "I think that's unfortunate."
Ryan Horn, president of Bullhorn Communications and a Republican media strategist, pointed to one ad in particular, which he believes to be a national first: Herbster's ad aimed at discrediting Slama's allegations.
"Nebraska created a first in a governor's race in 1986, when, for the first time in American history, both candidates from both major parties for governor of the state were women," Horn said. "This is a much less glorious milestone."
Yet another dynamic that has more recently come to the fore: a wave of new Republican voters. State data show the Republican Party gained nearly 8,500 registered voters between January and Monday's registration deadline, while the Democratic Party lost about 8,100 and there were about 2,800 fewer nonpartisan voters.
Anecdotally, it appears that many of those who switched parties plan to vote for Lindstrom. And, even considering that some of the perceived shift is actually attributable to deaths, moves and new voters, they could make up a meaningful sum.
A percentage point or two could be the difference between winning and losing, Smith said. The last time there was an open race for governor, in 2014, Ricketts won by a margin of about 2,350.
"Eight thousand votes is a huge number," Neilan said. "If those all go to one candidate, it could make up more than 10% of their total vote."
Horn said yet another major factor could be turnout, considering the relative growth in Nebraska's cities and large towns versus rural Nebraska.
The 2020 Census showed that Douglas, Sarpy and Lancaster Counties alone grew by 136,381 people and now account for 56% of Nebraska's total population, while many rural areas of the state lost population.
One thing seems certain: The outcome of this bitterly contested and often negative race stands to make a lasting impact on Nebraska politics. Will a fractured party unite behind the winning candidate this time?
"There's a lot of mudslinging that's been going on and, you know, cleaning yourself off after the primary can be a significant challenge," Smith said.
Ricketts, who has said that Herbster would be a "terrible governor" and that Lindstrom isn't a true conservative, suggested in a statement that he'd support whoever wins — but he offered a vague,

Herbster-specific caveat.
“I have consistently supported the winner of Republican primaries and believe unity behind our candidates and principles is great for our state,” Ricketts said in a statement. “However, I would not be able to support Charles W. Herbster unless he is able to resolve these allegations of sexual misconduct by eight women.”
By Sara Gentzler

LJS: Republican governor candidates race to the wire

It's been a wild ride, but the Republican gubernatorial candidates who have jockeyed for position with promises of tax relief and pledges of conservative government have finally reached the end of the trail.
Voters will determine the winner of the marathon yearlong race for the GOP nomination at the primary election on Tuesday.
There have been ups and downs on the long and bumpy road to Election Day, with Falls City cattle producer and businessman Charles Herbster running out front most of the way as measured by candidate polling results.
Armed by his close ties to former President Donald Trump and self-funding his campaign, Herbster galloped into an early lead.
But late-in-the-campaign allegations that Herbster had improperly touched or groped eight women, including state Sen. Julie Slama of Sterling, during public events threw a block in his path as the candidates rounded the turn and headed down the final stretch with Columbus hog producer Jim Pillen of Columbus finishing strong and Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha riding into contention.
Adding a little drama ahead of the finish line, Trump's decision to fly to Nebraska to give a boost to Herbster in the final days stirred a storm.
Literally.
Trump's scheduled appearance at I-80 Speedway between Lincoln and Omaha had to be postponed for a couple of days due to the forecast of heavy rain and high winds coinciding with his originally anticipated arrival.
The former president ultimately showed up to endorse Herbster during a long and rambling speech two days later. Herbster had been his agricultural adviser during Trump's presidency and subsequently became a familiar figure at White House events, developing relationships with Trump family members and advisers who helped support his campaign.
Trump's endorsement presumably could be especially golden in the heavily Republican counties of western and central Nebraska where statewide GOP primary elections often tend to be won.
Meanwhile, Pillen, a University of Nebraska regent who has been endorsed by Gov. Pete Ricketts and a host of GOP stalwarts and luminaries, soldiered ahead with a full schedule of campaign stops all across the state, steadily gathering visibility and momentum for a final surge.
And along the way Lindstrom's campaign appeared to take off.
Polling evidence that Lindstrom was suddenly gaining ground triggered a negative TV ad assault directed at the Omaha financial adviser and two-term state senator.
Perhaps even more consequently, thousands of Democrats appeared to be changing their voter registration to Republican in order to participate in choosing the GOP gubernatorial nominee at the

May 10 primary election.
Informed political speculation suggests that most of those votes would likely be cast for Lindstrom, who appears to be the least doctrinaire or partisan Republican candidate and is an experienced member of the nonpartisan Legislature with a working knowledge of state government along with a record of tax reduction.
Democratic voters who have changed their registration to participate in the Republican primary election are motivated in large part by the reality that Nebraska governors essentially have been chosen in GOP primary elections for the last couple of decades with Democratic nominees struggling to compete statewide.
Ben Nelson was the last Democrat to be elected governor when he was re-elected to a second term in 1994.
Pillen has centered on the need for additional property tax relief, his pro-life credentials, support for Second Amendment gun rights and opposition to any teaching of critical race theory in Nebraska schools. CRT examines the intersection of race, society and law in the United States.
Herbster has said Nebraska needs to "completely rehaul" its tax system and replace it with "a new consumption-based tax system." He has voiced support for pro-life and Second Amendment positions while also stressing the need to "defend each state's right to conduct and oversee its election process."
Lindstrom has pointed to his success in gaining legislative approval of his bill to completely phase out state income taxation of Social Security benefits along with an overall legislative record of supporting tax relief. He proposes action to "cut red tape for small business" and identifies himself as pro-life and as a supporter of Second Amendment gun rights.
Although his name won't be on the ballot, Trump could conceivably be a big factor in determining the final outcome.
Last week, all 22 of the candidates he endorsed in Ohio and Indiana primary elections, including Senate candidate J. D. Vance in Ohio, won. Vance prevailed in a four-candidate scrap with 32% of the vote.
What could be developing in the final days of the campaign might be a potential repeat of the down-to-the-wire 2014 Republican gubernatorial primary election in Nebraska, which Ricketts won with just 26.5% of the vote.
There are nine Republican candidates for governor on the ballot this year, including former state Sen. Theresa Thibodeau of Omaha, but only Pillen, Herbster and Lindstrom appear to have had the resources needed to win.
In 2014, four well-resourced candidates split most of the vote although there were six names on the Republican ballot. That, in effect, reduced the percentage of votes required to win.
Ricketts ultimately defeated Attorney General Jon Bruning by one percentage point and 2,347 votes in a race that was so close that Ricketts suggested that Bruning might be conceding too early when the attorney general called him on election night.
The other well-known and well-resourced candidates at the time were State Auditor Mike Foley, now Ricketts' lieutenant governor and a supporter of Herbster despite the governor's endorsement of Pillen, and then-Sen. Beau McCoy of Omaha, whose campaign was funded by Herbster after he dropped out of the race, citing his wife's health challenges.
McCoy now is a marketing director at Conklin Co., which is owned by Herbster.
In addition to the top three and Thibodeau of Omaha, other Republicans running for the GOP nomination are Michael Connely of York; Lela McNinch and Donna Nicole Carpenter, both of Lincoln;

Breland Ridenour of Elkhorn; and Troy Wentz of Sterling.
On the Democratic side of the ticket, Carol Blood of Bellevue is running against Roy Harris of Linwood. Scott Zimmerman of Omaha is a Libertarian candidate.
By Don Walton

AP: 2022 midterms: What to watch in Nebraska, West Virginia

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The top race in Tuesday's primary elections in Nebraska and West Virginia is a heavily contested Republican primary for Nebraska governor, featuring a Donald Trump-endorsed candidate who has been accused of groping multiple women.
Voters in Nebraska will also be nominating candidates to replace former U.S. Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, a Republican convicted in March on charges he lied to federal authorities about an illegal campaign contribution he received from a Nigerian billionaire.
In West Virginia, two incumbent congressmen are facing off in a Republican primary after redistricting cost the state a seat in the U.S. House.
What to watch as Tuesday's primaries unfold:
HOW MUCH SWAY DOES TRUMP HAVE IN NEBRASKA?
In Nebraska's Republican primary for governor, Trump has endorsed Charles Herbster, a wealthy agribusinessman and cattle breeder who has positioned himself as a political outsider.
Herbster has recently faced allegations that he groped young women, including a Nebraska state senator and a former legislative staffer. He vehemently denies the accusations and has filed a defamation lawsuit against the lawmaker, state Sen. Julie Slama. She filed a countersuit, accusing Herbster of sexual battery. Despite the allegations, Trump has stood by Herbster and appeared with him at a rally last week.
His main rival is University of Nebraska regent Jim Pillen, a former college football player and veterinarian who owns a hog farm operation and swine breeding-stock company. Pillen has won support from high-profile conservatives, including Gov. Pete Ricketts, former Gov. Kay Orr, the influential Nebraska Farm Bureau and former Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne.
And in a surprising twist, state Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha has risen to top-tier status as well with support from Omaha's Republican mayor and ads in which he pitches himself as a "new generation" of leader. He is considered the more moderate option to Herbster and Pillen.
The winner of the GOP primary is expected to face state Sen. Carol Blood, who is all but certain to win the Democratic nomination for governor over a little-known candidate who hasn't actively campaigned.
HOW DID A CONGRESSMAN'S CONVICTION RESHAPE THE PRIMARY?
U.S. House primary races are usually low-key affairs in Nebraska, with little turnover among the Republican incumbents. But the state has an open seat this year following Fortenberry's resignation.
Fortenberry initially planned to seek reelection to a 10th term despite a federal indictment and launched attack ads against his main challenger, Republican state Sen. Mike Flood. He dropped his bid after his conviction, and Flood gained momentum with endorsements from Ricketts and former Gov. Dave Heineman.

Flood is now the strong favorite to win the nomination for the 1st Congressional District out of a field of five Republican candidates. Fortenberry's name will still appear on the ballot because he withdrew after the state's deadline to certify candidates.
The GOP nominee is expected to face Democratic state Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks in November. Pansing Brooks is running against University of Nebraska-Lincoln student Jazari Kual Zakaria in the Democratic primary.
Flood and Pansing Brooks will also face each other in a June 28 special election to decide who serves the rest of Fortenberry's term. The November general election will determine who fills the seat starting in January 2023.
The 1st Congressional District encompasses a stretch of eastern Nebraska, excluding Omaha and most of its suburbs. The Republican-leaning district includes Lincoln as well as large stretches of farmland and small towns.
HOW MUCH DO INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS MATTER TO WEST VIRGINIA VOTERS?
A Republican primary in West Virginia's 2nd Congressional District between two incumbents could hang on support for President Joe Biden's $1.2 trillion infrastructure law in the GOP-leaning state.
One of the incumbents, Rep. David McKinley, was among 13 House Republicans to vote for the bill. He cited the state's "D" infrastructure grade from the American Society of Civil Engineers, saying it would have been a betrayal to vote based on "party politics" on an issue so important to residents. West Virginia, one of the nation's poorest states, is slated to get $6 billion in infrastructure money.
The other incumbent, Rep. Alex Mooney, voted against the infrastructure bill and won Trump's endorsement the day Biden signed the measure into law. Mooney and Trump have called McKinley and other Republicans who voted for the infrastructure bill RINOs, or "Republicans In Name Only." Mooney called the bill "Biden and Speaker Nancy Pelosi's spending masterplan" and said it will contribute to inflation.
While in Congress, McKinley and Mooney voted together the vast majority of the time. But the infrastructure vote will serve as a test of Trump's clout in a state that wholeheartedly embraced him in two presidential elections.
By Grant Schulte

Nebraska Examiner: Evnen faces two challengers in GOP primary for Nebraska Secretary of State

LINCOLN — Incumbent Nebraska Secretary of State Bob Evnen is being challenged in the Republican primary by two candidates who claim the 2020 election was stolen from former President Donald Trump.
The race is being spiced by claims that voter fraud has occurred under Evnen's watch, and counterclaims by the first-term secretary of state that all allegations have been investigated and refuted.
Candidates Robert Borer of Lincoln and Rex Schroder of Palmyra both insist that President Joe Biden did not win the voting in Nebraska's 2nd Congressional District — a race he won by more than 22,000 votes — and should not have been awarded the one electoral vote from that district.
Trump 'partly won'

“Donald Trump didn’t win Nebraska, he partly won — we had one electoral vote stolen from us,” said Borer, a 63-year-old retired Lincoln firefighter.
Both Borer and Schroder, a 49-year-old small business owner and former Palmyra fire chief, claimed to find several instances of fraudulent votes after making public information requests of the Secretary of State’s Office, Nebraska Attorney General’s Office and others.
“Stuff just didn’t line up,” Schroder said.
But Evnen, a 69-year-old attorney from Lincoln, said that his office has investigated every allegation of voter fraud it has received, as well as other claims it learned about, and “haven’t found any validity or merit to any of them.”

‘Fake vs. Fact’

In March, he published a 20-page PowerPoint presentation entitled “Fake vs. Fact” that addresses, one by one, claims that voting is rigged, voter registration lists are inaccurate and the state’s voting counting machines have been corrupted.
“There’s a lot of speculation about what could happen, but there isn’t any evidence that it did,” Evnen said. “There’s lots of evidence it didn’t.”
Both Borer and Schroder said that if elected, they would immediately cancel the state’s contract with Omaha-based Election Systems & Software to provide vote-counting machines for Nebraska and would switch to hand-counting of ballots, by mostly volunteers, at the precinct level.
Borer said the government used “the scamdemic” to infringe on people’s constitutional rights and to steal the election via unsupervised ballot drop boxes and not extensive tracking of the “chain of custody” of mail ballots.
“What did we see the last two years? Rank infringement, rank denial and rank tyranny. It was about scaring people to death,” he said.

Fraud in ‘every county’

He claimed that “statisticians” who have analyzed the 2020 election results have found fraud in every county.
Evnen, in his PowerPoint subtitled “Setting the Record Straight about Nebraska Elections,” and in an interview, disputed that.
One claim was that the vote count for Trump declined several times on election night. But Evnen said that was a mistake made by a third-party vendor for the New York Times and not one repeated in the official count from the Secretary of State’s Office.
Another claim was that 10 Nebraska counties had more registered voters than population. Evnen said that there were five counties like that, and all were small, rural counties.
He that happens because voters cannot be removed from the voter rolls until they haven’t voted in two federal elections. There are also college students who are registered at home but are counted in the census at their college location, Evnen said, contributing to slightly more registered voters than population.

‘Common practice’

Borer said he could prove that there was fraud in the 2020 elections if Evnen would “give me the keys” to the vote-counting machines.
Evnen said that the contract with ES&S requires “penetration and vulnerability scans” by an independent tester, and that making those scans public could lead to improper and nefarious use of the information.
“It is a common practice, and a best practice, not to disclose results of penetration and vulnerability scans,” Evnen said in the “Fake vs. Fact” presentation.

Borer filed a conflict of interest complaint on April 25 against Evnen over the “Fake vs. Fact” PowerPoint — which is posted on a state website — saying that the secretary of state was using state resources to produce campaign “talking points.”

Evnen, when asked about the complaint, said that “there are some people who don’t like when we put out information that runs counter to their claims.” The complaint is still pending with the Nebraska Accountability and Disclosure Commission.

Schroder also disputes that Evnen has “run to the ground” all claims of voting irregularities in Nebraska. Schroder said he would order a full forensic audit of at least the 2020 vote in Douglas, Sarpy and Lancaster Counties.

‘Not establishment’

“I am not an establishment, crooked politician. I’m just your average guy who’s ticked off,” Schroder said.

He said he would virtually eliminate absentee voting, limiting it to those serving in the military and the elderly living in nursing homes who could not make it to a polling place.

Schroder said that the millions saved by canceling the ES&S contract could be used to pay people to hand count ballots if not enough volunteers could be found.

Despite the criticism from Borer and Schroder, Evnen, a former counsel to the Nebraska Republican Party, is endorsed by two dozen state senators, including Sen. Tom Brewer, who heads the state legislative committee that handles election integrity. Evnen is also endorsed by Gov. Pete Ricketts.

Backs voter ID

Evnen said he supports requiring voter identification and returning Nebraska to a winner-take-all system of awarding electoral votes. He was successful this year in getting legislation passed that ensures greater security of ballot drop boxes and bans private funding of elections.

He said he was unaware, until later, that Lancaster County had accepted funds from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to help pay for costs of the 2020 election but said such donations are wrong. At least one group, Civic Nebraska, defended the acceptance of the so-called “Zuckerbucks,” saying the money was used to pay for COVID-19 protective gear for poll workers.

If campaign spending is any indication, Evnen is not taking the primary race for granted.

He has spent about $153,000 so far in his re-election bid, according to reports filed with the state Accountability and Disclosure Commission. His fund-raising included a personal loan of $20,000, as well as a $15,000 donation from the Nebraska Realtors Association. (The secretary of state serves as the chair of the Nebraska Real Estate Commission.)

Borer raised $39,000

Borer has raised about $39,000 for his challenge and spent about $31,000, mostly on campaign signs and radio advertising.

His biggest contribution has been $5,000 from Regier Equipment of Madrid, Nebraska.

Schroder did not file a campaign spending report, which is required only if a campaign raises or spends at least $5,000 in one year.

By Paul Hammel

Nebraska Examiner: Herbster, Pillen in dead heat in Nebraska GOP governor’s race, analyst says

WAHOO, Nebraska — Most of the hay is in the barn by this point in Nebraska's Republican gubernatorial primary, after months of campaign stops, ads, endorsements and noise.

Polling shows a race that could go any of three ways, said Logan Phillips, the national political analyst whose RacetotheWH.com correctly predicted the GOP's U.S. Senate primary in Ohio.

His model shows a dead heat at the top between Conklin Co. CEO Charles Herbster and University of Nebraska Regent Jim Pillen. It gives State Sen. Brett Lindstrom a solid chance to win, too.

"My model has this race as what might be the most competitive race I have information on," Phillips said. "Trump's influence has been less than I expected."

RacetotheWH.com gives Herbster a 44% chance of winning, Pillen a 42% chance of winning, and Lindstrom a 14% chance. Phillips projects that all three candidates will secure between 20% and 30% of the vote.

Phillips bases his projections on who wins most often out of 10,000 simulations. He factors in polling, fundraising, endorsements, election experience and Google searches in the race's last week.

Most polling shows only those three within range of winning the primary among nine GOP candidates in the race. The next closest to the top three is former State Sen. Theresa Thibodeau, whom Phillips' model gives a 0.2% chance to win. The winner of Tuesday's primary will likely face State Sen. Carol Blood, who faces only a nominal primary challenge.

Each of the primary race's three contenders spent the race's final days hammering home themes from their campaigns.

Herbster has spent the last few days hosting rallies in person or by phone where he speaks about national issues like immigration and re-litigating the 2020 election for former President Donald Trump, who endorsed him and held a rally.

When he speaks about Nebraska issues, he speaks about the need for tax reform in Nebraska, though he offers few specifics on what he'd like to change.

"The fact that we brag about the fact that we're the only state in the United States that has a one-house Legislature, and we're proud of that," Herbster said at a Wahoo stop last week. "That's like bragging about the 1967 tax law and how it's great today."

He has run as a political outsider, but spent much of his campaign touting ties to national GOP insiders and has been joined at rallies in the final weeks by Trump, Trump economist Stephen Moore and embattled U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida.

Herbster calls the groping allegations of eight women against him "fake news," and has said he would ban sex education in K-12 schools. He says some textbooks should be burned.

The race's best-known candidate, University of Nebraska Regent Jim Pillen, may have fumbled an early name ID advantage from his Husker playing days by not matching Herbster's first TV ad purchases.

Pillen campaigned in small groups across the state, holding more than 400 meetings with voters in Nebraska's 93 counties, including 30 with the Nebraska Farm Bureau.

The hog producer avoided traditional debates, preferring candidate forums. Pillen has proposed capping school spending growth so state property tax relief funds make a bigger dent.

The education part of Pillen's playbook emphasizes the need to steer more K-12 students toward internships, apprenticeships and training in the trades beyond the college path.

He has spent the race's final days calling voters and preparing for a final campaign swing with key supporters Gov. Pete Ricketts, former Gov. Kay Orr and his coach at Nebraska, Tom Osborne.

"I'm running for governor to keep our kids here with great opportunities, cut taxes, defend

agriculture, strengthen our rural communities, end abortion and critical race theory, and preserve our conservative values," Pillen said in a statement Sunday.
The race's upstart contender, State Sen. Brett Lindstrom, has taken a beating in the race's final stretch from outside ads after gaining momentum for running a positive campaign.
At last count, outside groups tied to Ricketts and others had run more than $1.6 million in negative ads against Lindstrom. Lindstrom raised a total of $2.52 million for his bid.
Some conservatives have questioned Lindstrom's 2015 vote to repeal the death penalty, which voters restored by initiative petition and he now says he would enforce as governor, and to boost roads funding with an increase in the gas tax.
Lindstrom, a financial adviser, spent much of the spring in session. Senators passed Nebraska's largest tax cut, including accelerating his income tax cut on Social Security payments.
"The momentum is real," Lindstrom said during an Omaha fundraiser with a key supporter, Mayor Jean Stothert. "They've been doubling down, tripling down, quadrupling down, which is a positive sign. So we're going to continue to stay positive."
The race's biggest wildcard could be what more than 8,000 party switchers do. The Nebraska Democratic Party lost 5,625 voters over the same span. And nonpartisans lost 2,631.
Two nonpartisans who spoke to the Nebraska Examiner at Herbster's Trump rally said they might vote for Herbster. Voters had until May 2 to change their registration for the primary. Others said they switched to vote for Lindstrom or Pillen.
"I certainly think that's a major wildcard," said Paul Landow, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha with experience in campaigns."It's unusual, and it's unclear how it will affect the race.
"But it almost certainly will."
By Aaron Sanderford

Washington Examiner: 'We think for ourselves': Nebraska GOP governor candidate expects victory without Trump endorsement

Though a Republican candidate endorsed by former President Donald Trump has yet to lose a primary in the 2022 midterm election cycle, one Nebraska candidate expects to break the streak this coming Tuesday.
Jim Pillen, a Republican running in the Nebraska gubernatorial race, has attended nearly 400 events in all 93 Nebraska counties since starting his campaign and says he has received "amazing support every step of the way." Although Pillen is not Trump's preferred candidate, he has been endorsed by a line of top conservatives in the state, including Gov. Pete Ricketts, Attorney General Doug Peterson, former Gov. Kay Orr, and "many thousands more," he told the Washington Examiner.
"Here in Nebraska, we think for ourselves, care for our neighbors, and care about what our neighbors think," Pillen said when asked if a Trump endorsement is important to a candidate's victory. "The polling is clear: Republican voters are going to make up their own minds about who our Republican gubernatorial nominee is."

Pillen, a University of Nebraska regent and hog producer, will be running against Trump-endorsed businessman Charles Herbster and state Sen. Brett Lindstrom in the primary election. He does not know if Trump would endorse him should he win Tuesday but says he is "completely focused on the work" needed to win.
Pillen said he has never met with or spoken to Trump but noted he did vote for Trump in 2016 and 2020 and is "thankful for all his administration accomplished for America."
Ricketts cannot run again due to term limits. On the Democratic side, state Sen. Carol Blood and Roy Harris are running.
A polling memo released by Pillen's campaign shows him with a slight but growing lead in the GOP primary race. The WPAi Intelligence survey, which has a margin of error of roughly 4.4 percentage points and was conducted by phone from April 30 to May 2, shows Pillen with 31% support, 4 points above the next closest candidate, Herbster. Prior polling released by Herbster's and Lindstrom's campaigns also showed a close race, according to the Omaha World-Herald.
If elected governor, Pillen said he plans to "keep Nebraska great for our kids" by shrinking the state's government in addition to "better [controlling] government spending." He also plans to give the state "transformational tax change," especially for property taxes, and seeks "to preserve and defend the commonsense, Christian, conservative values" in the state.
Calling himself "the most conservative candidate in this race," Pillen described his principles as being "backed by a lifetime of experience," saying he is the only Nebraska candidate "to earn a living day in, day out in production agriculture" and the only candidate "who has built a Nebraska business creating thousands of good-paying Nebraska jobs."
"My conservatism isn't just my platform in this campaign — it's the way I've built my business, raised my family, and lived my life," Pillen said. "Voters are facing very clear choices in this race, both on Tuesday and in November."
Disclosure: Pillen's deputy campaign manager, John Gage, was a reporter for the Washington Examiner for roughly a year between 2019-2020.
By Asher Notheis

OWH: Books, buses, bleachers and bathrooms: Schools have long shopping list with federal 'rescue' aid

Nebraska school districts are cashing in on the massive federal rescue package Congress passed last year to provide pandemic relief.
They're buying everything from buses to bathroom fixtures, stadium bleachers and robots, but the most popular purchase is curriculum — the books, online resources and other materials for teaching.
The $492 million allocated to Nebraska districts through the American Rescue Plan Act is proving to be less of a rescue and more of a reward for getting kids back into in-person learning ahead of other states.
Some of the spending is clearly related to COVID-19 recovery and prevention, addressing mental health and learning loss, according to a World-Herald review of district spending plans.
Not all of it, however.
Congress wrote the spending rules so broadly that, with few exceptions, virtually any education-

related expense can be justified. Congress said only 20% must be used to address learning loss. They put few restrictions on spending the rest.

Plattsmouth Community Schools' plan includes installing bleachers on the visitors' side of their high school football stadium.

"It's a little difficult to get adequate social distancing when you have one set of bleachers on one side of the field," Superintendent Richard Hasty said. "The goal with the bleachers is to improve distancing between everyone."

Hasty said the idea for bleachers came up while health officials were still recommending separating student groups to reduce disease spread.

"Obviously it came about during COVID, but that's probably helpful regardless of what the health concern might be, to have people separated and distanced," Hasty said.

More than two-thirds of districts — including Bellevue and several metro Omaha districts — indicated they're buying curriculum, primarily in core academic areas of math, science, English language arts and social studies.

A smaller number of districts plan to buy social-emotional curriculum. Those are classroom lessons meant to socialize children by increasing their awareness of self and society, along with improving relationship and decision-making skills.

After curriculum, the most popular purchases are heating-and-air-conditioning units, followed by classroom technology — everything from whiteboards to iPads and robots that allow sick or quarantining students to participate remotely in the classroom.

Some districts are buying buses, SUVs and vans.

Others are renovating school kitchens and bathrooms, replacing school windows, expanding classrooms and weight rooms, adding playgrounds.

They're hiring teachers, counselors, social workers, therapists and curriculum experts.

Some are replacing drinking fountains with bottle-filling stations or putting portable air filters in classrooms.

The money is from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund — referred to as ESSER III and allocated through the 2021 American Rescue Plan. Districts have until Sept. 30, 2024, to spend their share of the funds.

Earlier rounds of ESSER funding was allocated through previous federal COVID relief measures, including the 2020 CARES Act.

Nebraska schools didn't need rescuing as badly as schools in other states.

The state's schools were among the first in the country to return to offering in-person learning. That meant students didn't fall as far behind academically as their peers elsewhere.

Chad Aldeman, policy director for Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab, said the funding has been beneficial but data show it might not have been as needed in Nebraska.

Only about 3% of Nebraska school districts have used money in the last round of COVID-19 relief funding, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Districts have spent 21% of ESSER II and 91% of ESSER I funds.

"There is still opportunity for them to spend that money, but it suggests that reopening wasn't really based on the need for money," he said.

Nebraska districts are spending much of it on normal school expenses or wish-list projects that otherwise would have required a bond issue or just remained on the back burner.

The allocations were based on Title I poverty funding, so high-poverty districts received the most money.

The Omaha Public Schools, for instance, got $194.4 million. About 78% of its students qualified for free or reduced-price school meals last year, according to the Nebraska Department of Education. The Elkhorn Public Schools, with 10% low-income kids and about one-fifth as many students, received $899,000.

That's almost $3,800 a kid versus less than $85 a kid.

Of the state's 244 districts, two Nebraska districts declined the money: Cross County and Hayes Center. Five of them didn't receive any ESSER III money at all: Elgin, Arthur County, Exeter-Milligan, McPherson County and Sioux County.

School officials in Cross County and Hayes Center didn't return calls or emails to The World-Herald to explain why they declined the funding.

David Jespersen, spokesman for the Nebraska Department of Education, said the five districts that didn't receive any ESSER money had previously declined to receive Title I poverty funding from the government, in turn taking away their chance to receive any COVID-19 relief dollars.

These districts still received some funding from the portion of money the state received for itself, Jespersen said. On top of the $492 million being allocated to districts, Nebraska has nearly $55 million for statewide investments.

States weren't allowed to cut back on state school funding and replace it with the aid. As a result, the federal money represents a significant boost above local school budgets.

Robert Moore, assistant superintendent of the Bellevue Public Schools, said the challenge in his district was to "find good ways to put that money to work for us."

"When they say all of a sudden that you have $6.3 million, that's a blessing and a curse," Moore said of his district's allotment. "It's hard to spend that amount of money."

By Lauren Wagner and Joe Dejka

OWH: How are Nebraska school districts spending federal COVID relief?

Nebraska schools received nearly $492 million in the latest round of federal COVID-19 aid to spend on a variety of projects. At least 20% is required to go toward addressing student learning loss.

While schools had to meet specific requirements for allocations, the rules were written to leave a lot of flexibility for spending decisions.

Districts have taken advantage by planning purchases they have never been able to before. The following are examples of how Nebraska schools are spending the money:

Curriculum

Robert Moore, assistant superintendent of the Bellevue Public Schools, isn't surprised that districts are buying curriculum.

During normal times, curriculum is "an enormous purchase for most districts," he said.

His district plans to spend $1.84 million of its $6.3 million federal allotment on curriculum, primarily for English language arts and math.

That was a logical decision, he said, because the state just updated English language arts standards and will do the same for math this year.

The Gretna Public Schools are using all of their allotment of more than $1 million to update the

district's reading curriculum for kindergarten through sixth grade.
The decision was an easy one and will address learning loss, Superintendent Rich Beran said.
"We could have done summer school, we could have done all these things, but it was just easier. 'Here, let's do this.' Boom. It's straightforward, they approve it quick," he said. "It just made sense to do that."

Social-emotional curriculum

More than a dozen districts indicated interest in buying a social-emotional curriculum.
Several districts mentioned a curriculum called Second Step, a product of a Seattle, Washington, nonprofit called Committee for Children.
Creighton Public Schools bought the curriculum for kindergarten through fifth-grade students.
Superintendent Josh Weber said Second Step curriculum addresses various topics including recognizing bullying and harassment, and how to stand up to those things, while managing emotions and reducing stress.
"About 20 minutes once a week they would have the opportunity to go through some of these lessons with our guidance counselor," he said.
At the high school level, Creighton officials are looking to host speakers "to talk about school climate and culture and how do we improve that, and how do we create more ownership for students within our school," he said.
The Nebraska Department of Education states on its website that social and emotional learning "is an integral part of education and human development." It helps kids "to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals" and it "advances educational equity and excellence."
In recent years social-emotional learning has come under fire from some conservatives, who say it is a vehicle for bringing progressive ideas about sex and race into the classroom.

Mental health

About 20% of districts have stated they want to use the money to address mental health issues for both students and staff.
Many are hiring more licensed mental health practitioners to allow more students to receive therapy, or giving existing staff more hours to help students.
Winnebago Public Schools are directing the majority of their federal dollars, along with special building funds, to build a facility that houses therapists, truancy officers and other mental health services.
Superintendent Dan Fehringer said the district already has some therapists, but it needs more room to meet everyone's needs.
"If the children are not social emotionally ready, it doesn't matter what curriculum you have," Fehringer said. "We already had a high need for mental health services and it continues to be a high need even more so after the pandemic."
Douglas County West Community Schools Superintendent Melissa Poloncic said a survey of her district's staff and parents indicated mental health as a high priority.
The district is using ESSER III money to partner with Region 6 Behavioral Health Care to get therapists into schools to serve kids and families.
Therapists from CHI will be available on campus probably once a week, Poloncic said.
District officials were interested in addressing children's mental health before the pandemic, but the last two years highlighted the need, she said.
"I think we're seeing what was lost in the pandemic, for kids and families, was the social aspect,"

Poloncic said.
Larger school districts are also using the money in creative ways to help address mental health concerns. The Omaha Public Schools are dedicating $2.5 million to employee wellness programs and the Grand Island Public Schools are establishing teletherapy services for students.

Hiring

At least 60 districts are planning to hire staff to help in the classroom and with school operations, including teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians and nutrition service employees.
The main problem with hiring staff with ESSER money is that new employee salaries will remain an ongoing expense after the spending deadline, which ranges from the end of this year to 2024 for all three rounds.
Hastings Public Schools are planning to spend more than $600,000 to hire teachers to reduce classroom sizes, especially at the highest poverty schools, Superintendent Jeff Schneider said.
Schneider said a lot of the funding in ESSER III is continuing the employment of staff hired in the previous two rounds. The future for those staff still remains uncertain — Schneider said he won't know how many employees the district will be able to keep until he knows how much state aid Hastings will receive in 2024.
"We absolutely tried to do this responsibly, so we didn't fall off a cliff after the 2023-24 school year, but I think we will have to make adjustments," he said.
Summerland Public Schools have a similar spending plan for hiring staff, but the district will absorb the positions into its budget once the federal money runs out. Superintendent Kyle Finke said the district added an instructional coach and paraprofessionals who have been key to helping students get back on track.
"We will have to go about finding it within our budget to keep them," he said. "I don't see us not hiring these staff members back."

Heating and air

More than 4 in 10 districts plan to upgrade heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems to improve air quality for kids and teachers.
High demand and supply chain issues are delaying some projects.
Creek Valley Public Schools used the federal money to help pay for HVAC units with virus-killing technology. Its ESSER III allocation was about $331,000.
The district went with two types of systems: one with bipolar ionization in 13 classrooms, the other with UV-C lamps in the library, gym and a couple of classrooms.
For the first time, the gym now has air conditioning, said Pat Ningen, Creek Valley superintendent.
The new classroom units are quieter than the water-based system of the late 1980s and early 1990s that they replaced, he said.
"You could hear them when you went into the classroom," he said. "Now you can't really hear much."
Trevor Drebla, estimator and project manager for Johnson's Plumbing and Heating of Norfolk, said demand for HVAC units has contributed to "unprecedented" wait times for delivery.
For some rooftop units, the wait can be 32 weeks, he said.
In addition, manufacturers have had trouble getting some materials, especially computer chips, he said.
"It's kind of the perfect storm where we've got a huge demand right now and then the backlogged supply, and so it's coming to a head and it's starting to hurt a little bit."
In the Pawnee City Public Schools, officials originally planned to spend 80% of their $546,762 on

HVAC and building improvements.
They had to reconsider when the bid for the air quality improvement project came in twice the cost estimate, Superintendent Brian Rottinghaus said.
“We will likely be revisiting and updating in the near future because the major air-quality improvement project will not now be able to be done due to the bid coming in far too high,” he said.

Technology

More than a third of districts are planning to purchase more technology — anything from laptops, desktops and iPads to more unique devices to help learning.
Malcolm Public Schools will be buying classroom audio distribution equipment this summer, said Superintendent Ryan Terwilliger. Teachers will wear a device that is similar to a microphone around their neck and it will transmit sound throughout the room.
“It’s interesting tech. It sounds like the teacher is right next to you,” he said. “We have some kids who have hearing issues so it will be good for them. The research has shown it improves performance for all kids.”
Students who are home sick will still be able to be present during a classroom lesson with new technology at Winside Public Schools.
Superintendent Andrew Offner said the district is planning to purchase two robots, for about $4,500 each, that students will be able to take control of from their laptops at home in order to learn remotely.
The student, teacher and peers will be able to see each other through a video-chat like screen. The student operating the robot will also be able to move around the classroom and talk to other people.

Renovations and additions

Cedar Bluffs Public Schools plan to expand the school cafeteria and kitchen, with a dual aim: shortening the lunch lines and spacing out students to improve social distancing, Superintendent Harlan Ptomey said.
The project has been slowed by supply chain issues, including getting metal for the structure, he said.
“The last building we did I think we did it for under $140 to $150 a square foot price,” Ptomey said. “They’re estimating like $250 per square foot price this year. It’s like, Jiminy Christmas.”
During the worst of the pandemic, students were eating in classrooms and hallways to social distance, he said.
Bond issues for projects like this have been a tough sell with voters, especially because half of the students live outside the district, he said.
“We’ve known a long time ago that there’s no way we pass a bond, so we’ve always tried to be creative,” he said.
In Centura Public Schools, officials are taking aim at the high school bathrooms.
The plan is to remodel the space, replace original out-of-date and broken fixtures, add more stalls for the girls and bring the facilities into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
The bathrooms are in such bad shape that kids avoid using them, Superintendent Ryan Ruhl said.
“We were trying to find a way to attack it right away, because our kids were walking further down the hallway to use different bathrooms because it was getting that bad,” Ruhl said.
If not for the federal money, the project would probably have required a bond issue, he said.
The new bathrooms will have automatic touchless toilets and faucets, which Ruhl said would improve sanitation and prevent the spread of germs.
The Grand Island Public Schools are also spending about half of their $18 million in funding to

renovate 10 schools and purchase technology. Many of the construction projects are focused on building more secure building entrances.

Other spending

Some districts have plans to use the money for more unique allocations.

Walthill Public Schools are looking to train all staff in the National Incident Management System, which are practices for school emergency management. The district also wants to buy safety signs and materials, plus host mock exercises through the "I Love U Guys" Foundation, which helps schools work on response protocols.

The Bellevue Public Schools plan to spend $300,000 as "seed money" to explore the feasibility, cost and possible curriculum for a new virtual school.

According to Moore, the assistant superintendent, the school could potentially serve as an alternative for some families but also help the district prepare to respond to future school closures.

"The lessons that we might learn from doing this could help us if we ever have another pandemic, if we ever have another situation where we're out, so we can be more effective in taking care of all of our kids," Moore said.

By Lauren Wagner and Joe Dejka

OWH: Rains have eased drought and fire risk in Nebraska — for now

The rain has finally come, and with it, the good news text messages have followed.

"I cannot tell you how much we needed that," one Nebraska farmer texted UNL Climatologist Gannon Rush. "Things were looking pretty gloomy."

"We are beyond happy right now," another farmer wrote to Rush. "We thought the pivots were going to be working overtime."

Rush tracks the weather and its impacts for the High Plains Regional Climate Center, housed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

He said the recent rains have been just what the state needed in the wake of drought, wildfires and dismal ag conditions.

For the week April 28 to May 4, virtually the entire state received at least an inch of rain, according to the High Plains Climate Center, and a large swath received 3 to 4 inches, if not more. The Omaha metro area has received more than 2 inches since April 28, according to the National Weather Service.

"This could not have not come at a better time," Rush said. "We all saw how everything was shaping up — with fire and heading into the planting season pretty dry. It was looking pretty gloomy."

While nearly all of Nebraska remains in drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, the rain has lessened its severity. About 62% of the state was in severe to extreme drought as of last week, down from 76% the week before. Those percentages are expected to improve again this week.

"The fire risk has decreased substantially," said Cliff Cole, meteorologist with the National Weather Service office in North Platte. "It's absolutely good news."

Aggressive wildfires in April burned more than 118,000 acres across the state, claiming two lives and injuring at least 15.

Rush said some of the rains have been gully-washers that generated high totals but didn't generate much benefit because the water ran off. Other rains have been gentle enough to soak in.
Northwest of Columbus, a volunteer weather observer reported 6.29 inches in a single storm on April 28, Rush said. There were unconfirmed reports of 10-plus inches of rain in that area, he said.
Near Arapahoe in southwest Nebraska, where about 35,000 acres burned in early April, more than 4½ inches of rain fell from late April into early May, he said
"That is more precipitation in one week for that area than the past seven months combined," Rush said.
Still, the drought isn't over, both Rush and Cole said.
"It's important to remember that May and June are our money months for rainfall," Cole said. "That's when we get our heaviest rains. In July, the rains become a little more hit or miss."
The national Climate Prediction Center's long-term outlook indicates that above-average temperatures and below- normal rainfall could be the dominant pattern through July. If that happens, a couple of bad heat waves and drought-like weather would erase spring gains.
"This has been a great step for us, but people need to be cautious that this might not continue," Rush said.
By Nancy Gaarder

OWH: Douglas County election commissioner predicts potential record-breaking turnout for primary election

Election officials in Nebraska are anticipating high turnout statewide and potential record-breaking numbers in Douglas County for Tuesday's primary election.
Douglas County Election Commissioner Brian Kruse said Friday that he expects 35% of the county's registered voters to fill out ballots in the primary.
The predicted figure would surpass Douglas County's primary turnout record set in 2020, which was 33.6%, according to the Nebraska Secretary of State's Office.
The 2020 election heavily leaned on mail-in ballots because of the coronavirus pandemic, as Kruse and other election officials chose to send out ballot request forms to all registered voters in the state.
If Kruse's prediction holds true, the figure would be much higher than the county's previous record for turnout in a statewide gubernatorial primary election: 27.6% in 2006, when former Husker football coach and U.S. Rep. Tom Osborne ran against incumbent Gov. Dave Heineman.
Statewide, Nebraska Secretary of State Bob Evnen also predicted turnout of 35%. That would fall short of the record for statewide turnout in a primary — 40.5% in 2020 — but it would come close to the statewide record in a gubernatorial primary. The current record, from 2006, is 35.1% turnout.
The state's third most populous county, Sarpy County, also anticipates a decline from record high turnout in 2020. Sarpy Election Commissioner Emily Ethington predicted turnout will clock in at about 30%, down from 37.1% in 2020's primary.
Tuesday's top contest is the Republican governor's race, where businessman Charles Herbster, hog producer Jim Pillen and State Sen. Brett Lindstrom are viewed as the front-runners, based on a series of polls and fundraising numbers. The Nebraska GOP opted to keep its primary closed, meaning only

registered Republicans can vote in the race.
"This election cycle has piqued the interest of voters in Douglas County," Kruse said. "We may very well have a record turnout for a gubernatorial primary election."
Kruse said his office sent out nearly 85,000 early voting ballots this year, which is a new high. He reminded voters to drop off ballots in one of the 13 drop box locations across the metro area to ensure that their ballots are received by the 8 p.m. Tuesday deadline.
Evnen said that 227,679 early voting ballots were sent across the state, and 122,679 have been returned as of Friday.
If voters plan to vote in person, polling places will be open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday.
By Alia Conley

OWH: Nebraska Democrats make bid to become early presidential primary in 2024

LINCOLN — The Nebraska Democratic Party submitted a letter of intent Thursday to the Democratic National Committee to enter Nebraska as one of the early states in the 2024 presidential nominating calendar.
The DNC is accepting applications from state parties wishing to be one of the first five states in the 2024 presidential primary lineup. It marks the first time in 50 years that the DNC is considering restructuring the primary schedule, according to Jane Kleeb, chair of the state party. Since 1972, Iowa has been the first contest, followed by New Hampshire.
If Nebraska is successful in its campaign, it would replace Iowa as the first state to represent the Midwestern district, but that would not necessarily put Nebraska first in the overall schedule. The DNC could change the order of what districts go first. It is expected to announce a decision later this summer.
Becoming one of the first primary states is a powerful position, as Kleeb said the earliest states often set the pace for the rest of the presidential primaries. According to Kleeb, Iowa stands a real chance of being ousted from its first position.
Democrats have criticized Iowa's primary election system, particularly its full caucus, which Kleeb said can discourage voters from participating. She said people have also argued that Iowa's Democratic Party is not diverse enough to be an accurate reflection of the rest of the party.
Nebraska has some competition in the fight. Kleeb said Michigan and Minnesota have also applied to take Iowa's place. Kleeb described Nebraska as an "underdog" in the race. Michigan and Minnesota are more populous, battleground states with higher-ranking Democratic officials to pull for them.
But she said there are multiple reasons why Nebraska would be the best choice.
"We have a lot to sell," Kleeb said.
Kleeb said Nebraska's separated electoral districts differentiate it from its competitors. Nebraska and Maine are the only two states in the U.S. that award Electoral College votes by congressional district. While Nebraska as a whole heavily favors Republicans, its Omaha-centric 2nd Congressional District has awarded an electoral vote to a Democratic presidential candidate twice in recent years, including Joe Biden in 2020.
Within the state, Kleeb said there is a good mix of voters representing a range of demographics,

including rural areas, military members, people of color and unions.
Though Nebraska has a smaller population, Kleeb said this could benefit the DNC, and increase the chance of Democrats winning in traditionally red states.
Beyond presidential politics, Democrats have struggled to win in Nebraska, where Republicans — with a few exceptions — have held a firm grip on statewide and congressional offices in recent years.
While state Democratic parties are jockeying to move up in the presidential primary calendar, Republicans are maintaining the status quo. The Republican National Committee opted to keep its calendar, ensuring Iowa will go first in the 2024 Republican presidential nominating contest, according to the Associated Press.
By Erin Bamer

OWH: Court hearing scheduled for June in Herbster, Slama legal battle

LINCOLN — A hearing has been scheduled for June 3 following a flurry of court filings in the legal battle between gubernatorial candidate Charles W. Herbster and State Sen. Julie Slama.
Herbster filed a defamation lawsuit against the Sterling senator last month, after the Nebraska Examiner reported allegations from eight women — including Slama — who said Herbster had groped them in recent years. In response, Slama filed a counterclaim alleging battery.
Court documents at the time showed she gave notice to depose Herbster on Friday, but a member of Herbster's campaign indicated that he did not plan to attend the deposition.
Herbster's lawyers filed court documents Thursday, including a motion to quash the deposition notice and seek a protective order that limits his deposition to "scheduling at a mutually convenient time."
His legal team followed that with another motion, dated Friday, seeking a protective order against Slama and her legal team, arguing that they were attempting to try the case in the press. It accused Slama's attorney of engaging "in repeated gamesmanship" and violating court rules regarding trial publicity. The motion requested the court impose unspecified "remedies and/or sanctions."
Slama's attorney Dave Lopez could not be reached for comment Friday.
The latest filing from the Herbster legal team cited a statement from Slama on Thursday after it emerged Herbster would not be present for the deposition.
"I am appalled at Charles Herbster's blatant disregard of Nebraska's judicial process," Slama said. "Charles Herbster sexually assaulted me and then sued me for telling the truth, but now he refuses to actually show up for his own deposition. I look forward to holding Herbster accountable through the judicial process."
The June 3 hearing is scheduled before District Judge Rick Schreiner in Johnson County.
By Erin Bamer

OWH: Nebraska health officials report 9 cases of liver illness in children

Nebraska health officials Friday reported that they are investigating nine cases of unexplained hepatitis in young children, including two in Douglas County and two in the health district that covers Sarpy and Cass Counties.

The Nebraska cases are among a total of 109 such cases in 25 states and territories under study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention dating back to October, agency officials said Friday.

Worldwide, well over 200 cases have been reported in at least 20 countries, according to the World Health Organization.

In the U.S., more than 90% of children with the condition had to be hospitalized, said Dr. Jay Butler, the CDC's deputy director of infectious diseases. Of them, 14% required liver transplants and five have died. More than half had a confirmed infection with an adenovirus that commonly causes cold-like illnesses and gastrointestinal symptoms.

Butler noted that adenovirus has not been confirmed as a cause. While rare, children can develop hepatitis, an inflammation of the liver with a range of causes, and it's not uncommon for the cause to be unknown.

Based on a preliminary analysis with limited data, he said, the agency has not identified a significant increase in pediatric hepatitis or liver transplants in the U.S. The United Kingdom, however, does appear to have had an increased number of cases.

The cases the agency is reviewing date back seven months, he said, and some ultimately may not be linked to the investigation.

"It's important to note that this is an evolving situation," Butler said, "and we're casting a wide net to help broaden our understanding."

The nine Nebraska cases were identified between Nov. 5 and March 6, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. The patients ranged in age from 1 to 9, with a median age of 2. Three tested positive for adenovirus. No liver transplants or deaths have been identified.

Lindsay Huse, director of the Douglas County Health Department, said the notification should be more of an alert to parents to keep an eye out for symptoms of hepatitis than a cause for alarm.

Both of the children in Douglas County were hospitalized but have since been released, Huse said.

"This probably seems really scary to parents to hear about," she said. "But it's important to keep in mind it's very rare."

Parents should contact their child's doctor if they notice jaundice or yellowing of the skin or eyes. Other symptoms may include abdominal pain, vomiting, dark urine or clay-colored stools.

Health care providers who see children under age 10 with hepatitis of unknown origin should notify their local health department.

To prevent the spread of the adenovirus, people are urged to wash their hands frequently, cover coughs and sneezes and avoid touching eyes, mouths and noses.

The first reported cases in the U.S. were in Alabama in October. The CDC issued an alert a little more than two weeks ago outlining nine cases in that state through February. All nine children previously were healthy and all nine tested positive for adenovirus, with five having a specific strain called adenovirus 41.

That type of adenovirus typically causes more severe stomach illness but is not usually known as a cause of hepatitis in otherwise healthy children, Butler said.

Based on initial investigations in the U.S. and abroad, none of the common causes of viral hepatitis,

hepatitis viruses A, B, C, D and E, have been found in any of the cases.
None of the nine children initially identified in Alabama had COVID-19 during hospitalization or a documented history of COVID. And none of the children in Alabama had received the COVID vaccine before they were hospitalized. The mean age is 2, so most of the children were not yet eligible for the shots.
“COVID-19 vaccination is not the cause of these illnesses, and we hope this information helps clarify some of the speculation circulating online,” Butler said.
Meanwhile, investigators in the U.S. and abroad continue to investigate a variety of possible causes, including environmental causes, exposures to animals or even reactions to the adenovirus itself.
Said Dr. Umesh Parashar, head of the CDC’s division of viral diseases enteric viruses epidemiology team, “It’s still early days in terms of pinpointing the cause and the mechanism of illness in these children.”
By Julie Anderson

LJS: Former Jefferson County deputy among six officers who have certifications revoked

A former Jefferson County Sheriff's deputy who resigned last spring after the agency discovered a social media post featuring the officer with a quarter-pound of marijuana had his law enforcement certification revoked on Friday.
The Nebraska Crime Commission, a panel of police and public officials who review revocations and oversee statewide law enforcement standards and compliance, approved former Deputy Mathew Bornemeier's revocation at a quarterly meeting in Lincoln on Friday.
Don Arp, the commission's executive director, said former Jefferson County Sheriff Matthew Shultz filed a serious misconduct report with the commission last spring after learning of the Facebook post.
Bornemeier resigned in lieu of termination, Arp said.
Nick Georgi, who replaced Schultz as the Jefferson County sheriff upon Schultz's abrupt retirement in April 2021, told the Journal Star that Bornemeier hadn't been criminally investigated for his alleged possession of marijuana and that there's no indication he acquired, used or sold marijuana while on patrol.
He said the former deputy had been experiencing mental health issues at the time an internal affairs investigation was initiated, which preceded Bornemeier's resignation.
He is one of six former officers who voluntarily surrendered his law enforcement certificates ahead of Friday's meeting, Arp said.
Gabriel Wagner, a former officer at the Schuyler Police Department about an hour north of Lincoln, was terminated after a polygraph exam he took while applying to another department indicated that he had admitted to committing numerous thefts since he had received his law enforcement certification, according to the crime commission.
Some of Wagner's alleged thefts occurred as recently as last summer, Arp said.
Michelle Quinn, the former sheriff of Garden County, and Matthew Herbel, a former officer with the Scottsbluff Police Department, both became revocation-eligible after they were charged with third-

degree domestic assault. Quinn has since been convicted, and Herbel entered a no-contest plea in his case.
Former Webster County Sheriff's Deputy Dianne Nichols was fired after a judge ruled that she could not be considered credible based upon her testimony in a criminal case. Nichols was accused of listening in on and recording conversations between a jailed defendant and his attorney, Arp said. The criminal charges against the defendant were ultimately dismissed as a result of Nichols' alleged recordings, Arp said.
The sixth officer whose license was revoked Friday was Jeffrey Chitwood, a former lieutenant with the Scotts Bluff County Sheriff's Office and an officer with the Minatare Police Department who resigned amid an internal affairs investigation into serious misconduct allegations lodged against him.
Arp said he could not describe the nature of the misconduct report. Sheriff Mark Overman, who filed the misconduct report against Chitwood with the crime commission, did not respond to phone calls seeking comment on the report he filed against Chitwood.
Former officers who have their certifications revoked are not permitted to work at any law enforcement agency in the state.
In Jefferson County, Bornemeier's departure from the sheriff's office came amid a tumultuous time for the agency, where Georgi is the third sheriff to head the department in the last 18 months. Schultz had been sheriff for less than five months after taking over for Nels Sorensen, who had held the post for 18 years before retiring at the of 2020.
In the months since, Deputy Wilber Young was terminated and charged last year with neglect or delay to serve a felony arrest warrant for an incident stemming from November 2020.
A Jefferson County jury found Young not guilty of the crime at a trial last month. Young, 59, is now running for the sheriff's seat in a three-man contest among Republicans that includes Georgi, the acting sheriff who launched the internal affairs investigation into Young.
By Andrew Wegley

OWH Editorial: Optimism found in selection of new Greater Omaha Chamber leader

A thriving business community that continuously attracts economic development of all sizes is essential to a city's growth and future sustainability. It also takes proven leaders to help move a city forward.
With this in mind, we are optimistic about the selection of the Greater Omaha Chamber's new CEO, Veta Jeffery.
An economic developer from the St. Louis area, Jeffery said she was attracted to Omaha by the proven ability of the city's civic and corporate sectors to work together to move the city forward. She replaces David Brown, who is retiring after nearly 20 years in the job.
To say she has her work cut out for her may be a bit of an understatement.
Her hiring comes at a critical time in the city's history and development. Omaha, like all other cities across the country, is competing for workers amid a severe nationwide labor shortage. In addition, the city is in the process of remaking its downtown and urban core in an effort to attract and keep

more young workers. And the state has just appropriated more than $300 million that's targeted for redevelopment of underserved communities, particularly North and South Omaha.

We're confident that, in her new position, Jeffery can handle these challenges. She brings to the job the unique experience of helping rebuild Ferguson, Missouri, after civil unrest sparked in 2014 by the police shooting in Ferguson of an unarmed 18-year-old Black man.

Chambers of commerce, not just in Omaha but around the country as well, have historically not been particularly diverse in their leadership. Notably, Jeffery is also the first woman of color hired to lead the chamber, coming at a time when Omaha business leaders are emphasizing the need for the city to embrace diversity and inclusion to attract and retain the workers needed to spur future growth.

While Jeffery's hiring could be viewed as an example of business leaders' commitment to diversity, chamber officials also made it clear Jeffery was simply the best person for the job.

"Our committee was 100% unanimous that Veta was the right choice," said Mogens Bay, the retired CEO of Valmont. "She stood out from the other candidates, and we found her to be very thoughtful, very committed and just impressive during every step of the search process."

Admirably, Jeffery said she hopes her hiring does matter to young people, who might be encouraged to aspire for something more.

"It says Omaha values what all people bring to the table," Jeffery said. "And it gives us an opportunity to showcase that here."

We believe Jeffery brings much to the Omaha area and we are eager to see her in action.

OWH Editorial: Tuesday is the Nebraska primary. Don't forget to vote.

Citizens of Nebraska, it's time to vote.

The state's primary election is Tuesday, May 10. Don't miss this opportunity to help choose local and state officials whose decisions may well affect the taxes you pay, the laws that you'll have to follow and the services that you will receive.

In many cases, you'll just be narrowing the field of candidates down to the finalists who will compete in the November general election. In some cases, your vote on Tuesday will effectively choose the winner.

Either way, it's important — for your own interests and for the larger community.

Besides voting for candidates, Omaha voters will decide whether the city can issue $260 million in general obligation bonds for street improvements and other capital projects. That includes $120 million to continue Omaha's program of extra street work that voters authorized in 2020.

The $260 million, which is divided among six separate ballot questions, would not require property tax rate increases beyond what voters have already authorized in past votes. We've supported such bond issues in the past as a prudent way of maintaining and improving city streets, public facilities and other capital projects.

Don't think your vote matters? Seemingly every year, there's a race decided by a razor-thin margin. Two years ago, two candidates in a Douglas County Board primary were separated by three votes.

For this election, we've made endorsements in two high profile races.

In the Republican primary race for governor, we believe State Sen. Brett Lindstrom is the best candidate because of his experience with Nebraska issues, his track record of working to build consensus and his positive tone in the campaign.
In the Democratic primary race for the 2nd Congressional District, State Sen. Tony Vargas has demonstrated an ability to work with other lawmakers and has useful legislative experience. We believe he should advance from the primary to face incumbent Republican congressman Don Bacon in the general election.
But no matter who you support, you should exercise your right to vote.
If you already have your ballot, be sure to get it in on time. If you intend to vote Tuesday at the polls, make your plans to get there.
Vote.

OWH Midlands Voices: The secret is in Nebraska's topsoil — and regenerative practices

"Just as the soil is itself under threat, so is the Nebraska way of life. It seems there is nothing left for these industrial ag corporations to take but our souls." — The RegeNEration Proclamation
As a Nebraskan attending college in the northeast, I am often faced with questions like "Where even is Nebraska?" and "What's notable about Nebraska?" I usually give them the spiel about the College World Series, Warren Buffett, perhaps the Reuben sandwich and, if I'm lucky, I can convince them that I drove a tractor to high school.
Of course, I can't talk about Nebraska without mentioning the abundance of corn after which our state is nicknamed. But what will we name our football team when climate change-caused drought and wildfires strip our state of viable topsoil and, consequently, the golden corn we grow? Climate change is already affecting Nebraska growers. It's past time for our farmers to transition to regenerative agriculture practices.
The World-Herald's May 2 issue covered late April wildfires in Cambridge, the extreme drought of 2012 and the loss of topsoil. Topsoil is the precious upper layer of soil composed of minerals, organic matter, water and air, all of which are necessary for rich crop production. Warming winters without sufficient snow cover expose the land to drying winds, eventually blowing away the top "money-making" inches of soil. No-till farming can help stop these losses — it's a strategy increasingly utilized by American growers to prevent the release of CO_2 trapped in the soil.
While this is part of the solution, it does not solve the problem completely. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, the goal of regenerative agriculture is "to restore soil and ecosystem health, address inequity and leave our land, waters and climate in better shape for future generations." Regenerative practices, like compost, cover crops and crop rotation aim to improve the soil's microbiome, the microorganisms associated with plants and soil. This will help the soil retain water and stay on the farmland instead of drying up and blowing away.
Climate change will impact crop yields, namely corn, within 10 years. A NASA report from November 2021 warns, "Maize crop yields are projected to decline 24% ... found that the change in yields is due to projected increases in temperature, shifts in rainfall patterns, and elevated surface carbon dioxide concentrations from human-caused greenhouse gas emissions." Agriculture is responsible for 11% of

the total U.S. Greenhouse Gas emissions, as of 2020. Industrial agriculture methods are hurting themselves in the long run by continuing these destructive practices and releasing the carbon their crops ever-so-kindly stored in the ground.

So, what can Nebraskans do? You can start by watching the documentary "Kiss the Ground" to educate yourself further on the concept of regenerative agriculture. The organization offers grants to farmers and ranchers interested in educating themselves and making the transition to regenerative agriculture. More locally, a network of growers known as RegeNErate is calling other farmers to join the effort to rebuild communities "from the soil up" by transitioning to regenerative agriculture. They work together with Indigenous tribes to promote sustainable agriculture, strong communities and food sovereignty in Nebraska.

And consider moving toward regenerative practices on their own land. If you are able, you should aim to vote with your dollar. In other words, support local regenerative farms and ranchers! RegeNErate has a comprehensive list of Nebraska farms committed to regenerative agriculture — even some that accept SNAP benefits.

You might be thinking: What can my individual actions possibly do to fight the crushing force of climate change? Alone, not much. But your actions influence others and that is powerful. Movements must start somewhere, so why not your farm? Your dollar?

By Camille Beaulieu

OWH: Protect abortion rights

Many Republicans don't want to pay to help unwanted children. They also don't want to pay for criminal rehabilitation, so our penitentiaries bulge with inmates. Banning abortion will just result in more unwanted children eventually creating increased crime, further crowding prisons and the furtherment of human misery. What's the point? If Republicans would be willing to finance the human damage, I'd be willing to accept a ban — but they're not willing to pay for it. Governor Pete Ricketts has mercilessly devastated HHS and the prison rehabilitation systems in Nebraska, and I can't understand what he's thinking. Family planning should never be a separate issue unless our society is willing to harbor the consequences of rape, incest and a mistaken evening on the part of some teenage girl. We should not ban abortion until we are morally and financially prepared to underwrite the consequences.

Terry Niver, Omaha

OWH: Gaslighting governor

Interesting that Gov. Pete Ricketts hosted a conference opposing the "land grab" of the highly popular America the Beautiful Act, ignoring the fact that this proposal is totally voluntary for landholders, four days after signing laws creating a canal in Colorado and a large lake on current farmland. Both laws make clear they will invoke eminent domain to accomplish their projects.

Tell me again about "land grab," please?

Linda Wood, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 5/8: 4 lessons learned from debate over Wilderness Crossing development

At least four lessons can be learned from the heatedly debated Wilderness Crossing development near Wilderness Park that was approved by the City Council and Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird last week.

1. Parks have boundaries and development outside those boundaries should be expected.

That has previously been the case around Wilderness Park with the development of Lincoln Southwest High School, Cooper YMCA and the Horizons business park and was anticipated in the Comprehensive Plan's 2002 urban residential designation of the 75 acres south of Pioneers Boulevard between First Street and U.S. 77

The previous developments used buffers and setbacks to protect the park and its uses, as will Wilderness Crossing.

As Lincoln grows and plots new parks on the edges of the city, conservation design standards to help guide the City Council in developments near land such as Wilderness Park, should be developed and implemented. And any new park siting and nearby zoning should take into account any Native land and usage in the area.

2. There were no bad guys in the process.

Given the urban residential designation, all those involved – from the Catholic Dioceses of Lincoln, which will sell the land to developer Sam Manzitto Jr., to the City Council and Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird acted openly and responsibly in creating and approving the development.

Manzitto, who had been working with the church on the project since 2018, followed all applicable rules and regulations in proposing the development. The planning department and Lincoln-Lancaster County Planning Commission evaluated the proposal, with public input.

After the commission approved it, the council held hearings, attempted to address concerns raised at the hearing, then gave its approval, with explanation from most of the council members.

3. Voices will be heard.

Environmental activists and members of the Native community expressed concerns about the effect the traffic, light and noise from the development will have on native habitat and wildlife in the park and on the sweat lodge and nearby Native land.

To mitigate those impacts, Manzitto has agreed to build a 6-foot fence, create a 10-foot outlot planted with native vegetation, include requirements that houses be built a certain distance from their back fence, include lighting restrictions and prohibition of planting invasive plants and trees in housing covenants. Additionally, 33-feet of vacated First Street will be maintained as a buffer and two retention ponds constructed to manage drainage.

Those actions and requirements may not satisfy opponents. But they are good-faith measures that will do much to help preserve the west edge of the park.

The sweat lodge used by Native people to practice sacred ceremonial rituals is across the street from the development on private property, not parkland and, thus, out of the control of the city and Wilderness Crossing developers.

4. Lincoln continues to have a housing shortage that Wilderness Crossing will help alleviate. Wilderness Crossing will have 162 single-family homes, 134 townhomes and 205 apartments. No single development can solve the city's housing crisis. But the addition of 500 units to the housing stock – which will almost certainly be quickly snapped up – will be a step forward in providing places to live in our continually growing city.

Nebraska Examiner: State Sen. Tony Vargas, Alisha Shelton square off in Omaha-area Democratic U.S. House primary

OMAHA — Tuesday's Democratic primary to determine who will face 2nd District Rep. Don Bacon in November pits State Sen. Tony Vargas against mental health practitioner Alisha Shelton.

Both are serious candidates, said Paul Landow, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. But he said Vargas has an advantage because of his experience as an elected official, his connections and his fundraising edge.

Vargas, in addition to being a state senator, is a former member of the Omaha Public Schools Board.

Shelton has the backing of the Congressional Black Caucus and the experience of having run a statewide race in 2020. She lost in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate to Chris Janicek. Shelton says that campaign and her work in mental health make her a good listener.

The contested primary race is rare for Nebraska Democrats elsewhere, who tend to consolidate more quickly around single candidates running at or near the top of the ticket.

The 2nd District seat has seen a number of contested primaries in the recent past, including Kara Eastman vs. the late Rep. Brad Ashford in 2018 and Eastman vs. Ann Ashford and Gladys Harrison in 2020.

This year, the National Republican Congressional Committee has taken shots at both Vargas and Shelton as too liberal for the "purple" district.

Vargas leads the two in funding. He raised more than $1 million, according to federal campaign fundraising reports, and has spent more money on campaign ads. Shelton raised more than $300,000.

Vargas said he decided to run because he got tired of watching Congress make Americans' political divisions worse. He said he wants to unify people, not divide them.

His solution is to bring more of the approach he and others used in the officially nonpartisan Legislature, he said. He wants to find common ground and work on areas of agreement.

"Congress is more divided than ever, but I realized that who we elect either makes it a more unified place on common shared things or less," Vargas said.

Shelton said she wants to ease people's financial pain. Too many people ignore inflation, which is hurting families and people who are struggling, she said.

Among her ideas: making sure people have the education and training for better jobs, raising the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour and perhaps indexing the minimum wage to inflation.

"Anything that's going to help American working families, I think that's the way to go," Shelton said.

Vargas and Shelton say they're hearing from Democrats and nonpartisans about lost wages and the cost of health care and child care.

Addressing those concerns, Shelton said, would get more people back into the workforce and fill

open jobs. Vargas, who fought for workplace protections for meatpackers in the Legislature, said people should not have to worry financially about getting sick.
"They have a lot less in their pockets," Vargas said of his constituents. "People want somebody that's not just going to talk nicely and actually is going to try to do something."
On education, Vargas backed charter schools early in his career. He has since backed away, saying he's a "proud former public school teacher" who has worked for better pay for teachers.
Shelton said she wants public dollars going to public schools. During a debate with Vargas, she said voters want someone they know will be consistent on issues that matter.
Vargas and Shelton agreed on the need to help small businesses pay higher, more competitive wages with help from tax incentives and grants.
Vargas pointed to his record in the Legislature, where he helped pass a package by State Sens. Justin Wayne and Terrell McKinney allocating federal recovery funds for programs in North and South Omaha.
Shelton pointed to her work at the individual and neighborhood level to connect people with needed services, be they government, nonprofit or medical.
Vargas said he wants to help people focus on the 2nd District's economic future, to think about what the region is good at, what it could be good at and what investments it needs to get there.
Shelton said she would like to see a greater focus on workers, who she said need more federal protections to join unions and more encouragement to study trades.
Vargas and Shelton agreed on the need to boost voting rights.
Both candidates have New York ties. Shelton's family moved to Omaha when she was a child. Vargas grew up in New York after his parents immigrated to the U.S. from Peru. His wife, Lauren, had ties to Nebraska. They moved here in 2012.
The winner likely will face Bacon, who is running against a little known primary opponent, Steve Kuehl. Bacon is a retired Air Force brigadier general. Kuehl is a salesman for White Castle Roofing. Bacon has raised more than $2.3 million, compared with Kuehl's $5,141.
When former President Donald Trump held a rally May 1 in Greenwood, Nebraska, he urged Republicans not to vote for Bacon (who won the 2nd District in 2020, when Trump lost it).
Trump tried in the current election cycle to recruit a primary opponent for Bacon. But no well-known opponent surfaced.
Trump, when criticizing Bacon from the stage, said, "Good luck, Steve, whoever the hell you are."
Bacon, reached this week, said he is grateful to constituents for their faith and said he works for them, not Trump. "We are focused on 2022 and not backwards," Bacon said.
By Aaron Sanderford

Montana Free Press: Railroaders quit after BNSF institutes 'draconian' attendance policy

Brady Wassam knew what to expect when he took a job on the railroad. Wassam, 30, of Columbia Falls, came from a family of railroaders who have spent years moving freight over the mountains of northwest Montana.
"It's a family affair [and] I knew what I was getting into," he said. "I knew I would get called to work

in the middle of the night. I knew I'd have no regular schedule. I knew that because that's how my family lived."

Freight trains don't usually run on a set schedule and they don't stop moving just because it's a weekend or holiday. However, on the flip side of that unpredictable lifestyle was the fact that for many years railroads could provide workers with great compensation and benefits without requiring a college degree. The good pay and benefits were the reasons Wassam hired on back in 2014.

But Wassam says working conditions on BNSF Railway, one of the largest railroads in the country, have worsened in the last few years, and the introduction of a new attendance policy earlier this year — one union officials have called "the worst and most egregious attendance policy ever adopted by any rail carrier" — was his last straw. He resigned in March and he's not alone. In the last three months, more than 700 railroaders have walked off the job at BNSF because of it, according to the union.

"It felt offensive," Wassam said of the new attendance policy. "I gave so much to this job, and this new system made it seem like it wasn't enough."

Chaotic schedules

Federal law mandates that locomotive engineers, conductors and other railroad employees work no more than 12 hours a day and have a minimum of 10 hours off between shifts. But even with those hours written in stone, working for the railroad can be a chaotic existence — one day an engineer might go to work at 9 a.m., and the next day they might start at 5 p.m. Not to mention the fact that half the time they would be spending their off time away from home, taking their 10 hours rest and waiting to take another train back to their home terminal. Wassam said the unusual hours made living a normal life nearly impossible, even more so with a family.

"You give up so much when you work for the railroad, but it impacts your family even more," he said, adding that for years he's never known if he'll be able to be home for holidays and other special events.

Wassam said when he started at the railroad, employees could normally take five weekdays and two weekend days off per month. At the beginning of each month, the railroad would look back at the last 90 days, and if an employee had been available to work 75% of the time then they remained in good standing, according to Wassam. That system made it possible to take personal days for things like doctor's appointments, family commitments and more.

It was also possible to predict when you might go to work in the next day or so, Wassam said. Railroads have "pools" of engineers and conductors that work certain segments of railroads, such as Whitefish to Havre. When a train arrived at a terminal they would call the first available engineer and conductor to take it to its next destination. If those employees weren't available, they would call employees off the "extra board," who tended to have less seniority on the job and an even more chaotic schedule. Calling employees off the extra board avoided disrupting the schedule for the regular pool employees, meaning if an engineer or conductor knew there were eight crews ahead of them on the call list they could make an educated guess about when they might be called to run a train — regardless of whether someone ahead of them decided to take a personal day or called in sick.

But not long after Wassam got hired, BNSF changed how it assigned its employees to trains. Instead of having them work the same stretch of track every trip, the company would call employees to work trains going in any direction out of their home base: Instead of working from Whitefish to Havre on every run, Wassam might instead get called to take a train to Spokane. At about the same time, BNSF also decided to put fewer employees on the "extra board," Wassam said. Those two things

combined to make it even harder to figure out when an employee might get called to work.
Wassam and other BNSF employees that Montana Free Press spoke with said the change made an already challenging work-life balance worse, but it was nothing compared to what was announced in January. Starting Feb. 1, the railroad implemented a new attendance policy called "Hi-Viz" that assigns all employees 30 points. If they miss a call or take an unplanned day off, even for a family emergency, sickness or fatigue, they lose points. The exact number of points deducted depends on the type of absence and where it falls on the calendar (weekend days and holidays cost more points). An employee can get four points back if they're available to work 14 days in a row. If an employee loses all their points, they can be disciplined. If they lose their points multiple times they can be fired.
In a statement to MTFP, BNSF spokesperson Lena Kent wrote that the new policy was implemented to "improve the consistency of crews being available for their shifts to run trains," particularly during the ongoing supply-chain crisis, which has hobbled nearly every sector of the transportation industry. Railroad officials also noted that BNSF had not updated its attendance policy in more than 20 years and wanted to make it more consistent with the rest of the industry.
"We understand that change is hard but, as with every other railroad and service business, delivering for our customers requires employees to be available to work their assigned shifts," Kent wrote.
But the labor unions, including the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen and SMART Transportation Division, which represent more than 17,000 BNSF employees, didn't see it that way and immediately began polling members on whether or not to go on strike over the new policy.
"This draconian attendance policy has made a poor work environment even worse," Greg Regan, president of the Transportation Trades Department of the AFL-CIO, told MTFP.
Before the unions could finish polling members on whether or not to strike, BNSF filed a lawsuit in federal court seeking a restraining order against any work stoppage. A federal judge in Texas ruled in favor of the railroad, thus precluding a strike. Railroad-labor relations are governed by the Railway Labor Act of 1926. It was the first federal law that guaranteed the right of workers to organize, but it also set a high bar for when a railroad union could strike, which could cripple the economy.
Regan said most of the big railroads in North America have "severe" attendance policies, but that BNSF's new Hi-Viz policy is by far the worst, in his opinion. Because of it, many railroaders have quit.
According to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen and SMART Transportation Division, more than 700 operating employees have resigned since Feb. 1, and some have said the number is even higher. But during a recent hearing in Washington, D.C., a BNSF executive called that figure "greatly exaggerated." BNSF declined to offer its own figure to MTFP.
BNSF officials wrote that its operating employees receive three to four weeks vacation and more than 10 "Personal Leave Days," which was increased by 25% at the beginning of the year. Since Hi-Viz was implemented, the railroad said it has seen more employees using vacation days.
"BNSF team members drive our success and we couldn't deliver the nation's goods without them," Kent wrote. "We believe we can adapt together to meet today's competitive freight environment."

Record profits

Wassam said he was already growing tired of the railroad lifestyle before the new attendance policy went into effect — especially since he has three young children at home and rarely gets to see them.
Because of the solid benefits the industry provides, including a federally run retirement program separate from Social Security, railroaders often think twice about leaving, but Wassam said Hi-Viz pushed him over the line.
While Wassam no longer works for the railroad, he's still frustrated by what he's seeing because he

has friends and family who still work in the industry. He's not only worried about the impacts the new policy will have on railroaders' personal lives, but also on safety, particularly if employees feel they have to go to work fatigued because they fear losing points. He also worried that the railroad might use its shrinking employee numbers as an excuse to implement one-person crews, a practice that labor groups have fought vigorously in recent years. Presently, most freight trains are staffed with two people, but there is no law preventing there being only one employee on a train.

BNSF's labor strife comes at a precarious time for America's freight railroads. In recent months, some of the largest railroads in America, including BNSF, have struggled to deliver reliable service to customers, with trains running slower and freight cars sitting longer in rail yards waiting for deliveries. Service has gotten so bad that the federal regulator that oversees the industry called executives from four of the country's largest railroads to a hearing last week in Washington, D.C., to explain themselves. BNSF's Vice President of Transportation Matt Garland admitted during the hearing that his company's "service has not met our own expectations," but said that it was quickly hiring more workers and taking old locomotives out of storage to meet demand.

In 2021, BNSF posted record-breaking profits, despite moving fewer carloads of freight than it had before the pandemic.

Regan, the president of the AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department, said the railroad's decision to implement a strict new attendance policy while making billions of dollars in profit has resulted in a demoralized workforce. Because of that, he's not surprised that some employees are calling it quits.

Wassam said he loved working for the railroad — "Driving a train is every little kid's dream, and I got to do that for eight years" — but that he has no regrets about leaving. He recently became an electrician apprentice and said he's loving every minute of it, particularly because he can be home with his family every night.

"In the weeks since I left the railroad, I've been to my kids' dance competitions, Jiu Jitsu competitions and wrestling matches," he said. "It's been so great to be able to tell my kids, 'Yeah, I'll be there.'"

AP: Many US urban areas to become rural

Hundreds of urban areas in the U.S. are becoming rural, but it's not because people are leaving.

It's because the U.S. Census Bureau is changing the definition of an urban area. Under the new criteria, more than 1,300 small cities, towns and villages designated urban a decade ago would be considered rural.

That matters because urban and rural areas qualify for different types of federal funding. Some communities worry the change could affect health clinics in rural areas as well as transportation and education funding from federal programs. But leaders in other communities designated to lose their urban status say it won't make a difference.

"We are rural and we feel rural, and that's how we already identify," said Randy Reeg, city administrator of Mauston, Wisconsin, a city of 4,347 residents about 75 miles northwest of Madison.

Groups like the American Hospital Association say the changes, which are the biggest being made to the definitions in decades, could cause problems for people who need medical care in rural areas.

"Going with the new definition could limit the number of rural health clinics moving forward and have a negative impact on rural access to care," said Shannon Wu, senior associate director of policy

at the hospital association.
For starters, the Census Bureau is switching to housing units instead of people as the basis for calculating what should be an urban area. Bureau officials say the change will make it easier to update between once-a-decade head counts of the U.S. They also contend that it's needed because a new privacy method introduces errors into 2020 census population numbers at small geographies to protect people's identities. Housing counts stay accurate under the method.
A place had to have at least 2,500 people to be urban under old criteria that lasted more than a century. Now, it will need at least 2,000 housing units, the equivalent of about 5,000 people. A revised list of urban areas won't be released until later this year, but a third of the areas deemed urban a decade ago would be knocked into the rural category under the new criteria.
Places with 50,000 residents or more were considered "urbanized areas," compared with "urban clusters" having between 2,500 and 49,999 residents in the past. But those distinctions will be eliminated and all will be called urban areas under the new definition.
Some communities worry that the switch to housing units will cause some areas to be underestimated if the Census Bureau uses the U.S. average of 2.6 people per household for its calculations. For instance, Madera County, California, has 3.3 people per household, and the change "would not fully represent the community," Patricia Taylor, executive director of the Madera County Transportation Commission, said in a letter to the bureau last year.
The Census Bureau says the new definition should be used for statistical purposes only. But the bureau's urban areas form the cores of metro and micro areas, and its definitions provide the basis for how other agencies classify urban and rural areas in determining eligibility for federal funding.
The bureau reviews the definitions every 10 years after a census, and the urban population has grown from about 45% of the total U.S. population in 1910 to more than 80% a decade ago.
"We've heard people say 2,500 was too low. That was the impetus for the increase," said Michael Ratcliffe, a senior geographer with the Census Bureau.
Different federal programs use different definitions of urban and rural, and some communities qualify for rural funding for some programs and not others. But any changes "will have significant implications for many groups and communities," said Kenneth Johnson, a senior demographer at the University of New Hampshire who studies rural issues.
"Another likely concern for many rural communities is that if many existing urban areas are redefined as rural, competition for the limited rural funds will increase," Johnson said.
A coalition of associations representing cities, counties, planners and transportation groups had objected to many of the proposed changes last year, saying the switch from people to housing units would miss variations in development and land use patterns.
The Census Bureau tried to address those concerns by creating three levels of urban area definitions for census blocks, which are the nation's smallest geographic unit. Census blocks will be urban if they have 425 housing units per square mile, the equivalent of 1,105 people. Before the change, census blocks with at least 500 people per square mile were considered urban.
Bill Keyrouze, executive director of Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, said the Census Bureau's revisions, adding different levels of urban areas based on density, "was an adequate compromise."
For the town of DeMotte, Indiana, 85 miles southwest of South Bend, which won't qualify as an urban area anymore, it doesn't really matter from a "status" viewpoint, Town Manager Michael Cain said.
"You are who you are. The number of people doesn't matter. It's the spirit of the community that

matters, whether your town is a cohesive group of people who care about each other," Cain said.

Very Respectfully,

Andrew Shelburn
Digital Communications Manager

Office of Governor Pete Ricketts
CELL 402-890-2467
Andrew.shelburn@nebraska.gov
governor.nebraska.gov | **Facebook** | **Twitter**