From: Gage, John
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 1-13-23
Date: Friday, January 13, 2023 11:33:35 AM

TV and Radio

WOWT: Pillen appoints Ricketts as Nebraska's new Senator

KLKN: Pillen picks former Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts to fill vacant Senate seat

NTV: With 'unexpected opportunity' to fill Sasse's seat, Ricketts makes commitment to serve

NBC News: Nebraska Gov. Pillen appoints former Gov. Pete Ricketts as Ben Sasse's Senate replacement

NCN: Pillen: Back-room deal not part of his DNA

Fox42: Those in Nebraska's political scene react to Ricketts' Senate appointment

NTV: Nebraska leaders react to Pillen's senate appointment

NCN: Ricketts calls Senate appointment 'unexpected' opportunity

KMTV: With 'unexpected opportunity' to fill Sasse's seat, Ricketts makes commitment to serve

NPM: Pillen appoints Ricketts to Senate; Legislature considers rules

KETV: Nebraska Democrats bash Ricketts appointment to fill Senate vacancy

KLKN: Gov. Pillen picks Nebraska's US senator; one Republican says, 'It smells bad'

CNN: Nebraska Gov. Pillen appoints Pete Ricketts to Sasse's Senate seat

KMTV: This little piggy went to Lincoln: Help the governor name his pig statue

Governor

OWH: Pillen appoints former Gov. Pete Ricketts to U.S. Senate

LJS: Former Gov. Ricketts will fill Nebraska's Senate seat

Nebraska Examiner: Pillen, as expected, taps former Gov. Pete Ricketts to succeed Sasse in Senate

AP: Nebraska governor names predecessor to US Senate seat

OWH: Ricketts not likely to face political fallout in 2024 despite Senate appointment by ally

Breitbart: Nebraska Governor Appoints Pete Ricketts to Fill Sasse's Senate Seat

Newsweek: Ben Sasse's Republican Senate Replacement Has Fraught History With Trump

NY Times: Pete Ricketts Will Be Nebraska's Next Senator, Replacing Ben Sasse

Reuters: Former Nebraska Governor Ricketts to become U.S. senator

Business Insider: One of the most powerful rich families in American politics just got their son in the Senate

USA Today: Former GOP gov. to fill open Nebraska Senate seat, following Ben Sasse's resignation

Roll Call: Former Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts appointed to Senate

Daily Caller: Former Governor Appointed To Replace Sen. Ben Sasse

Washington Times: Ex-Gov. Ricketts of Nebraska picked to replace Sasse in Senate

Daily Wire: Former Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts Fills Empty Senate Seat Vacated By Ben Sasse

Politico: Ricketts tapped to fill Nebraska's open Senate seat

NY Post: Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen chooses Pete Ricketts to fill Ben Sasse's Senate seat

Washington Post: Pete Ricketts's massive political turnaround

LJS: Three applicants seek to be district judge in Lancaster County

Breitbart: Nebraska Lawmakers Propose Fetal Heartbeat Bill to Protect the Unborn

Legislature

LJS: Bill targets school library books and critical race theory in Nebraska classrooms

OWH: Nebraska state senator introduces bill aimed at increasing parental control in schools

Nebraska Examiner: Senators introduce parental 'bill of rights' proposal to ensure parental control over education

OWH: Support, opposition to secret balloting for legislative leaders raised at rules hearing

LJS: Senators hear changes to secret ballot, voting procedure rules during marathon hearing

Nebraska Examiner: Nebraska lawmakers to ponder funding for relocation of iconic mural

Nebraska Examiner: ACLU condemns proposed 'drag' show ban as part of national effort to 'push LGBTQ+ people out of public life'

State, Local and Regional

OWH: Pizza, news and lawn mower entrepreneurs among newbies to Nebraska business hall of fame

OWH: Non-credible threats against several OPS schools lead to arrest of youths, young adult

Opinion

OWH Public Pulse

1. No surprise here
2. Different tax system
3. One-house legislature
4. Parking ramp
5. Yes to streetcar
6. New plates, expired tags
7. Trash pick up
8. Unimproved streets
9. An expensive mistake
10. Smart on crime

LJS Editorial, 1/13: New project adds to momentum at Lincoln Airport

LJS Letters

1. Military spending worth scrutiny
2. Give money to taxpayers

National/Federal

AP: US inflation eases grip on economy, falling for a 6th month

OWH: Pillen appoints former Gov. Pete Ricketts to U.S. Senate

LINCOLN — Gov. Jim Pillen confirmed widespread expectations Thursday when he announced former Gov. Pete Ricketts as "the person for the job" to fill Nebraska's vacancy in the U.S. Senate.

Ricketts, a major Pillen supporter, will replace Ben Sasse, who officially resigned from the Senate on Sunday to become the next president of the University of Florida. Ricketts will be sworn in when the Senate reconvenes Jan. 23.

Ricketts said he expects to continue Sasse's conservative voting record, especially on judicial nominees, and plans to prioritize making government work better and having a strong national defense, particularly against China.

"I am very grateful for this unexpected opportunity to continue to serve the people of Nebraska," Ricketts said. "I won't let you down."

Nebraska's senior senator, Republican Deb Fischer, joined 30 state lawmakers and the state's top elected officials for the announcement. Ricketts' wife, Susanne Shore, and his son, Roscoe, also attended.

Ricketts is Pillen's predecessor, serving as Nebraska's governor for eight years up until last week, when Pillen was sworn in. Before he left office, Ricketts announced he was applying for the position. Ricketts previously sought a Senate seat in 2006, but was defeated by the incumbent, Democrat Ben Nelson.

On Thursday, Pillen said that 111 people applied for the job and that he interviewed nine candidates over the last three days, including former State Sen. Brett Lindstrom and Sid Dinsdale, chairman of Pinnacle Bank.

Among the more than 100 applicants who didn't get an interview were Ann Ashford, widow of former U.S. Rep. Brad Ashford of Omaha, and TV and radio talk show host Tom Becka of Omaha.

Pillen said the choice was "very, very obvious."

The governor said he looked for someone who would represent the values and ideology important to Nebraskans, have a "servant's heart" for public service and be a "God-fearing" person of "incredible faith." He also looked for someone who believes in less government and fiscal accountability, who would defend Nebraska and the nation and who understands the importance of agriculture to Nebraska.

"It's really, really important this nominee knows Nebraska really well," Pillen said.

But the appointment didn't sit well with one Nebraska Republican. Charles W. Herbster, who came in second to Pillen in last May's GOP primary, tweeted his criticism of both the former and current

governors Thursday.

“The lengths to which Pete Ricketts went to assure his handpicked successor for governor were, by all standards, unprecedented,” Herbster said. “Today it is clear why it was so important for Pete Ricketts to fight my candidacy in the 2022 primary election.”

In making his announcement, Pillen made clear that he did not want to name a “placeholder,” a person who would fill the vacancy until the next election and then step aside. He said that seniority is important and that a person who did not plan to seek election would not have the same accountability to Nebraskans.

Pillen said Ricketts assured him that he would run in 2024, when an election will be held to fill the remaining two years of Sasse’s term, and he would turn down any other job offers. The seat will be up for election again in 2026, at which point candidates will be seeking a full six-year term.

“He’s committed to this seat, and he and Susanne are committed to winning elections for a minimum of 10 years,” Pillen said.

Fischer praised the appointment, saying that Ricketts knows and loves Nebraska and will be a quick learner as he confronts a broader array of issues.

“I look forward to working together in this new capacity and forging a strong partnership in the U.S. Senate,” she said. “We will continue to fight every day for a stronger Nebraska and a more secure nation.”

State Sen. Myron Dorn of Adams was optimistic about the choice. He said he expects Ricketts will spend more time meeting and talking with Nebraskans while in office than Sasse did. He also said Ricketts will benefit from his experiences and contacts made during numerous trade missions.

Both Pillen and Ricketts addressed criticisms that the appointment was a done deal because of Ricketts’ role in getting Pillen elected. One critic, Jane Kleeb, chair of the Nebraska Democratic Party, said Thursday that Pillen choosing Ricketts was evidence of “the most blatant pay to play scheme we’ve seen in our state.”

Ricketts was a key supporter of Pillen’s gubernatorial campaign, adding credibility to Pillen’s bid both through name recognition and financial support. The former governor donated $100,000 directly to Pillen’s campaign, and he and his family gave more than $1.4 million to the political action committee Conservative Nebraska, which ran attack ads against Pillen’s top opponents in the hotly contested GOP primary election.

Pillen has repeatedly denied the selection was pre-determined, and said Ricketts’ campaign support played no role in the appointment.

“Anybody who knows me, that’s just not part of my DNA,” Pillen said. “Integrity of the process and commitment to the process was my highest priority.”

For his part, Ricketts said it should be no surprise that he and Pillen share the same political philosophy. He said he was proud to have supported Pillen in the campaign and believes he will be a good governor.

Even before Ricketts announced he was applying, there were murmurs that he was Pillen’s top candidate. After Ricketts’ announcement, U.S. Rep. Don Bacon seemed to confirm the rumors on Twitter.

“We look forward to hazing the junior member of the delegation,” Bacon wrote in a since-deleted tweet referencing Ricketts.

Despite multiple requests from The World-Herald and other news media, Pillen refused to release the list of applicants for the role before Thursday’s announcement. His office released the full list of

names Thursday afternoon, almost three weeks after the application deadline.

On Thursday, he also named the eight other people who were interviewed. They were: Dinsdale, Lindstrom, former 1st District congressional candidate John Weaver, former Nebraska Agriculture Director Greg Ibach, AmeriFirst managing director Don Kluthe, RBC Wealth Management financial adviser John "Buzz" Garlock, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce President Bryan Slone and Don Eckles, co-founder and chairman of Scooter's Coffee. All are Republicans.

Pillen said he doesn't support the current Democratic administration and doesn't believe it would be fair to name someone who would become part of the Democratic caucus in the Senate.

By Erin Bamer and Martha Stoddard

LJS: Former Gov. Ricketts will fill Nebraska's Senate seat

A week after completing his governorship, Pete Ricketts on Thursday was appointed to a seat in the U.S. Senate.

"My task was to find the best person," Gov. Jim Pillen said in making the announcement before dozens of state senators, state officials and Republican stalwarts who filled the Governor's Hearing Room.

Pillen said Ricketts will bring his dedication to "fiscal responsibility" to Washington along with a knowledge of "what drives this state — agriculture."

After interviewing nine applicants for the job — there were 111 total — Pillen said Ricketts was "the very obvious choice."

Ricketts, who completed eight years as governor last week, said he expects his priorities and voting record to be very similar to former Sen. Ben Sasse, who resigned from the Senate effective last Sunday to prepare to assume the presidency of the University of Florida early next month.

Ricketts said he shares the dedication that Sasse displayed in seeking confirmation of conservative federal judges, along with the former senator's demonstrated respect for the U.S. Constitution, his support for a strong national defense and his concerns about China and the Chinese Communist Party.

Like Sasse, Ricketts said he would "work to control overspending" by the federal government.

"I can't think of an issue we differ on," he said.

Sen. Deb Fischer, who stood with Pillen and Ricketts during the announcement, said she is "very, very excited to have Pete Ricketts as a colleague" and to have the opportunity to "partner with him."

Ricketts, she said, has demonstrated "a very swift learning ability" during his years as governor.

"We know that Pete knows the state of Nebraska. And we know Pete loves the state of Nebraska. I know he is going to do a wonderful job in continuing to serve the people of this state," she said.

Fischer said she and Pillen had a conversation before he interviewed Ricketts.

Questioned about allegations that the appointment might appear to be the result of "backroom dealing" after Ricketts provided strong financial and political support in Pillen's successful battle to win the Republican gubernatorial nomination in a hotly contest GOP primary battle last May, the governor said "that's not part of my DNA."

Pillen said he has "way, way too much respect for the people of Nebraska" to ever engage in that kind of political bargaining and he focused solely on choosing the best person for the job.

Ricketts donated more than $100,000 of his own money to Pillen's campaign. Ricketts also gave nearly $1.3 million to the political action committee Conservative Nebraska, which ran a slew of attack ads against Pillen's primary opponents, including the Donald Trump-backed candidate, Charles Herbster.

Pillen noted that Nebraska voters will have a voice in deciding whether they approve of Ricketts as their new U.S. senator next year when he needs to seek election to complete the final two years of Sasse's unexpired term. Fischer will also be on the ballot for reelection in 2024.

Ricketts would be on the ballot again in 2026, when he said he would seek election to a full six-year term.

Ricketts, who was joined at Thursday's announcement by his wife Susanne Shore and son Roscoe, said he was grateful for the "unexpected opportunity to serve Nebraska."

No Democrats were interviewed for the job, Pillen said. Among the Republicans he interviewed were former state Sen. Brett Lindstrom, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce President Bryan Slone, Pinnacle Bank Chairman Sid Dinsdale and Greg Ibach, former director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

Pillen said he rejected the alternative of choosing a so-called placeholder for the Senate seat who would not subsequently seek election to the post, thereby opening the field to an array of candidates because that choice would then have "no accountability to the people."

Seniority matters in the Senate, Pillen noted, and that also argues against a so-called placeholder.

"I'm a pretty big believer that past performance is a pretty good indicator of future performance," he said.

Pillen noted that he appointed a U.S. senator during his eighth day in office as governor and that process has occurred only five times in the history of the state.

The Senate reconvenes Jan. 23.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky praised the choice of Ricketts.

"Gov. Pillen could not have found a more capable leader to take the baton from our colleague Sen. Sasse and fight for the Cornhusker State," McConnell said.

The Nebraska Farm Bureau immediately expressed its support for the choice.

"Nebraska's farm and ranch families need champions in Washington, D.C., fighting for them each and every day, and they have one in Pete Ricketts," Farm Bureau President Mark McHargue of Central City said.

Democratic State Chair Jane Kleeb of Hastings said: "Gov. Pillen appointed Pete Ricketts in order to pay him back for buying the governor's seat."

By Don Walton

Nebraska Examiner: Pillen, as expected, taps former Gov. Pete Ricketts to succeed Sasse in Senate

Editor's note: This story has been updated with live comments from Thursday's announcement and interviews with supporters and critics.

LINCOLN — Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen made the expected choice Thursday, appointing his predecessor and political benefactor, Pete Ricketts, to the U.S. Senate.

Ricketts, who finished his second term as governor last week, fills the seat that Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., vacated Sunday to lead the University of Florida.

"My job … was to find the best person to represent us, and the process for me has been really, really important," Pillen said in making the announcement in the Governor's Hearing Room.

Ricketts thanked Pillen and said he was grateful for the "unexpected opportunity. … I am humbled and grateful for the opportunity that Governor Pillen has given me."

He told those gathered in the room, including state senators and U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., "I often say Nebraska is what America is supposed to be, and it's never been truer at any point in our history."

Experience mattered

Ricketts was the most experienced applicant for the job, based on reporting by the Nebraska Examiner in recent weeks, and Pillen said experience mattered. But the list of 111 applicants also included other well-known names.

Among them: former State Sen. Brett Lindstrom, Pinnacle Bank Chairman Sid Dinsdale, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce President Bryan Slone and lawyer Ann Ashford.

Pillen said he interviewed nine candidates during the selection process, none of them Democrats. He has said he wanted to appoint someone who reflects the state's conservative mindset.

"We took this process incredibly seriously," Pillen said. "The criteria for me were really, really simple. The appointee needs to represent us as a people."

He said the person selected needs to have a "servant heart," to be there for future generations and to push for accountability and less government.

Pillen has praised Ricketts' record of cutting taxes and controlling spending. Ricketts weighed in more often on national issues during his second term, including on immigration enforcement and conservation easements.

Ricketts faced troubles with crowding and staffing at state prisons and had to pull child welfare services in the Omaha area back under state control after a contractor chosen by his administration flopped.

Governors as senators

He becomes the latest Nebraskan to serve in the Senate after being governor, most recently including Republican Mike Johanns and Democrats Ben Nelson, Bob Kerrey and J.J. Exon.

Ricketts on Thursday thanked Sasse for his service, including his efforts to help to get conservative judges confirmed. He said he looks forward to working with and learning from Fischer.

"We all know that Pete is a quick learner," Fischer said Thursday at the State Capitol announcement. "He will work hard for this state, so I look forward to partnering with him in the future … to build a stronger Nebraska and to build a stronger and more secure nation."

Political consultants considered Ricketts the odds-on favorite to get the job. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina both backed him.

McConnell issued a statement Thursday praising Pillen for the pick, saying he "could not have found a more capable leader" and that he was "thrilled" with the selection.

"Senator-designate Ricketts has a proven record," McConnell said. "He pairs sharp business savvy with a deep commitment to public service. That's why the people of Nebraska elected and reelected him."

Republicans in Washington, D.C., have said they wanted someone who can run and win a statewide special election in 2024 to finish the final two years of Sasse's term, and again in 2026, for the seat's regular election. They like that Ricketts has the political infrastructure and funds to win.

Pillen said Thursday that Ricketts committed to him to run in 2024 and 2026 and not seek or take another job, including vice president or a cabinet post, should a Republican win the presidency in 2024.

Reaction from Nebraskans

U.S. Reps. Don Bacon, Mike Flood and Adrian Smith have all said Ricketts would make a strong senator. Each welcomed the choice Thursday.

"Pete is eminently qualified," Bacon said. "He knows this state as well as anyone, and he'll use his 8 years of experience as governor and be a great senator. I congratulate my friend."

Many state legislators backed by Ricketts over the years also have voiced support, including State Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Omaha. She served as chief of staff for former Nebraska U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel.

She said Thursday that she sees Ricketts as one of the best-prepared and best-positioned rookie senators Nebraska could have had. Her reasons: He has governed. He knows the state. He knows its issues. And he reads a lot.

"Most importantly, you know Ricketts can win statewide," Linehan said. "He's done so twice. … You've got to be able to raise money. You got to have people in every county. You've got to have people on the ground."

Ricketts critics, including Nebraska Democratic Party chair Jane Kleeb, said this week it was clear Pillen would pick Ricketts because he was Pillen's top political patron.

Kleeb said Pillen would be paying back Ricketts for his help in the governor's race. She said Nebraskans "deserve a senator who will work for them, not someone who buys elections as a hobby."

Ricketts spent more than $1.3 million during the 2022 election to help elect Pillen, including contributions to outside groups that bashed Pillen's top opponents during the pivotal GOP primary.

Some of the Republicans who wrested control of the state party away from Ricketts last summer said anger from rank-and-file activists stemmed from Ricketts taking sides in primaries.

Several privately backed the application of Republican John Glen Weaver, who lost a primary bid last year for the 1st Congressional District.

Officially, the new leadership team of the Nebraska Republican Party congratulated Ricketts on Thursday, saying he "served Nebraska well for eight years as a conservative-minded leader."

Matt Innis, a delegate who was among those who voted for a GOP leadership change, said Thursday's announcement is evidence that the state's power brokers still want to decide who gets power and who gets a seat at the table.

Innis said voters will get to weigh in on Ricketts soon but said Ricketts will now enjoy the support of McConnell and the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which will make defeating him more difficult.

"Now what you're looking at is you're seeing the reason why we did that," Innis said of the party leadership change. "What (Pillen) did (with the appointment) didn't shock anybody. I think it was kind of silly. You're basically trying to make Nebraskans chumps by going through the process."

Ricketts will run in 2024, 2026

When Ricketts announced his interest in the Senate post in December, he dismissed conspiracy talk as misguided. He said that in applying for the job he worked to make the case that he was the best person for the job.

Pillen agreed. He said Thursday that he and Ricketts share a conservative vision for the state, built on lower taxes, less regulation and making government work better for the people who pay for it.

Ricketts said he was proud of his administration's work to improve customer service and service delivery by state government.

"In all those ways, we showed how government can work. I want to bring that to Washington, D.C.," he said. "We need to hold Washington, D.C., accountable."

Ricketts repeated his often-stated philosophy that government needs to run more like a business and stressed the need for a strong national defense.

Ricketts' seat faces voters next in 2024, the same year Fischer is up for re-election. It would be Ricketts' second run for the Senate. He lost his first bid in 2006, when he was a political novice, running against Nelson, an incumbent.

That was the last time a Republican has lost a statewide race in Nebraska.

Possible primary challenge

Political consultants in the Midwest are already gearing up for the possibility of a primary challenger to either Ricketts or Fischer, who has confirmed she is running for a third term.

The new leaders of the state GOP have expressed more openness to the idea of primary challengers to Republican incumbents than previous leadership. The Ricketts-led GOP team, in contrast, got involved more often in open-seat primaries.

Among those rumored as interested in a possible Senate bid is agribusinessman Charles Herbster, who finished second to Pillen in the 2022 GOP primary for governor.

Herbster issued a statement Thursday criticizing Pillen and Ricketts. In it, he said the Senate appointment made clear "why it was so important" for Ricketts to "fight my candidacy" for governor.

Ricketts and Pillen said Thursday that there was no arrangement involving the Senate seat. Pillen said he wouldn't disrespect Nebraskans that way. Ricketts said he would keep reaching out to voters with doubts.

"I've worked for 20 years to elect conservatives," Ricketts said. "I will work hard to earn their vote."

By Aaron Sanderford

AP: Nebraska governor names predecessor to US Senate seat

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — In one of his first acts as Nebraska's governor, Republican Jim Pillen named his predecessor to the state's vacant U.S. Senate seat on Thursday.

Pillen surprised no one in naming fellow Republican Pete Ricketts to the seat vacated Sunday by Ben Sasse.

The governor said 111 people applied for the vacant seat and nine people — all Republicans — were interviewed. He said he chose Ricketts based on their shared conservatism and Ricketts' promise that he would later run to be elected to the seat.

“I don’t believe in placeholders. I believe that every day matters. … Placeholders don’t have any accountability to the people,” Pillen said.

Ricketts said he would fight for conservative values and a strong national defense, and would work to hold leaders in Washington accountable for waste and fraud.

“This is an unexpected opportunity,” Ricketts said. “I am humbled and grateful.”

He also promised to continue Sasse’s vocal criticism of the Chinese Communist Party, saying he will work with Republican colleagues in the Senate to reduce China’s geopolitical influence.

Ricketts’ appointment came even after some fellow Republicans expressed reservations about Pillen selecting his benefactor.

Pillen was elected in November in large part because of Ricketts’ backing, which included more than $100,000 of his own money contributed directly to Pillen’s campaign. Ricketts also gave nearly $1.3 million this year to the political action committee Conservative Nebraska, which ran a slew of attack ads against Pillen’s primary opponents, including the Trump-backed candidate, Charles Herbster.

The reproach was repeated Thursday by state Democrats.

“Gov. Pillen appointed Pete Ricketts in order to pay him back for buying the governor’s seat,” Nebraska Democratic Party Chairwoman Jane Kleeb said in a statement. “This is the most blatant pay-to-play scheme we’ve seen in our state, and it’s happening right in front of us all. Nebraskans deserve a Senator who will work for them, not someone who buys elections as a hobby.”

On Thursday, Pillen rejected criticism that his selection of Ricketts amounted to backroom dealing.

“Anybody who knows me knows that’s just not in my DNA,” Pillen said, adding that he has “way too much respect for Nebraskans” to select anyone he didn’t believe would be elected by the majority of voters.

Pillen handily defeated Democrat Carol Blood in the November general election in a state that hasn’t elected a Democrat as governor since 1994. But the GOP primary was much closer, with Pillen squeezing past Herbster to win the nomination in a nine-person race.

Ricketts will serve two years before a special election is held in 2024 to finish out the last two years of Sasse’s term. He would then have to seek reelection in 2026 for a full six-year term.

Sasse announced last fall that he would be leaving the Senate just two years into his second six-year term to take a job as president of the University of Florida.

Ricketts steps into his new role as one of the richest senators in the chamber, with a reputation for using that wealth to back conservative causes and candidates. Ricketts put his net worth at about $50 million when he ran for a second term as governor in 2018.

Ricketts is expected to be sworn in when the U.S. Senate reconvenes on Jan. 23.

By Margery A. Beck

OWH: Ricketts not likely to face political fallout in 2024 despite Senate appointment by ally

When former Gov. Pete Ricketts declined to appoint himself to the U.S. Senate, he avoided a fraught political history.

Of the last nine governors nationally who appointed themselves to the Senate, eight failed to keep the seat in the next election.

But could there be any political peril in Ricketts being appointed to the Senate Thursday by the new governor he just helped put in office? Could that cause Ricketts any problems when he runs for the seat in 2024?

Not likely, said most political observers interviewed for this article.

“(Ricketts) will be elected, and he will serve in the United States Senate as long as he wants,” predicted Paul Landow, a longtime Democratic political operative in Omaha. “He’s experienced now, he’s very popular with Nebraska Republicans, he has the right profile for a Republican U.S. senator, and he has the money to run any kind of campaign he wants.”

Perhaps in another state, such an appointment could prove problematic, said UNO political scientist Randall Adkins. But not Nebraska.

Just given the current political landscape in the state — where Republicans have prevailed in every race for Senate and governor since 2006 — Adkins said he does not see either Senate seat leaving Republican hands anytime soon.

And Adkins said Ricketts has many political advantages over Democrats or any GOP rivals, including a well-known name, his experience in office and the unlimited ability to fund his own campaign.

“Who wants to step into that?” Adkins said.

ov. Jim Pillen’s appointment of Ricketts to the Senate has been anticipated almost from the moment U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse emerged in November as the likely president of the University of Florida.

Not long after, then-Gov. Ricketts announced that he would leave the appointment of the new senator to his successor as governor, Pillen. Ricketts later announced he would apply for the position.

But the appointment comes with some questionable optics.

Ricketts was a key supporter of Pillen’s gubernatorial campaign. He campaigned for him. He donated $100,000 directly to Pillen’s campaign. And Ricketts and his family gave more than $1.4 million to the political action committee that ran attack ads against Pillen’s top opponents in the hotly contested GOP primary election.

Pillen repeatedly denied the selection was pre-determined and said Ricketts’ campaign support played no role in the appointment.

If Pillen was looking for someone to keep the seat in GOP hands, Ricketts was in many ways the logical choice.

Serving as governor has long been a political recipe for success for those with Senate aspirations in Nebraska. In the last half-century, all four Nebraska governors who later decided to run for Senate were victorious — J.J. Exon, Bob Kerrey, Ben Nelson and Mike Johanns. Exon, Kerrey and Nelson were Democrats; Johanns was a Republican.

The last man who was appointed to a Senate seat in Nebraska, Republican David Karnes, did fail to win election in 1988.

But Karnes had never served in office before Gov. Kay Orr appointed him. And he did win a contested GOP primary before running into a political buzz saw in Kerrey, who was very popular at the time. (Kerrey, who left the office after two terms, didn’t fare as well in a comeback Senate bid in 2012.)

John Cavanaugh, a former Democratic congressman from Omaha and longtime state political observer, said he didn’t see Ricketts as a Senate shoo-in in 2024.

Even though he was twice elected governor, Ricketts' political following is not very deep, Cavanaugh said. And Cavanaugh said a quality candidate from either party could exploit the politics of the appointment.

"It certainly doesn't look good to be appointed by someone who received a tremendous amount of money from the person he appoints," Cavanaugh said.

Cavanaugh and Democrats weren't the only ones raising that issue Thursday. Charles W. Herbster, the Donald Trump-backed GOP candidate for governor who was the target of many of the Ricketts-funded attack ads, on Twitter Thursday suggested it's now clear why Ricketts was determined to see his hand-picked successor win.

Others weren't so sure voters would connect those dots and find the appointment problematic.

"Do people just kind of shrug their shoulders and go, 'OK'?" said Ryan Horn, a GOP political consultant from Omaha. "If Pete Ricketts does a good job in the Senate as people perceive it, and he works hard, there's a good chance people might forget about (the appointment) in two years."

Landow predicted voters will see the appointment as "no issue whatsoever."

"I think anyone who knows anything about politics knows that favors are traded, and they would have assumed — rightly so — that Ricketts would be appointed," Landow said.

But the biggest reason most said they expected Ricketts to prevail in 2024 is the current state of the Nebraska Democratic Party — which Kerrey recently described as "pathetic."

Horn said it seemed Pillen barely had to campaign to win this fall's governor's race over Democrat Carol Blood.

"The reason the seat is likely to stay in Republican hands is the Democratic Party doesn't have a brand that appeals to most Nebraskans," Horn said.

Adkins likewise noted that Republicans in Nebraska have recently been handily winning statewide. That can change, he said, but it would likely take time.

"Until we have a fundamental shift in the politics of Nebraska, I just don't see Ricketts being beaten by a Democrat," he said.

By Henry J. Cordes

Breitbart: Nebraska Governor Appoints Pete Ricketts to Fill Sasse's Senate Seat

Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen (R) appointed his predecessor, former Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts (R), to fill the state's U.S. Senate seat, vacated by former Sen. Ben Sasse (R-NE) in January.

Term limits rendered Ricketts unable to run for reelection. Being appointed to the position was widely expected after he said he intended to seek an application for consideration for the appointment following Pillen's announcement that he would "seek qualified applicants" to fill the upcoming vacancy.

Sasse, a two-term senator, left his U.S. Senate seat to become the president of the University of Florida. He officially resigned from the Senate on Sunday.

Ricketts will now serve as Nebraska's U.S. senator until January 2025. Under the Cornhusker State's law, he will have to run in a special election during the 2024 cycle to serve the last two years of Sasse's term before running again in 2026 if he wants to be elected for a full six-year term.

According to the Hill, Pillen said there were 11 applicants for the Senate seat, and his office

interviewed nine of them, ultimately choosing Ricketts for his ability to win a statewide election.

“My job in this process is really, really simple: to find the best person to represent us Nebraskans,” Pillen said, adding that Ricketts has committed to running in the special election in 2024 and in 2026 for a full term, in addition to not accepting a Cabinet position from a future Republican president if asked.

“Ultimately, the timing of this is very, very rigorous, and my belief in not [selecting] a placeholder and my belief in seniority being really, really important, and running statewide elections and winning statewide elections in ’24 and ’26 is rigorous and demanding, and ultimately that was a big separator,” Pillen said.

National Republican Senatorial Committee chairman Steve Daines released a statement congratulating Ricketts on being appointed to the Senate.

“I want to welcome former Governor Pete Ricketts to the U.S. Senate. I look forward to working with Pete to stop Joe Biden’s harmful agenda and keep Nebraska red in 2024,” Daines said.

By Jacob Bliss

Newsweek: Ben Sasse's Republican Senate Replacement Has Fraught History With Trump

Republican Ben Sasse, a fierce critic of Donald Trump, officially resigned from Congress on Sunday —and the person filling his Senate seat also has a fraught history with the former president.

On Thursday, former Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts was announced as the replacement for Sasse, who is leaving politics to serve as president of the University of Florida. Ricketts was picked for the role by the state's current governor, Republican Jim Pillen.

Sasse has long bashed both Trump and his supporters. He was the first GOP senator in 2021 to publicly say he'd mull action to boot Trump from the White House. He also joined six other Republican senators in voting to convict the former president for inciting the Capitol riot.

Ricketts, meanwhile, announced on Thursday that he'd like to see the federal government "run like a business."

"We need to make Washington, D.C., accountable, and ensure they are bringing the high level of services we did here in Nebraska," Ricketts said, according to NBC News.

But even though Ricketts and Trump are both business-minded, their relationship over the years has been a bit rocky.

While running for president in 2016, Trump targeted the family of Ricketts, whose billionaire parents were reportedly big backers of an anti-Trump super PAC.

"I hear the Rickets [sic] family, who own the Chicago Cubs, are secretly spending $'s against me," Trump tweeted on February 22, 2016. "They better be careful, they have a lot to hide!"

After that, though, the two seemed to temporarily make amends. Ricketts, who was governor at the time, made an appearance at a 2016 rally to boost Trump's White House bid.

Then in 2018, Trump appointed Ricketts for a role on the Advisory Committee for Trade and Negotiations and even called him a "terrific" governor.

Tensions again spiked between the two as Ricketts urged Trump last year to butt out of his state's gubernatorial GOP primary, according to NBC. The former president ignored him and endorsed a Republican candidate who was ultimately defeated by Pillen.

Trump has also hurled the "RINO" label at Ricketts, an acronym that stands for "Republican in name only," Nebraska's KLKN-TV reported last May. He didn't like that Ricketts had thrown his weight behind the reelection bid of Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, who had resisted Trump's demands to aid him in subverting the 2020 election results.

Trump's Georgia endorsee, former Senator David Perdue, wound up losing to Kemp during the state's Republican primary.

However, the Nebraska Examiner news outlet reported last May that Ricketts qualified his relationship with Trump as "fine."

"I certainly feel that I can pick up the phone and call him, like I did last summer," the then-governor reportedly said at the time. "In contested primaries, people are going to pick different candidates."

By Simone Carter

NY Times: Pete Ricketts Will Be Nebraska's Next Senator, Replacing Ben Sasse

Former Gov. Pete Ricketts of Nebraska, a Republican, was appointed on Thursday as the state's next senator, replacing Ben Sasse, a fellow Republican who resigned this week to become president of the University of Florida.

Mr. Ricketts was chosen for the Senate seat by his successor in the governor's office, Jim Pillen, whose campaign he helped bankroll last year.

A special election will be held in 2024 to fill the seat for the remainder of Mr. Sasse's term, which would have ended in 2026. That means if Mr. Ricketts wants to stay in the Senate, he will have to run in the special election in 2024 and then again in 2026 for a full term.

Mr. Ricketts, 58, served two terms as governor from 2015 until this month. He was widely expected to seek the Senate seat after Mr. Sasse announced last year that he intended to step down, and he quickly received support from Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican leader.

"We've got to hold Washington, D.C., accountable for the waste and the fraud and make sure that we're running government more like a business, just like we've done here in Nebraska," Mr. Ricketts said at a news conference after his appointment was announced.

The Ricketts family has long been among the most powerful in the insular world of Nebraska politics. Mr. Ricketts's father, Joe Ricketts, the founder and former chief executive of the financial services company TD Ameritrade, is a major donor to Republican candidates and causes across the country.

Pete Ricketts spent at least $1.3 million in last year's raucous Republican primary for governor, helping Mr. Pillen while attacking his two leading opponents. Mr. Pillen narrowly won the party's nomination over a Trump-backed candidate and a relative moderate, and then cruised to victory in the general election.

On Thursday, Jane Kleeb, the chairwoman of the Nebraska Democratic Party, issued a statement accusing Mr. Pillen of using the open Senate seat to reward a supporter.

"Governor Pillen appointed Pete Ricketts in order to pay him back for buying the governor's seat," Ms. Kleeb said. "This is the most blatant pay-to-play scheme we've seen in our state, and it's happening right in front of us all."

A spokesman for Mr. Pillen did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Pillen solicited applications from Nebraskans interested in replacing Mr. Sasse and has said he

considered many candidates.

“We took this process incredibly seriously,” he said, according to The Nebraska Examiner. “The criteria for me were really, really simple. The appointee needs to represent us as a people.”

But there was never much doubt that Mr. Ricketts would get the job if he wanted it.

At a Florida gathering of Republican governors in late November, Mr. Ricketts downplayed his interest in the Senate seat, saying, “We’ll see what happens.”

Three weeks later, he filed an application seeking the appointment.

Reuters: Former Nebraska Governor Ricketts to become U.S. senator

WASHINGTON, Jan 12 (Reuters) - Nebraska's former Republican Governor Pete Ricketts is due to become a U.S. senator after being appointed on Thursday to fill the seat left vacant by Republican Senator Ben Sasse.

In an anticipated move, Nebraska's Republican Governor Jim Pillen announced the appointment of his predecessor at the state Capitol on Thursday morning.

Ricketts, 58, served two terms as Nebraska's governor, wrapping up his second term last week.

Twice elected to the U.S. Senate, Sasse resigned earlier in January to become president of the University of Florida. The senator was one of seven Republican senators who voted to impeach then-president Donald Trump.

Ricketts' appointment will not alter the balance of power in the Senate. He would need to win a special election in 2024 to serve the remaining two years of the current term.

By Katharine Jackson

Business Insider: One of the most powerful rich families in American politics just got their son in the Senate

Former Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts will be joining the US Senate, an appointment that caps his political comeback and cements his family, which owns the Chicago Cubs, as one of the most powerful forces in American politics.

On Thursday morning, Gov. Jim Pillen announced that Ricketts was his pick to replace former Sen. Ben Sasse, who left the chamber to lead the University of Florida. Ricketts will serve until 2024 when he will face Nebraskans in a special election to finish out the remainder of Sasse's term. Ricketts pledged to run for a full term in 2026 as well. Sen. Deb Fischer, a two-term Republican incumbent and loyal ally of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, is also up for reelection then too.

Along with owning the Cubs, the Ricketts family has long been among the biggest funders of Republican campaigns.

Joe Ricketts, the founder of what is now TD Ameritrade, donated at least $1 million to Trump after opposing him in the GOP primary. Before their rapprochement, Trump threatened the family by saying, "They better be careful, they have a lot to hide!" Todd Ricketts, one of the governor's brothers, was later named finance chair for the Republican National Committee. Laura Ricketts, the governor's sister, is the one major exception to the family's largely conservative views. She is a

major Democratic donor and was a bundler for former President Barack Obama.

As governor, Ricketts used his status as a multi-millionaire to buck up his policies and punish those who crossed him. His most successful endeavor was pushing for the state to bring back the death penalty after the Nebraska legislature overrode Ricketts' veto to end the death penalty. BuzzFeed estimated that Ricketts and his family spent over $400,000 on a ballot initiative to restore the death penalty that was ultimately successful.

"Supporting candidates is a manner of free speech. Can you have too much free speech?," Ricketts said in a recent interview with the Omaha World-Herald when asked about his strategy. "I'm exercising my free speech rights. Every American should be able to do that."

Ricketts was instrumental in Pillen's comeback to win the Nebraska gubernatorial primary over the Trump-backed Charles Herbster. Former President Donald Trump lashed out at Ricketts as a "RINO" for crossing him in the primary. McConnell also made it clear that he wanted Ricketts to replace Sasse, making Thursday's announcement one of the worst-kept secrets in Nebraska. Pillen denied that there was anything untoward about his selection of Ricketts.

Then-Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson drubbed Ricketts in 2006, a rough start to his political career. Ricketts then founded a conservative think-tank, his family purchased the Cubs, and then the Nebraskan rebranded himself as a "very bold and very bald conservative" before winning the governorship in 2014. He was term-limited out of office, leaving his political future uncertain before his appointment.

Pillen told reporters that he interviewed nine people for the job before selecting Ricketts. None of the nine were Democrats. Of the remaining list, the most well-known are former State Sen. Brett Lindstrom, who Pillen also beat in the gubernatorial primary, and Sid Dinsdale, who lost to Sasse and other hopefuls in the 2014 US Senate primary.

By Brent D. Griffiths

USA Today: Former GOP gov. to fill open Nebraska Senate seat, following Ben Sasse's resignation

Former Nebraska GOP Gov. Pete Ricketts will fill the state's open Senate seat, following Ben Sasse's resignation Sunday to become University of Florida president.

Recently elected GOP Gov. Jim Pillen appointed Ricketts to serve two years as senator, until a special election in 2024. During a press conference Thursday morning in Lincoln, Pillen said there were more than 100 applicants for the seat, nine of whom were interviewed.

"This was a very, very hard decision," Pillen said. "Running statewide elections and winning statewide elections in '24 and '26 is rigorous and demanding, and ultimately that was a big separator." Reelected in 2020, Sasse would have had to run in 2026 for a third term.

"Governor Ricketts assured me that no matter who calls (him) for a different job, he is committed to the United States Senate," he added.

Sasse was in his second term when he first announced his plan to return to academia last October.

One of seven Republicans who voted to convict Donald Trump on impeachment charges related to the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol, Sasse often criticized the former president and his influence on the party.

Ricketts said in the press conference that accountability for the federal government will be a top priority for him, along with bringing "civility" and "respect" to a sometimes contentious Senate chamber.

"Here in Nebraska, we have worked to be able to make government work for the people, and that's what has to happen in Washington, D.C.," Ricketts said. "We should not have the expectation that the federal government in doomed to fail."

Government spending and national defense were among the specific issues Ricketts said he hopes to address as a member of Congress. As governor, he said he took already steps to "push back on the Chinese Communist party," including banning the popular social media app TikTok.

Ricketts is expected to be sworn in in two weeks, once the Senate reconvenes Jan. 23.

By Savannah Kuchar

Roll Call: Former Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts appointed to Senate

New Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen has followed through on appointing his predecessor, Pete Ricketts, to the Senate following the resignation of Sen. Ben Sasse.

Pillen made the announcement Thursday morning, noting how seldom senators are appointed.

“Appointments happen only because life happens,” Pillen said. “This is an extraordinary day. It’s only happened five times in the history of our state.”

To keep the seat, Ricketts will have to run in 2024 to serve the remainder of Sasse's term, and then again in 2026 if he wants a full six-year term. Pillen said he did not think that appointing a placeholder senator would be the right move, saying that “Placeholders don’t have any accountability to the people.”

He noted that Ricketts' challenge ahead will represent the first time anyone has had to run for statewide office in two consecutive cycles.

“I have a pretty good idea of what it takes to win an election that is statewide and to do that in two consecutive two year terms is, it's an extraordinarily rigorous challenge,” Pillen said.

Pillen said that it was important for the new Nebraska senator to begin to gain seniority, as Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., has done.

“I’m very grateful for this unexpected opportunity to be able to continue to serve the people of Nebraska,” Ricketts said.

“I look forward to working with him, and I look forward to welcoming him to the Senate chamber for a swearing-in at the end of this month,” said Fischer. “We know that Pete knows the state of Nebraska, and we know that Pete loves the state of Nebraska.”

The Ricketts appointment was widely expected, though Pillen formally used an application process for the position. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has said publicly since October that he wanted to see Ricketts join the ranks of Republicans in the Senate, including in a CNN interview.

"If that were the way it worked out I think it'd be a smooth transition," McConnell said of the potential Ricketts appointment.

Sasse officially left the chamber on Saturday to take over as president of the University of Florida. Under Nebraska law, the appointment would run until the seat can be filled during the next statewide election, which is in 2024.

Sasse would not have been up for reelection until 2026, and took a jab at the institution he was leaving in his farewell speech last week.

"When we're being honest with each other, which usually means when on one of the very rare occasions where cameras aren't present, we all know that a big chunk of the performative yelling that happens here and in every hearing room is just about being booked for even more performative yelling at night on TV," Sasse said. "It might feel good temporarily, a little dopamine hit, to fire off a clever tweet or get booked on a supposedly prime slot. But honestly, almost nobody's watching and the share is getting smaller."

Ricketts, a two-term governor, previously held senior leadership roles at what became TD Ameritrade, the Ricketts family business. The Ricketts family also owns the Chicago Cubs and members of the family have been prolific GOP fundraisers and donors.

By Niels Lesniewski

Daily Caller: Former Governor Appointed To Replace Sen. Ben Sasse

Republican Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen appointed his immediate predecessor Pete Ricketts on Thursday to serve two years of the term vacated by former Sen. Ben Sasse.

"Gov. Ricketts assured me that no matter who calls for a different job, he is committed to the United States Senate," Pillen said at a press conference. "No matter who calls him to be a vice president of the United States, who calls him to be … Secretary of State or any other thing, he's committed to this seat; and he and Susanne have committed to winning elections at a minimum of 10 years, and I'm praying it's gonna be longer than that, and you're gonna love it there, Susanne."

Sasse, who was reelected in 2020, officially resigned on Sunday to take over as the University of Florida's president. Ricketts will serve through 2024, when a special election will be held for the remainder of the term ending in 2026. Ricketts previously ran for Senate in 2006, and is likely to run in the special election.

"There's a fallacy in Washington, D.C., that government can't work and we have to expect failure, but that's not true. We proved that's not true here in Nebraska," Ricketts said at the press conference. "We need to hold Washington, D.C., accountable for making sure they're providing the same level of high service that we do in state government."

Critics of Ricketts' impending appointment argued that the former governor effectively bought the seat. Ricketts gave $100,000 to Pillen's 2022 gubernatorial campaign directly, and more than $1 million to a pro-Pillen political action committee. Pillen pushed back on those claims during the press conference, noting that he interviewed nine candidates for the seat.

"Anybody who knows me, that's not part of my DNA. Just doesn't work," Pillen said. "Integrity of the process and commitment to the process was highest priority."

By Michael Ginsberg

Washington Times: Ex-Gov. Ricketts of Nebraska picked to replace Sasse in Senate

Nebraska's former Gov. Pete Ricketts is set to replace recently retired Sen. Ben Sasse.

Mr. Ricketts, who left the governorship last week after two terms, was chosen by his successor to fill the remainder of Mr. Sasse's term.

"I am thrilled to hear that Nebraska's outstanding former Governor Pete Ricketts is heading here to the U.S. Senate," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican.

Mr. Sasse, who was re-elected in 2020, resigned last week to become president of the University of Florida.

Upon appointment, Mr. Ricketts will have to run in a special election in November 2024 to fill out the remainder of Mr. Sasse's term.

If elected, Mr. Ricketts would then face voters again in 2026 to secure a full term.

By Haris Alic

Daily Wire: Former Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts Fills Empty Senate Seat Vacated By Ben Sasse

Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen appointed the state's former Republican Governor Pete Ricketts as the Cornhusker State's next senator on Thursday, replacing Ben Sasse, who officially resigned early this week.

Ricketts served two terms as the state's top official from 2015 until last week when his successor moved into the governor's mansion.

Governor Pillen personally chose Ricketts to fill the vacated Senate seat, saying he took the process to replace Sasse "incredibly seriously" because the appointee needs to "represent the people" of Nebraska, NBC reported.

Pillen said the next senator must reflect "values and ideology important to Nebraskans," believe in "less government and fiscal accountability," and be a "person of incredible faith, God-fearing like almost all Nebraskans."

"It's clear the person for the job was Sen.-designate Pete Ricketts," he said.

According to The New York Times, Ricketts said during a news conference after Pillen appointed him that the Senate has to "hold Washington, D.C., accountable for the waste and the fraud," adding that government needs to run more like a business "just like we've done here in Nebraska."

"For me, it came down to a single question: How can I best serve the people of Nebraska and advance our conservative values?" Ricketts said in a news release, NBC reported. "In Congress, we're in a fight for the future of our nation, and it's a fight we have to win."

Ricketts comes from a family heavily invested in Nebraska politics. His father, Joe Ricketts, the founder and former chief executive of the financial services company TD Ameritrade, donated to Republican candidates nationwide.

Ricketts spent approximately $1.3 million in the Republican primary for governor last year, helping Pillen defeat a candidate backed by former President Donald Trump. His appointment comes days after former U.S. Sen. Sasse officially resigned from his seat, having accepting a position to become president of the University of Florida, where he will reportedly earn a salary of $1 million.

The Republican politician delivered his farewell address from the Senate floor last week, saying that he never planned on spending a lifetime in Washington after eight years of public service.

"That's not what our founders envisioned for the people they would send to the federal city," Sasse said. "They envisioned, rather, congressmen, senators, and presidents who thought of D.C. as a temporary stay."

"Washington is a place to do a good bit of neighbor-loving work, but then to go back home to the more permanent work of life and flesh and blood whole communities," he added.

Ricketts will fill the seat until 2024, when a special election is held for the remainder of Sasse's

term, which would have ended in 2026.

By Brandon Drey

Politico: Ricketts tapped to fill Nebraska's open Senate seat

Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen has appointed Pete Ricketts, the state's former GOP governor, to fill retired Sen. Ben Sasse's seat through 2024.

Ricketts, who served two terms and endorsed Pillen in the race to replace him last year, will run in a special election next fall to fill out the remaining two years of Sasse's Senate term. Ricketts said on Thursday that he is committed to running for the seat in both 2024 and 2026.

Before appointing Ricketts, Pillen said he weighed the former governor's ability to win statewide elections as well as his commitment to run for a full term, which would help develop seniority in the Senate. Ricketts will come in as a the most junior member of the chamber when he is sworn in on Jan. 23.

"There's never been a Nebraskan who has had to run for statewide election in two consecutive terms … it's an extraordinarily rigorous challenge," Pillen said. "I don't believe in placeholders."

Sasse resigned this month to become president of the University of Florida, creating the vacancy. He had distinguished himself for his criticisms of former President Donald Trump, whom Sasse eventually voted to convict in his impeachment trial, but the departed senator also focused much of his energy on the Judiciary and Intelligence committees.

Ricketts said he "can't think of specific issues" he and Sasse disagree on, adding that he expects to be a reliably conservative vote and continue focusing on appointing right-leaning judges.

Both Pillen and Ricketts brushed off questions about backroom deals when it came to filling the seat. Ricketts was a top backer of Pillen's campaign, raising some questions in the state about filling the vacancy. Sasse did not resign until after Pillen was sworn in, allowing Ricketts to fill the seat without having to self-appoint himself.

Pillen said backroom deals are "not my DNA."

"I have no concerns about the process," said Sen. Deb Fischer (R-Neb.), the senior senator from the state.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell indicated last year he wanted Ricketts to fill the vacancy left by Sasse. He said on Thursday that Fischer and Ricketts "will instantly form an extremely effective one-two punch for Nebraska in the Senate" and praised Ricketts for his governing record and winning governor races "by gigantic margin."

Pillen said he interviewed nine candidates for the job and that none were Democrats. Nebraska is now a reliably red state, and Democrats have not won a Senate race there since 2006.

Yet Pillen suggested he didn't want to take any chances by appointing a senator who could blow the seat in a primary or general election. He said Ricketts' political experience "was a big separator" in the interview process; it also doesn't hurt that Ricketts is personally wealthy, with the ability to self-fund should he face a primary challenge.

Ricketts said he would pass on any other opportunities that come along over the next 10 years as he shifts his focus to federal office.

"One of things we as Republicans need to win elections is to have a broad tent," Ricketts said. "I'm committed to running in '24 and '26 to serve the people of Nebraska."

National Republican Senatorial Committee Chair Steve Daines of Montana said he looks "forward to working with Pete to stop Joe Biden's harmful agenda and keep Nebraska red in 2024."

By Burgess Everett

NY Post: Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen chooses Pete Ricketts to fill Ben Sasse's Senate seat

Republican Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen on Thursday appointed his predecessor, Pete Ricketts, to fill the Senate seat vacated by Ben Sasse when he stepped down to become president of the University of Florida.

Ricketts, a Republican, served as governor of Nebraska from 2015 until last week when Pillen was sworn in after winning the 2022 election. Ricketts, who was term-limited, had endorsed Pillen and was widely expected to be the choice to replace Sasse.

"My job in this process is really, really simple: to find the best person to represent us Nebraskans," Pillen said at a joint press conference with Ricketts.

Pillen said his team interviewed nine candidates out of 111 applicants for the open Senate seat, which Sasse formally resigned from on Sunday. Pillen noted that Ricketts vowed he would not leave the Senate to accept a Cabinet position in a future Republican presidential administration.

"Ultimately, the timing of this is very, very rigorous, and my belief in not [selecting] a placeholder and my belief in seniority being really, really important, and running statewide elections and winning statewide elections in '24 and '26 is rigorous and demanding, and ultimately that was a big separator," Pillen said of why he selected Ricketts.

The former governor, and part-owner of the Chicago Cubs, said he is "committed to running" in the 2024 and 2026 elections.

"There's a fallacy in Washington, DC, that government can't work and we have to expect failure, but that's not true. We proved that's not true here in Nebraska," Ricketts said. "We need to hold Washington, DC, accountable for making sure they're providing the same level of high service that we do in state government."

Ricketts also said Nebraskans should expect "a lot of similarities" between Sasse's conservative positions and his own.

"I do think it's important that we have [those] same conservative values and philosophies coming to DC," Ricketts said.

Ricketts ran a failed Senate campaign back in 2006, losing to then-incumbent Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson.

He will now serve until 2024, when he will compete in a special election to fill the remaining two years of Sasse's term.

Prior to Sasse's appointment at the University of Florida, he told the school's Board of Trustees that the school is "the most interesting institution in the state, that has the most happening right now, and is, therefore, the best positioned to help lead our country through a time of unprecedented change."

In November, his appointment was protested by hundreds of students at the school.

By Victor Nava

Washington Post: Pete Ricketts's massive political turnaround

Before Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen (R) made the announcement Thursday that he would appoint former governor Pete Ricketts (R) to the Senate, Pillen made a point of pitching his pick as politically pragmatic. He said he didn't want a "placeholder" for former Republican senator Ben Sasse's seat, and he emphasized choosing someone with the strength to hold the seat for many years to come.

The announcement Thursday scans as unsurprising: Ricketts is the most established figure in the Nebraska GOP and supported Pillen as his successor to the governor's mansion. But the argument about Ricketts's political strength would have seemed utterly crazy less than two decades ago.

It goes to show how dramatically things can change in politics: With this appointment, Ricketts has completed one of the most remarkable comebacks from a losing Senate campaign in modern American history.

Ricketts made his first run for office in 2006, and it went exceedingly poorly. Despite Republicans targeting a Democratic senator in a red state and having high hopes for the former Ameritrade executive chosen as a challenger, he lost to Sen. Ben Nelson 64 percent to 36 percent.

Ricketts spent roughly $14 million of his own fortune on the 28-point loss. As a Republican in Nebraska. And against a first-term senator who had only narrowly won office six years earlier.

It's one of the biggest losses on record for a candidate who would later join the Senate. Many senators have previous losses under their belts, but almost never have they been as lopsided as Ricketts's.

Several senators have lost extremely close Senate campaigns before joining the upper chamber. Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) lost by 524 votes in 2002. John Ensign, a former Republican senator from Nevada, lost by 428 votes in 1998. Former Senate majority leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) lost by fewer than 700 votes in 1974.

Others have come back from slightly larger but still competitive losses, including Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.), Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) and former senator Gordon Smith (R-Ore.).

But even when they lose by more lopsided margins, they generally at least hit a number that starts with four. Former senator Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) took 43 percent in a 1974 campaign before winning her seat in 1986. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) took 42 percent in 1988. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) took 42 percent in 1962. Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) took 41 percent in a 1994 Senate campaign (though in blue Massachusetts).

And now-Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R) took 42 percent in 1992 before winning a Senate seat two years later. (Remarkably, DeWine was elected to the Senate by double digits in 1994 and then lost reelection by double digits, taking just 44 percent of the vote in 2006 - the same year Ricketts lost - before making another comeback and becoming an extremely popular governor.)

Incidentally, one of the biggest losses we could find for a candidate who would later become a senator came from the man Ricketts lost to in 2006: Ben Nelson. He took just 41.7 percent of the vote in his 1996 campaign, before winning his seat in 2000 and then embarrassing Ricketts six years later. But that 1996 figure is still nearly six points better than what Ricketts garnered in his own loss.

There have been larger losses, but they come with asterisks. Now-Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) was actually stuck in the single digits in his first two runs for the Senate, in 1972 and 1974, but that was as a little-known political novice running under the banner of the "Liberty Union" party. And now-Sen. John Kennedy (R-La.) took just 15 percent in a 2004 Senate campaign, when he was a Democrat, but in a race that featured multiple Democrats splitting the vote.

Of course, we've known for a while that Ricketts's career was going places. After winning a very

tight gubernatorial primary in 2014, he won the general election both then and in 2018 by 18 points. So Pillen is right that he's now a proven political commodity who should have little trouble winning the seat in his own right.

Ricketts hasn't done that yet, unlike the others mentioned above, but he in all likelihood will in 2024. And if and when he does, he'll register one of the biggest reversals in modern political history for a failed Senate candidate.

By Aaron Blake

LJS: Three applicants seek to be district judge in Lancaster County

Three attorneys have submitted their names for consideration to be the next district court judge in Lancaster County.

The vacancy is due to Judge Robert Otte's recent retirement.

In a news release, the Nebraska Judicial Branch identified the three applicants as Assistant Nebraska Attorney General Jennifer Huxoll of Palmyra, who works in the Civil Litigation Bureau; Deputy Lancaster County Attorney Matthew Mellor of Lincoln, who works in the criminal division; and Chief Deputy Lancaster County Attorney Daniel Zieg of Bennet, who leads the civil division.

The Judicial Nominating Commission will have a public hearing in the Supreme Court Courtroom at the Capitol at 1:30 p.m. Feb. 1, where the applicants will be given the opportunity to make a statement and the public can comment.

The commission ultimately will forward one or more names to Gov. Jim Pillen, who ultimately makes the appointment.

By Lori Pilger

Breitbart: Nebraska Lawmakers Propose Fetal Heartbeat Bill to Protect the Unborn

Nebraska state lawmakers introduced a bill that would prohibit abortions after six weeks of pregnancy, which is usually when a fetal heartbeat is detected, WOWT reported.

State Sen. Joni Albrecht (R) announced the introduction of The Nebraska Heartbeat Act with several other state lawmakers in the capitol rotunda on Wednesday morning. The bill would move the state's current abortion law from prohibiting abortions after 20 weeks to six weeks.

Albrecht's abortion bill failed last year by two votes, though the state senator told WOWT "I believe I do" when asked whether she thinks she has the votes to pass the legislation this time.

"We have 85 percent of the babies who would be saved with this six-week ban," she said.

The bill does not add criminal penalties but proposes that doctors who perform abortions past six weeks of pregnancy lose their medical licenses, according to the report. The bill also has medical emergency exceptions and exceptions for rape and incest. Dr. Robert Plambeck, an OB-GYN in Lincoln, told the outlet that "nothing in this bill…keeps [him] from providing necessary medical care to a pregnant woman or from terminating a pregnancy in the rare and tragic instance when the mother's life is at stake."

Albrecht's bill includes the Nebraska Pregnancy Help Act, which would provide a $10 million tax credit for donations annually to pregnancy help organizations.

Andi Curry Grubb, executive director of Planned Parenthood Advocates of Nebraska, told the outlet that the "egregious bill goes against the will of Nebraskans…"

"We cannot know a person's situation — their health, wellbeing, risks, and futures. Every Nebraskan deserves the right to control their reproductive health and their future. This bill strips them of that right. Politicians should not be making decisions for Nebraska families," Grubb said.

But pro-life advocates celebrated the bill's introduction. Sandy Danek, executive director of Nebraska Right to Life, said the law would "protect the lives of innocent human life within the womb," according to Life News, a pro-life online news website.

"A discernible heartbeat is the key and universal medical confirmation that life exists, and every heartbeat has a right to live," Danek continued.

Marion Miner, associate director of Pro-Life & Family Policy at the Nebraska Catholic Conference, noted that a "heartbeat is a universal sign of life."

"That is indisputable, and Nebraskans agree….We envision a Nebraska where every mom and baby without exception is celebrated, valued, and protected. We should all be able to agree on protecting babies with a beating heart," Miner said.

Nebraska's newly elected Gov. Jim Pillen (R) has signaled he would sign off on bills that limited or even outright banned abortion in the state.

By Katherine Hamilton

LJS: Bill targets school library books and critical race theory in Nebraska classrooms

Nebraska school districts would be required to make learning materials available for public inspection and create a process for parents to object to books in the school library under a bill introduced at the Legislature on Thursday.

The Parents' Bill of Rights and Academic Transparency Act (LB374) from Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil would also prohibit teachers from telling students they are "inherently responsible" for past actions because they belong to a certain race.

Sponsored by the new Education Committee chairman, the bill addresses grievances raised against Nebraska's public schools in recent years.

Last fall, several school districts were accused of making alleged inappropriate books available to children in school libraries, and state senators — including Murman — accused the Nebraska Department of Education of providing teachers with materials teaching critical race theory.

Murman, who said he was aware of reports of inappropriate materials being taught in Nebraska schools but did not provide specifics, said the bill was introduced to build greater transparency in schools.

"It makes it more clear what's being taught in the classroom and also ensures that access parents are asking for," he said.

The bill would require school districts to develop and adopt policies outlining how parents can inspect curriculum materials in an online portal and object to any learning materials they believe harm their "firmly held beliefs, values, or principles," and withdraw their children from those classes or activities.

School districts would also have to inform parents how they could review books in school libraries and challenge them, and outlines a process that includes the State Board of Education and the

Commissioner of Education in the final say.

“Parents are the ultimate decision-makers for their children,” Murman said. “Part of this bill is to guarantee they know what’s in the curriculum and the library.”

Murman, who said the bill was modeled on similar legislation in Kansas, Missouri and Florida, said while parents could still contact their local school boards or administrators, his intention for the bill was to provide “a more clear avenue to do that” in order to keep parents engaged.

The bill also prohibits teachers from discussing that “individuals, by virtue of their race, ethnicity, color, or national origin, bear collective guilt and are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race, ethnicity, color, or national origin.”

Although critical race theory isn’t explicitly stated in the text of the bill, it’s similar to a bill introduced last year that would have banned the teaching of the academic and legal theory, which examines systemic inequities stemming from race and racism.

Critical race theory is typically taught at the graduate school level and not in K-12 schools.

Murman said he didn’t think the bill would have a chilling effect on how teachers approach — or perhaps avoid — difficult topics.

“I look at it as liberating teachers,” he said. “There could be pressure on them to teach a certain way. This liberates them to teach what I think the general public accepts.”

Jenni Benson, president of the Nebraska State Education Association, the state’s largest teacher union representing 26,000 teachers, said family involvement in education is “critically important” to a child’s success in school.

While the NSEA supports addressing concerns parents have by fostering communications with schools, Benson said Murman’s bill could hamper Nebraska public schools’ attempts to recruit and retain teachers and staff.

“Those shortages are exacerbated when teachers feel they are facing relentless attacks by some elected officials,” she said.

There were 83 bills and one resolution introduced Thursday, Day 7 of the Legislature:

ISRAEL: Sen. Julie Slama of Dunbar introduced a bill (LB343) that would bar the state from contracting with any companies that take part in a boycott of Israel.

MAIL-IN ELECTIONS: Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt sponsored a bill (LB365) that would allow all 93 counties in Nebraska to conduct all-mail elections.

PROCUREMENT: Omaha Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh introduced a measure (LB360) creating an inspector general to investigate and review state government contracts.

BODY CAMS: Body-worn cameras would be subject to the Nebraska Public Records Statutes under a bill (LB366) brought by Lincoln Sen. Danielle Conrad.

TAX CREDITS: Elkhorn Sen. Lou Ann Linehan’s bill (LB370) would require county treasurers to mail a notice to property owners that they were eligible to claim a Nebraska Property Tax Incentive Credit.

DRAG SHOWS: Anyone under the age of 19 would be barred from attending a drag show, under a bill (LB371) from Murman. Businesses or organizations that host a drag show that allows individuals under 19 to be admitted would be fined $10,000 for each violation.

TEACHER RECRUITMENT: Linehan also sponsored a bill (LB385) appropriating $10 million to the Nebraska Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act for $5,000 grants to individual teachers.

PREGNANCY IMMUNITY: Pregnant women could not be cited, arrested or prosecuted for any pregnancy outcome that does not result in a live birth, under a bill (LB391) from Sen. Jen Day of Gretna.

MESONET: Sen. Myron Dorn of Adams brought a bill (LB401) to appropriate $550,000 to the Nebraska Mesonet system, which is an automated state weather network.

By Chris Dunker

OWH: Nebraska state senator introduces bill aimed at increasing parental control in schools

LINCOLN — A Nebraska state senator introduced a bill Thursday aimed at limiting education on subject matter commonly referred to by conservatives as "critical race theory."

State Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil introduced Legislative Bill 374, dubbed the "Parents' Bill of Rights and Academic Transparency Act." It was one of 84 bills introduced in the Nebraska Legislature Thursday.

Murman, a Republican farmer, was elected last week to be chair of the Legislature's Education Committee, replacing Sen. Lynne Walz of Fremont, a Democrat and former teacher. Last year, Murman led a Republican effort calling for a probe into the State Department of Education over an alleged promotion of critical race theory through the department's website.

The bill Murman introduced Thursday would expand parents' opportunities to challenge schools about learning materials they consider inappropriate.

Though the words "critical race theory" were not included in the bill, the bill uses language frequently used by conservative advocates to describe critical race theory. Although that description often doesn't line up with the official definition of the term.

One part of the bill prohibits instruction that promotes that members of a specific race are "inherently inferior or superior," or "bear collective guilt and are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race."

"(The bill) won't allow racism to be taught in schools," Murman said.

The official definition of critical race theory defines it as an academic concept based on the idea that racism is a social construct embedded in the nation's legal systems and policies, rather than stemming from individual prejudice. The concept is most commonly taught in law schools, not K-12 schools.

Murman claimed that critical race theory is taught in Nebraska's public schools, though he refrained from describing it as a "prominent" issue. He declined to give any specific examples.

LB 374 shares similarities with another bill, LB 71, which was introduced last week and was co-signed by Murman. The bill would require that public schools disclose instructional materials to parents and allow parents to request that their child be excused from certain lessons or activities.

Murman said LB 374 is a broader version of the other bill. It would require schools adopt a policy giving parents access to review all learning materials the school uses, and give parents an opportunity to object and withdraw their students from lessons or activities in which materials are used that conflict with the "parent's firmly held beliefs, values, or principles."

Many of the processes suggested in LB 374 are already in place in most public schools.

The bill outlines the right of a parent, student or teacher to sue their school if they believe the school has violated the bill's regulations. Parents would also have the ability to submit a complaint to the

Nebraska Department of Education if their school refuses to remove library content deemed inappropriate.

Other noteworthy bills Thursday included another Murman measure, which would prohibit individuals under 19 from attending drag shows, along with legislation to reduce maximum sentences for juvenile convictions and a bill expanding options for mail-in voting.

One bill that has yet to be introduced is an attempt to further restrict Nebraska's abortion access. On Wednesday Sen. Joni Albrecht of Thurston announced her intent to introduce the bill, which would prohibit all abortions once embryonic cardiac activity can be detected — typically around six weeks past fertilization.

Here's a roundup of the bills that did get introduced Thursday:

Drag shows: LB 371, also introduced by Murman, would prohibit individuals under 19 from attending drag shows. Jane Seu, ACLU of Nebraska legal and policy counsel, described the bill as "unconstitutional censorship" in an effort to silence members of the LGBTQ community. Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha has already introduced a motion to indefinitely postpone the bill.

Juvenile corrections: LB 339 would reduce maximum sentences for juvenile convictions, would protect the identities of juveniles prior to a criminal conviction, and would prohibit juveniles from being held out of state prior to their conviction. The bill's introducer, Sen. Terrell McKinney of Omaha, called Nebraska's current juvenile corrections system "horrible," and said it contributes to the state's ongoing prison overcrowding problem.

Mail-in voting: LB 365, introduced by Hunt, would allow all Nebraska counties to hold elections solely through mail-in votes, regardless of population. Some smaller counties already do this. Hunt's bill directly conflicts with LB 228, introduced by Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard, which would effectively eliminate almost all mail-in voting in Nebraska.

Tax credits: LB 370, introduced by Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, would require that a red slip of paper be included with every tax statement notifying residents of available tax credits.

Pregnancy: LB 391 would provide criminal and civil immunity for individuals who end their pregnancy either intentionally or unintentionally. The bill's introducer, Sen. Jen Day of Omaha, has opposed previous attempts to restrict abortion access in Nebraska.

Postpartum: LB 419 would extended the state's Medicaid and Medicare postpartum coverage from 60 days to 12 months. Sen. Anna Wishart of Lincoln introduced the bill, which was co-sponsored by a bipartisan group of 20 other state senators.

Teachers: LB 385, introduced by Linehan, would establish a State Department of Education grant with a $10 million cap in an effort to recruit and retain teachers. Teachers who apply would receive $5,000 under the bill. The Nebraska Department of Education reported that 14% of teacher positions across the state's 143 school districts were unfilled during the 2021-22 school year.

LB 413, introduced by Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue, would establish the "Interstate Teaching Mobility Compact," which would help teachers maintain their licenses through multiple states.

Pheasants: LB 400 would establish the Nest Predator Bounty Program, adding a $10,000 bounty for badgers, coyotes, opossums, raccoons, red foxes and striped skunks harvested between March 1 and July 1 in an effort to protect Nebraska's pheasant population. Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon introduced the bill.

Israel: LB 343, introduced by Sen. Julie Slama of Dunbar, would prohibit public entities from entering into contracts with companies that boycott Israel, a likely reference to the decades-long conflict between Israel and Palestine.

By Erin Bamer

Nebraska Examiner: Senators introduce parental 'bill of rights' proposal to ensure parental control over education

LINCOLN — As promised, State Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil has introduced a bill that he says would ensure that parents have control over the teaching of their children and that inappropriate books or instruction are not offered.

On Thursday, he and nine cosponsors introduced Legislative Bill 374, the "Parents' Bill of Rights and Academic Transparency Act," after stating last week in a floor speech that parents needed to be the "ultimate decision makers" for their children.

"This bill is to guarantee that they know what's in the curriculum, in the library and what's being taught, so they can control what's being taught," Murman said Thursday.

When asked, he could not cite specific examples of how parents had been denied information about what public schools are teaching. The senator did say that he's seen school books in Nebraska that he considered not "age appropriate," though he could not cite the books.

'Solution in search of a problem'

Bellevue Sen. Carol Blood called the bill a "solution in search of a problem."

Fremont Sen. Lynne Walz, a former fourth grade teacher, agreed, saying that she was frequently asked by parents about her lesson plans and she always answered their questions.

Walz said any problems can be directed, and dealt with, by a local school board.

Part of 'culture wars'

The bill of rights proposal is patterned after similar bills in Florida, Kansas and Missouri and comes after conservative U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., introduced a similar measure last year in the Senate.

Eighty-four similar bills, mostly introduced by Republican state lawmakers, were filed in 26 states last year, according to a Georgetown University think tank called FutureEd.

One was in Nebraska, LB 1158, from Bellevue Sen. Rita Sanders. The proposal was amended and advanced from the Education Committee,but failed to advance in the 2022 session. Sanders has introduced LB 71 this year, which appears more narrowly focused than Murman's "bill of rights" proposal.

Murman, who was elected chairman of the Education Committee last week, now has additional power in scheduling and advancing legislation, boosting the chances that LB 374 could advance.

Some parents fearful

Murman's bill and other bill of rights proposals have been inspired by fears from some parents that their children are being taught about sex when it's not "age appropriate," that critical race theory is part of instruction in K-12 schools and that inappropriate books are being stocked in school libraries.

Jenni Benson, the president of the state teachers union, said the Nebraska State Education Association has always supported parents and teachers working together to educate children.

Some conservative groups and parents disagree, however, and have made school board meeting a battleground for the nation's culture wars in recent months.

'Relentless attacks' don't help

Benson said that “relentless attacks by some elected officials” have exacerbated the shortage of teachers in the state, despite the widespread support for public education.

“I believe it is critically important that we work together to address concerns through communication versus accusations,” she said.

Murman said LB 374 sets up a “clear avenue” for parents to review educational materials and, if necessary, lodge objections to certain library books or learning materials. It also provides for an appeal process.

Transparency portal required

Under the bill, a school district must develop a policy on parental rights by July 2024 and create a “parent transparency portal” on its website listing all library items, as well as “learning materials, activities, and curriculum used for student instruction” and “social and emotional learning materials.”

Parents, under the bill, can request that a school determine whether books or materials should be marked “parental review recommended” if they contain inappropriate sexual content or excessive violence or profanity.

LB 374 also states that parents have a right to expect that their children will not be taught that they “bear collective guilt” or are “inherently responsible” for actions committed in the past, an apparent reference to the teaching of critical race theory.

Critical race theory, according to Education Week, is an academic concept that “racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies.”

Murman said, “If it’s not happening now, we shouldn’t be responsible, no matter what is the color of your skin is.”

He said he doesn’t look at the bill as “handcuffing” teachers for pursuing certain subjects, but “liberating” them from pressure to “teach a certain way.”

By Paul Hammel

OWH: Support, opposition to secret balloting for legislative leaders raised at rules hearing

LINCOLN — A record number of proposed changes in Nebraska legislative rules drew record public interest for a hearing Thursday.

More than 100 people filled a Capitol hearing room for the hearing, with several testifying on proposals to eliminate the use of secret ballots for legislative leadership elections and do away with daily prayers.

State Sen. Steve Halloran of Hastings offered the proposal to require that votes for legislative leaders be done either by acclamation or by public votes.

He argued that the change would promote transparency and honor U.S. Sen. George Norris’ vision for a more open lawmaking process. Norris championed the change from a traditional Legislature to the unique, nonpartisan, one-house version, which Nebraska voters approved in 1934.

Under the constitutional amendment Norris pushed, the Legislature is nonpartisan. That means state lawmakers are elected and serve without regard to party affiliation and that political parties are not part of the legislative structure or process.

Currently, lawmakers choose the speaker of the Legislature and other leaders by secret ballot. The process has been used ever since Nebraska launched its restructured Legislature in 1937.

Supporters of public leadership votes argued that Nebraskans want transparency and accountability, which can't happen with secret ballots. Among them, Myron Smith said he wants to know senators' votes so he can consider that at election time. Stephanie Johnson raised concerns that voting in secret leads to political deal-making and deceit.

Opponents of the change said it would increase partisanship in the Legislature, because lawmakers could be punished for voting against the wishes of their party. Teri Hlava said legislative leaders should be elected on merit, not party membership, and Nathan Leach of Nonpartisan Nebraska said secret ballots are widely used in local governments and other organizations.

Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard, the Rules Committee chairman, disputed the idea that the Legislature is nonpartisan and argued that the issue is one of transparency.

He said some senators in the past have been promised votes for a chairmanship, only to have those votes disappear when the ballots were counted. With secret ballots, it is impossible to know who broke their word, he said.

"That's what we're arguing to fix," Erdman said. "That's the problem with this secret ballot."

Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha offered the proposal that would do away with the prayers that start each legislative day. She called it inappropriate to have a religious activity as part of a government body and argued that the prayers violate the First Amendment separation of church and state.

Opponents of Hunt's proposal argued that the U.S. Supreme Court had found legislative prayers were constitutional. William Feely said most people agree on the existence of a divine creator and called Hunt's proposal an example of "cancel culture."

Erdman offered a rules change that would bar journalists from executive sessions of legislative committees, during which lawmakers discuss and vote on which bills to advance, amend or kill.

Other rules change proposals would increase access for Nebraskans with disabilities who wish to testify at public hearings, bar firearms from legislative areas of the Capitol except for military and law enforcement officials, revamp the redistricting process, set minimum hours of debate before a filibuster-ending cloture motion could be considered and allow pets in the Capitol.

The Rules Committee is expected to meet Friday to decide which changes to recommend to the full Legislature. Speaker of the Legislature John Arch of La Vista has said he wants to start debate about adopting permanent legislative rules on Tuesday.

By Martha Stoddard

LJS: Senators hear changes to secret ballot, voting procedure rules during marathon hearing

The Legislature avoided engaging in a fight over how committee leaders are selected on the first day of the session earlier this month.

During a marathon — perhaps ultramarathon — hearing Thursday, state senators initiated the first skirmishes in the rules fight to come.

The Rules Committee heard nearly 60 proposed changes to the Legislature's rulebook, including one that would end the secret ballot vote for committee chairs that has been in place since 1937.

The way those decisions are made drew renewed focus this year after former GOP gubernatorial candidate Charles Herbster made the issue the central — and only — tenant of his Nebraska First

political action committee.

Supporters of moving from a write-in ballot to a recorded voice vote said they garnered the support of roughly half of the 49 members of the Legislature, who signed a pledge to make the change.

Lawmakers could have moved to make a change on Day 1 of the 108th Legislature, but chose to punt, instead approving the last session's rules as the temporary rules for this session.

The promise to return to the proposed change came late Thursday afternoon when Sen. Steve Halloran of Hastings presented the proposal before the Rules Committee.

Halloran, who previously sponsored a similar proposal two years ago, said requiring senators to record their vote for committee chairpersons would promote transparency and uphold the state constitution.

It would also be in line with George W. Norris' vision for the unicameral system, Halloran said. The petition circulated by Norris in the early 1930s to build support for the unicameral Legislature included a provision that any senator could call for a roll call vote at any time, Halloran said.

"Clearly the father of the unicameral, George W. Norris, was a strong advocate in transparency to the voters in regard to business conducted by the one-house Legislature," Halloran said. "For decades, this Legislature has chosen to disregard our state constitution by using a secret ballot for electing the speaker and various chairpersons."

Proponents testifying after Halloran said they supported the proposed rule change, adding it would bolster their faith in the people they send to Lincoln to represent them.

"We the people expect professionalism and to know where you stand on an issue," said William Feely, who said voters expected transparency and accountability from their elected leaders.

Stephanie Johnson of Nebraskans for Founders Values, which pushes for conservative causes, said she was "mortified" to learn committee chair votes were done not by a record vote, but by secret ballot.

"Anything done in secret lends itself to deceit," Johnson said.

Opponents of the proposed rule change, however, told the Rules Committee doing away with the secret ballot would erode the nonpartisan nature of the Legislature.

Nathan Leach of Nonpartisan Nebraska said while supporters of the rule have said a public vote would improve transparency at the Legislature, he suggested it would be performative.

Rather, Leach said it was more important to allow senators room to vote for the person they thought would be the best person to serve as speaker, lead the 14 standing committees, as well as two special committees.

Other government bodies, as well as political organizations, vote for leadership with secret ballots but without the same scrutiny, Leach said: "I have never heard any objection to the ballot vote outside the context of the Nebraska Legislature."

In a back and forth with Rules Committee Chairman Steve Erdman of Bayard, who called the nonpartisan status of the Legislature "a figment of someone's imagination" and pointed to the fight over committee appointments that was largely based on party affiliation.

Leach said the secret ballot vote was among several structures created by Norris and maintained for nearly 90 years that reinforced the notion of a nonpartisan Legislature.

"It's by definition a nonpartisan Legislature, that's the only thing we can call it," Leach responded. "Bills should advance based on merit; they shouldn't advance just because a senator has an R or D next to their name."

Rachel Gibson, vice president of action for the League of Women Voters of Nebraska, said while the organization generally supports transparency, she believes it's important to look at that transparency within the context of the systems in place.

In the context of the Legislature, the secrecy surrounding committee votes worked to improve the overall system, she said.

And Teri Hlava, who told the committee she was a registered Republican, said she disagreed with her party's attempt to gain full control over the Legislature by changing how committee leaders are chosen.

"We need to strive for balance, fairness, and many viewpoints," Hlava said. "Let's get rid of our warrior mode."

The Rules Committee, which started its hearing at 1:30 p.m. Thursday and expected to work until midnight or later, heard testimony on a variety of other proposed rules changes ranging from prohibiting firearms in the Capitol by anyone other than law enforcement or members of the military, to limiting the number of bills each senator could introduce in one year.

Omaha Sen. Kathleen Kauth sponsored a rule change to incentivize lawmakers to refrain from recording themselves as "present, not voting" on bills by factoring it into a cloture vote. Senators who are present not voting would reduce the number needed for a filibuster to be ended.

Kauth, who initially proposed a rule doing away with a "present not voting" status altogether, said the tool "should come at a cost."

Feely said he and others are frustrated by senators who are present in the chamber but choose not to give a bill a straight up or down vote, calling it "gamesmanship that needs to be eliminated."

"To me, it boils down to a matter of transparency," he said. "Either you're for it or against it."

Calvin Pemberton, meanwhile, said he preferred Kauth's original proposal doing away with it wholesale.

Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt and Lincoln Sen. Danielle Conrad also sponsored rules changing the threshold of votes needed to pull bills from committee onto the floor, or to revive bills that have been killed in committee.

Hunt's rule change would increase the number of votes needed to pull a bill from committee from 25 to 33, while Conrad's change would require 33 votes, up from 30, to bring a bill new life after it had been killed.

Several bills — including an anti-abortion bill and a permitless concealed carry bill — were advanced onto the floor using a pull motion last year.

"If a bill is so important that we need to bypass committees and the committee process, I think it should have to meet the same threshold to come out of a committee to defeat a filibuster," Hunt said.

But Steve Jessen, who helped organize support around a resolution adding Nebraska to a list of states calling for an Article V convention of states, which was killed and later revived, said the threshold should remain as is to give senators and constituents an avenue if their bill gets stuck in an "unfriendly committee."

Jessen said a separate proposal from Erdman to make all committees have an odd-number of members in order to avoid ties, would also help resolve those issues.

The Rules Committee did not take any action on the proposals Thursday.

Erdman said the Rules Committee would Friday begin deliberating on which rules to bring to the

floor for full debate starting next week.

Speaker John Arch told the Legislature it was his goal to have permanent rules in place by Jan. 20.

By Chris Dunker

Nebraska Examiner: Nebraska lawmakers to ponder funding for relocation of iconic mural

LINCOLN — A $1.5 million boost from Nebraska lawmakers would help give a new home to the iconic Pershing Center mural, whose more than 760,000 tile pieces today sit in a warehouse after removal last year from the old city arena.

Fans of the mammoth artwork say they've already secured a new spot at Lincoln's Wyuka historical park and cemetery but are short of funds to cover relocation and rising installation costs.

Introduced Thursday, Legislative Bill 411 by State Sen. George Dungan of Lincoln would earmark $1.5 million from the state's general fund toward the $3 million preservation project. Private and philanthropic donations are to cover the rest.

Dungan said he appreciates history and art and said he is eager to see the mural displayed in the planned interactive setting.

Local artist Liz Shea-McCoy, a leader of the preservation effort, called the Wyuka grounds a perfect fit for what she describes as "the People's Mural."

Wyuka, which is a Lakota Indian word meaning "to rest," was established in 1869 as a burial ground and Lincoln's first public park. It has since grown into roughly 140 acres.

Its website also refers to the site as a "museum without walls," which features statuary art, monumental architecture and historical tributes to Lincoln families, war veterans and more.

"It's just magic," said Shea-McCoy, who partnered with the Nebraska Historical Society and Foundation. "The whole environment at Wyuka and the history of that area of our state is a magical installation area for the Pershing Mural."

The Pershing mural also has a storied history.

For nearly a decade, Nebraskans speculated what would become of the Pershing Center and the expansive mural that spanned its facade since 1957.

Created by artists Leonard Thiessen and Bill J. Hammon, the mural's assorted tiles depict 38 figures involved in wide-ranging activities such as sports and circus acts and historical scenes.

"It certainly holds tremendous meaning as a repository of both Nebraska history and lasting memories — and continues to be a treasure trove of ongoing support," Shea-McCoy said.

But construction of the Pinnacle Bank Arena in 2013 helped render the Pershing Center obsolete. The area now is a future site of an affordable housing and mixed-use redevelopment project led by White Lotus Group of Omaha.

Last year, Shea-McCoy and a small team came together under a tight deadline and raised $850,000 for early phases of the preservation project. The group had to first get an expert opinion on feasibility. Then tiles were detached last August from the structure and stored in a Lincoln warehouse.

Several other relocation sites had been considered, but the magnitude of the 38-foot-by-140-foot mural posed concerns.

The Wyuka board of trustees approached Shea-McCoy, who said she jumped at the thought of installation in a green space by a planned pond adjacent to the busy O Street.

She said that the Wyuka board had been planning renovations and that the mural would offer a "perfect backdrop" for a future stage, seating area and outdoor performances.

Shea-McCoy also sees the mural as an additional source of educational programming for visitors.

If all goes as planned, construction of the mural support base could start before summer and dedication could occur later in 2024.

Shea-McCoy said efforts to save the mural reflect a "grit" that defines Nebraska.

"The effort has been embraced as both a great responsibility and special opportunity," she said.

By Cindy Gonzalez

Nebraska Examiner: ACLU condemns proposed 'drag' show ban as part of national effort to 'push LGBTQ+ people out of public life'

LINCOLN — A bill introduced Thursday in the Nebraska Legislature to block minors from attending "drag" shows was condemned as part of the culture war against the LGBTQ+ community.

"Let's call this what it is — an unconstitutional censorship attempt rooted in a coordinated national effort to push LGBTQ+ people out of public life," said Jane Seu, the legal and policy counsel for the ACLU of Nebraska.

Legislative Bill 371, introduced by State Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil and eight other senators, would bar persons under 19 years of age from attending a drag show and block those under 21 from attending such shows where alcohol is served.

The bill also establishes fines of up to $10,000 for establishments that allow under-aged persons to attend a drag show and makes it a misdemeanor crime, punishable by a fine of up to $1,000, for an adult to allow a minor to attend.

The Nebraska proposal comes after similar bills banning minors from attending drag shows have been introduced in several states, including Missouri, Arizona and Texas.

Drag shows feature performers singing or dancing in elaborate costumes and makeup impersonating men or women.

While proponents maintain that it is harmless, fun entertainment, critics say such shows are inappropriate for minors, involving "perverted" and "hyper-sexualized" adults trying to sexualize young people.

Controversy and protests have spread across the county, with several shows featuring "drag queens" cancelled in recent months.

A shooting at a drag show at a Colorado Springs lounge in November left five dead and 17 wounded. One story time in California featuring drag performers was disrupted by the far-right Proud Boys group in July.

Shortly after LB 371 was introduced, Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt, the first openly LGBTQ candidate elected to the State Legislature, filed a motion to kill the bill.

The ACLU of Nebraska, in a press release, said LB 371 would be a violation of free speech.

"Drag is a visual expression and creative celebration of LGBTQ+ culture," Seu said. "It has been a

part of the creative community for centuries and this bill would have far-reaching implications on the historical tradition of artistic freedom."

By Paul Hammel

OWH: Pizza, news and lawn mower entrepreneurs among newbies to Nebraska business hall of fame

LINCOLN — A pioneering Black newswoman, a pizza entrepreneur and a man who led his town to be called "Lawn Mower Capital of the World" are part of the next group to be inducted into the Nebraska Business Hall of Fame.

The 2023 nominees, who will be honored at a Feb. 2 event of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry: the late Mildred Brown, Omaha Star; Jim Clifton and Jane Miller, Gallup of Omaha; Ralph and Beverly Holzfaster family, agribusiness/community development of Paxton; Anthony Messineo Jr., Valentino's of Lincoln; and the late Wilfred Tegtmeier, Encore Manufacturing of Beatrice.

The group joins some 130 business leaders in the statewide hall of fame who have impacted Nebraska's economy, jobs and quality of living, according to the chamber. The hall was established in 1992 by the Nebraska Chamber in partnership with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Business.

"This year's honorees embody the vision, grit and community loyalty often ingrained in our boldest-thinking Nebraskans," said Bryan Slone, chamber president.

Said Kathy Ferrell of UNL: "This group includes entrepreneurs, exceptional business leaders and highly engaged citizens who made a tremendous impact on the state."

Hall of fame recipients (biographies provided by the chamber):

Mildred "Millie" Brown, Omaha Star, (awarded posthumously)

Brown was owner, publisher and editor of the Omaha Star, the nation's longest-operating, Black-owned newspaper run by a woman. Launched in 1938, the newspaper helped steer Omahans through racial segregation, the 1960s civil rights movement and racial unrest through the early 1970s. Her coverage was honored by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Star featured positive news about the Black community and encouraged readers to vote and run for public office. Brown died in 1989. Today, the Star is the only African American newspaper printed in Nebraska. The biweekly publication is available in print or digitally via subscription and reaches about 30,000 in 48 states.

Jim Clifton, Gallup, Omaha

Clifton is chairman of Gallup, a global analytics and advice firm. Under his CEO leadership from 1988 to 2022, Gallup expanded worldwide with 30 offices in 20 countries and regions. He created The Gallup Path, which establishes linkages among human nature in the workplace, customer engagement and business outcomes and is used in more than 500 companies worldwide. The Gallup World Poll, another of his innovations, gives the world's 7 billion citizens a voice on key global issues. He's written four books and several articles on global leadership. The Clifton Foundation and Gallup helped establish the Don Clifton Strengths Institute at the University of Nebraska, which supports early development of state business builders.

Jane Miller, Gallup, Omaha

Miller is the retired president and chief operating officer of Gallup. She oversaw worldwide operations, ensuring all systems, resources and people were aligned to achieve organizational goals

across client servicing and market direct functions. She is committed to creating strong communities that begin with strong workplaces, as evidenced by leadership as a director or trustee for Peter Kiewit Foundation, TeamMates Mentoring, Kiewit Luminarium, Omaha Zoological Society, Nebraska Medicine and the University of Nebraska Foundation. Miller was the recipient of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce Women in Leadership Award and was inducted into that chamber's Hall of Fame in 2017.

Ralph and Beverly Holzfaster family, Agribusiness / Community Development, Paxton

The Holzfasters began early agricultural careers in custom harvesting and proving new stubble mulch practices on dryland wheat, which led to a stint farming in British Columbia. Embracing pivot irrigation technology in 1969, Ralph opened a Lindsay Manufacturing dealership in Ogallala. He served on boards including Nebraska Ethanol Authority & Development, Nebraska Public Power District, Keith County Economic Development Board and Foundation and Mid-Plains Community College Foundation. The Holzfaster family remains active in agriculture and other initiatives including managing Ole's Big Game Steakhouse & Lounge.

Anthony "Tony" Messineo Jr., Valentino's, Lincoln

In 1972, Messineo and his brother, Ron, purchased Valentino's, a pizza business started near UNL's East Campus. The takeout pizza service at the 60-seat restaurant quickly boomed. Today, Valentino's employs more than 500 Nebraskans at 40 locations and ships frozen pizza nationally and internationally, in addition to offering sauces and frozen pizza in Nebraska grocery stores. As the official pizza of the Huskers, Valentino's sells over 22,000 slices per home football game. Messineo contributes time and talent to places including Cedar's Home for Children, Make-A-Wish Foundation and TeamMates. He has received several honors, including induction into the Omaha Hospitality Hall of Fame.

Wilfred "Dick" Tegtmeier, Encore Mfg. Co., Beatrice (awarded posthumously)

Tegtmeier turned sketches drawn in his basement into two businesses that eventually employed more than 600 Nebraskans and gave Beatrice the unofficial title of "Lawn Mower Capital of the World." He designed his first mowers at Kees Manufacturing in the 1970s before starting Exmark Manufacturing with partners in 1983. In 1988, he formed Encore Manufacturing. Both companies remain drivers of Beatrice's economy. Exmark is now a division of Toro Co., and Encore was sold to a Chinese company on the condition that the Beatrice operation stayed. Tegtmeier, who died in 2013, represented the state on trade missions and was active in such organizations as St. Paul Lutheran Church and Beatrice Optimists.

By Cindy Gonzalez

OWH: Non-credible threats against several OPS schools lead to arrest of youths, young adult

Three youths and a young adult have been arrested after authorities said they made threats on social media against several schools in the Omaha Public Schools district.

The post said "be ready and safe" and "coming for all schools in Omaha NE" before listing nine OPS schools and the date of Jan. 25.

The Omaha Police Department said it's also investigating a separate, similar threat on social media that included some of the same schools and referenced Thursday as a date.

OPD said Thursday that officers cited an 11-year-old boy and a 12-year-old boy on suspicion of disorderly conduct; booked a 15-year-old boy on suspicion of making terroristic threats; and booked

18-year-old Itzel Bravo on suspicion of terroristic threats.

An investigation revealed the threats to be a hoax.

The Omaha Police Department said it works with law enforcement agencies, including the Omaha FBI office, OPS and staff from the website safe2helpne.org, to identify people who make threats. "Together, with the community, we were able to identify the individuals responsible for the posts," police said.

"These investigations take a lot of work hours with several different agencies and schools," a police statement reads. "We also send additional security to the schools and the schools are made aware so they can heighten their awareness and follow their protocols. We work very well together and we not only practice for incidents like this, but we also keep continual open communication to ensure the safety of everyone involved."

By Lauren Wagner

OWH: No surprise here

Why am I not surprised with the appointment of Pete Ricketts to fill the empty senate seat? Bottom line: money talks. Not the most-qualified.

Mary Tice, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 1/13: New project adds to momentum at Lincoln Airport

Last week's agreement giving a Colorado company the right to develop about 30 acres of Lincoln Airport property with the aim of transforming it into a major hub for air cargo and other aviation-related industries was a Happy New Year blast of good news not only for the airport but all of Lincoln.

Burrell Aviation intends to invest an estimated $65 million over several years to construct large buildings on airport property at the south end of what's called the west ramp, structures designed to attract air freight companies, logistics firms, food businesses and aircraft maintenance providers to use the Lincoln airport as a hub for delivery in the central U.S.

The company is proposing two or three large buildings, to be built in phases, with up to 210,000 square feet of space and estimates that the first tenants could occupy spaces as soon as 2025.

At full build-out, the development could add from 180 to 350 permanent jobs with salaries averaging from $60,000 to $80,000 a year.

Those are the kind of high-paying jobs that need to come to the growing community, employment opportunities that could attract newcomers to the city and inject dollars into the local economy – as will the construction projects which should begin well before 2025.

But it's already good economic news for the airport and Lincoln taxpayers.

The airport will get rent from the 30-year ground lease signed with Burrell – which could extend to 50 years – and will eventually own any structures the company builds when the lease expires.

That's a sharp contrast to previous developments in which the airport built the structures. This arrangement will put cash in airport authority coffers allowing it to keep its property tax levy as low as possible.

It’s also of note that the Burrell development is beginning at the time when the airport is in the midst of a $55 million terminal expansion and renovation project, aimed at attracting more airlines and flights and will, hopefully, see its first tenants as a project to rebuild the main runway gets underway.

The rebuild that will allow the airport to maintain its 13,000-foot-long runway would not have occurred without the efforts of Sen. Deb Fischer.

Nebraska’s senior senator brokered an agreement with the National Guard Bureau, which will chip in funds to the project as the Federal Aviation Administration, which covers 90% of the cost of most airport capital improvements, was not likely to pay to rebuild a runway of that length.

That effective representation from Fischer was one of the keys to bringing the Burrell development to Lincoln as the runway length factored into its decision to locate at the airport with the project that, if it comes to fruition, will greatly benefit the city in multiple ways.

AP: US inflation eases grip on economy, falling for a 6th month

WASHINGTON — Rising U.S. consumer prices moderated again last month, bolstering hopes that inflation's grip on the economy will continue to ease this year and possibly require less drastic action by the Federal Reserve to control it.

Inflation declined to 6.5% in December compared with a year earlier, the government said Thursday. It was the sixth straight year-over-year monthly slowdown, down from 7.1% in November. On a monthly basis, prices slipped 0.1% from November to December, the first such drop since May 2020.

The softer readings add to growing signs that the worst inflation bout in four decades is steadily waning. Gas prices, which have tumbled, are likely to keep lowering overall inflation in the coming months. Supply chain snarls have largely unraveled. That's helping reduce the cost of goods ranging from cars and shoes to furniture and sporting goods.

"This is the starting point for much better inflation rates, which should bolster consumer and business confidence," said Joe Brusuelas, chief economist at tax consultants RSM.

December's lower inflation reading makes it likelier that the Fed will slow its interest rate hikes in the coming months. The Fed may raise its benchmark rate by just a quarter-point at its next meeting, which ends Feb. 1, after a half-point increase in December and four three-quarter-point hikes before that.

Fed officials signaled they intend to boost their key rate above 5% — a move that would likely keep mortgage rates high, along with the costs of auto loans and business borrowing. The Fed's higher rates are intended to slow spending, cool the economy and curb inflation.

But if inflation continues to ease, the Fed could suspend its rate hikes after that, some economists say, or implement just one additional hike in March and then pause.

"If actual inflation is trending downward, the Fed can take more comfort that it's landed the economy in a good place," said Daleep Singh, chief global economist at PGIM Fixed Income and a former Fed staffer. Singh expects the Fed to raise its benchmark rate by a quarter-point at each of its next two meetings and then stop with its key rate just below 5%.

In remarks Thursday morning, President Joe Biden suggested that the "data is clear" that U.S. inflation is dropping. "It's coming down in America month after month, giving families some real breathing room," he said.

Inflation also has been dropping, though to a lesser degree, in Europe and in the United Kingdom. Annual inflation in the 19 countries that use the euro currency fell for the second straight month in December but still hit a painful 9.2%. That was down from November's 10.1% but still higher than normal.

While annual inflation in the U.K. eased to 10.7% in November from 11.1% a month earlier, it's still stuck near a 40-year high, with food and energy prices squeezing consumers.

Central banks in Europe and the U.K. are still raising interest rates but have slowed their pace.

Even as inflation gradually slows, it remains a painful reality for many Americans.

Excluding volatile food and energy costs, so-called core prices rose 5.7% in December from a year earlier, slower than the 6% in November. From November to December, core prices increased just 0.3%, after rising 0.2% in November. In the past three months, core inflation has slowed to an annual rate of just 3.1%.

Grocery prices rose 0.2% from November to December, the smallest such increase in nearly two years. Still, those prices are up 11.8% from a year ago.

Behind much of the decline in overall inflation are falling gas prices. The national average price of a gallon of gas has sunk from a $5 in June to $3.27 as of Wednesday, according to AAA.

Also contributing to the slowdown are used car prices, which fell for a sixth straight month in December. New car prices declined, too. The cost of airline tickets also dropped.

Still, for most Americans, the Fed's rate hikes have made auto loans much more expensive.

Housing costs are still surging, with apartment rental costs jumping 0.8% from November to December and 8.3% compared with a year earlier. The year-over-year increase was the fastest in four decades.

After two straight weekly increases, the average long-term U.S. mortgage rate came back down again this week but remains a significant hurdle for many prospective homebuyers.

Mortgage buyer Freddie Mac reported Thursday that the average on the benchmark 30-year rate fell to 6.33% from 6.48% last week. A year ago the average rate was 3.45%.

The average long-term rate reached a two-decade high of 7.08% in the fall.

U.S. applications for unemployment benefits fell to their lowest level in 15 weeks as the job market continues to show resiliency.

The number of Americans applying for jobless aid for the week ending Jan. 7 fell to 205,000, from 206,000 the week before, the Labor Department said Thursday. Last week's number was revised up by 2,000 to 206,000.

The four-week moving average of claims, which softens some of the week-to-week volatility, fell by 1,750 to 212,500.

Jobless claims are generally viewed as a proxy for layoffs, which have been relatively low since the COVID-19 pandemic wiped out millions of jobs in 2020.

By Christopher Rugaber