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Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Jan 2023	7.23	45.00	12/30/22
Corn	Oct 2023	5.75	-35.00	12/30/22
Milo	Jan 2023	6.58	-20.00	12/30/22
Milo	Oct 2023	5.35	-75.00	12/30/22
Soybeans	Jan 2023	14.44	-80.00	12/30/22
Soybeans	Oct 2023	13.36	-80.00	12/30/22
Wheat	Jan 2023	8.28	-60.00	12/30/22
Wheat	Jul 2023	7.96	-80.00	12/30/22

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NPM: A look ahead at the 2023 Legislature: Big opportunities, but potential for gridlock (no video)
KPTM: Group: Hospitals 'facing historic financial pressures'

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OWH: Nebraska Gov. Ricketts leaving "best job in the world" with record of tax cuts, spending restraint

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts will close out his time as Nebraska governor Thursday, leaving what he describes as "the best job in the world" and the "honor and privilege of a lifetime."
But he exits with an eye on another top political position, the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Nebraska's junior senator, Ben Sasse.
"I want to continue to look for ways to be able to serve the people of Nebraska and I believe that my experience as governor for the last eight years makes me the best candidate to be the next U.S. senator," Ricketts said in a year-end interview with The World-Herald.
"I've delivered results for the people of Nebraska, whether it's improving services for how we run state government or it's tax relief or getting us through the challenges we had in 2019 with the most widespread flooding or the COVID pandemic. I've got a track record that I'm very proud of working with people in state government."
"I believe that is a strong case for why I should be the next U.S. senator," he said.
Sasse is stepping down to become president of the University of Florida. The resignation takes effect Jan. 8. Ricketts has said he will leave it to the next governor, Jim Pillen, to name a replacement.

Pillen, who will be sworn in Thursday, is widely expected to appoint Ricketts.
Meanwhile, the 58-year-old Republican looks back on two terms at the helm of state government that included major tax cuts, spending restraint and conservative policies. They also included two unprecedented crises — record statewide flooding in 2019, followed by the COVID pandemic that started in 2020.
But he lists improvements in government services as one of his proudest accomplishments. Ricketts, a former T.D. Ameritrade executive, said he worked on creating a more customer-focused, efficient and effective government that would better serve Nebraskans.
He created a Center for Operational Excellence that completed 900 process improvement projects, saving 900,000 hours of state employee time and reducing costs by an estimated $100 million. He also consolidated some state functions.
Among the successes: cutting on-hold time for people seeking public benefits from an average of 23 minutes down to 5 minutes; streamlining registration and renewals for fleet vehicles that allowed one business to complete 4,000 renewals in three days rather than 30; and simplifying fire marshal reviews of building construction plans that cut 15 days out of the process.
“We found ways to ensure that Nebraskans are spending less time filling out forms, waiting in line or waiting on hold,” Ricketts said.
Those improvements are among the reasons outgoing Speaker of the Legislature Mike Hilgers of Lincoln called Ricketts a “tremendous governor for Nebraska.”
“That does not always show up in the headlines, but his efforts to make government work better, faster and more efficiently for its customer will be perhaps one of his most important accomplishments,” said Hilgers, who was elected attorney general in November.
The bigger headline-grabbers have been the tax relief measures. Two major packages passed in 2020 and 2022 capped off a series of tax bills passed on his watch. Together, they are projected to deliver $12.7 billion in tax relief by the time they are fully implemented in 2027. The total includes more than $10 billion in property tax relief.
They include expanded tax credits to offset property taxes, including some that directly reduce property tax bills and some offered as income tax credits. In addition, the top tax rates for individual and corporate income taxes are being reduced and the state is eliminating income taxes on military retirement and Social Security benefits.
Ricketts said he was able to deliver tax relief by keeping state expenses down. He held state budgets to an average of 2.8% growth annually, while revenues grew 4.5%. During an economic downturn in 2016 and 2017, state spending grew at a 0.5% annual average.
More recently, state coffers have benefited from steadily rising property valuations, which meant the state did not have to increase school aid as much as expected. Large infusions of federal pandemic relief since 2020 covered some state costs and shored up the state’s economy, which translated into stronger tax revenues.
“His legacy is one he can be proud of in the arena of fiscal restraint and tax reform,” said State Sen. Tom Briese of Albion.
But Ricketts failed to stop a gas tax increase in 2015. Lawmakers passed the increase over his veto to boost funding for highway construction and maintenance. Ricketts used some of that tax revenue later to help pay for a $450 million road-and bridge-building plan.
Lawmakers overrode two other vetoes that year, his first in political office. One was a bill repealing the state’s death penalty and the other on a bill allowing illegal immigrants brought to this country as children to get Nebraska driver’s licenses. Those are the youths involved with the federal Deferred

Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA.
He learned from those political setbacks. In later years, he worked more closely with friendly lawmakers to block bills before they came to his desk and he used his wealth to wield his political will. He was a major donor to a petition drive that restored the death penalty. He also targeted lawmakers that had voted for the veto overrides.
But Ricketts bristles at the idea that he has bought political wins, including spending more than $1.3 million to get Pillen elected governor this year. The son of T.D. Ameritrade founder Joe Ricketts, Pete Ricketts estimated his net worth at $50 million in 2018.
“Supporting candidates is a matter of free speech,” he said. “Can you have too much free speech? I think I’m exercising my free speech rights. Every American should be able to do that.”
He couldn’t stop Nebraskans from voting to expand Medicaid to more low-income people, as allowed under the federal Affordable Care Act, however. Expansion backers took the issue to voters with an initiative petition drive after Ricketts and fellow Republicans blocked it repeatedly in the Legislature.
Other challenges couldn’t be solved with wealth or political clout.
In March 2019, a combination of heavy snow and rain with extreme cold triggered unprecedented flooding across multiple communities. The floods caused an estimated $2.6 billion in damage to homes, businesses, farmland and roads and cost four lives.
Nebraska was still recovering in March 2020, when the first cases of COVID showed up in the state. Ricketts declared a coronavirus state of emergency on March 13 that year.
He navigated the pandemic with a mixture of public health restrictions and resistance to federal mandates. The combination, as he frequently notes, led Politico last year to name Nebraska as the state that fared best at balancing health, economic, educational and social well-being concerns.
Ricketts also had to deal with challenges inside state government, particularly Nebraska’s overcrowded and troubled prison system. The governor had been in office only a few months when the Tecumseh prison erupted in a deadly riot in May 2015.
He argues that the system has improved since then, with better programming and new construction that added beds. Still, Nebraska’s prison system remains the nation’s most overcrowded and has the fastest-growing inmate population in the country.
State Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha said Ricketts missed an opportunity by fighting a criminal justice reform plan in 2022. The plan came out of an intensive study guided by the nonprofit Crime and Justice Institute that involved all three branches of state government. Ricketts objected to parts of the plan as being “soft on crime,” and the two sides could not reach a compromise.
Ricketts said there were parts of the plan he supported, but those went down when the compromise efforts failed.
He said there is more work to be done in corrections. He has pushed to build a new prison to replace the aging Nebraska State Penitentiary. Lawmakers set aside money for the prison but have not authorized its construction.
He also said there is work to be done on reducing property taxes and major investments that need to be completed, such as the proposed Perkins County canal. Under the terms of a century-old compact with Colorado, construction of the canal would ensure Nebraska’s supply of water in the South Platte River.
Those tasks now fall to Pillen. Ricketts said he is confident handing over the reins because the two share a background in business.
“He’s going to take what we’ve done and take it to the next level,” Ricketts said.

By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Nebraska's outgoing chief medical officer reflects on state's handling of COVID pandemic

Within months of being appointed Nebraska's chief medical officer, Dr. Gary Anthone found himself in the midst of a pandemic that closed schools, bars and restaurants and at times threatened to overwhelm hospitals.

More than three years later, Anthone, 68, is poised to leave the post. His appointment ends with the departure of Gov. Pete Ricketts, whose term is up Tuesday.

Anthone next will serve as chief medical officer for Vetter Senior Living, which operates more than 30 assisted living, skilled nursing and long-term care facilities in the state.

Anthone said he's excited about the position. He learned more about the long-term care industry during the pandemic. Working to shore up those facilities — more than a dozen of which have closed in recent years — was among the goals he outlined in January 2020 during his confirmation hearing before the Nebraska Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee. He also served as director of the public health division within the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

"I think I'll be able to make a contribution there," he said of the Vetter job.

(Gov.-elect Jim Pillen recently appointed Charity Menefee as director of the department's public health division. Dr. Matthew Donahue will continue as state epidemiologist and serve as acting chief medical officer.)

Anthone, an Omaha native, said his desire to make a contribution also played into his decision to return to Nebraska in the early 2000s after 15 years away. During that time, he completed a fellowship at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and then took his first job at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"One of the things I always thought to myself was even though we had everything we needed and out in California, I just thought I'd never be able to make a difference," he said. "I thought, 'Let's go back to Nebraska. Maybe I can make a difference somehow.'"

In the spring of 2019, Ricketts asked Anthone, who is a surgeon, to consider the state's chief medical officer position. Anthone took the job in September of that year.

Anthone recently spoke about his tenure with The World-Herald. The questions and answers have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q. The pandemic began not long after you started the job. What were you expecting when you decided to become chief medical officer, and what was the reality?

A. I spent the first three months preparing myself for the role. Then, in late December, we started hearing about this virus in China, so I really never had much of a chance to go over my goals in my confirmation hearing.

One was to shore up the long-term care industry. And I learned during my first three months that Nebraska really doesn't score very well in prenatal and maternal care. I wanted to see what I could do to help with that.

And because of my background, I'm a surgeon — my specialty was in weight loss or bariatric surgery — I wanted to see what I could do to help with childhood obesity. I never really had a chance to do those things once the pandemic hit.

The governor realized my background was in surgery and that I didn't know a lot about public health after just three months on the job. When the pandemic hit, he gave me what was probably the best

advice a governor could have given anybody. He asked me to think like a doctor and advise him as a doctor would. I had 40 years of thinking like a doctor, so that's how I approached the pandemic.

Q. When did you know this was going to be a major emergency?

A. One of my first roles was to visit the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit at the Nebraska Medical Center, UNMC's clinical partner. Under state law, the chief medical officer gives the go-ahead to open the unit. They also showed me the Global Center for Health Security, which wasn't yet open.

By late January, UNMC was taking part in the federal response to bring home American citizens from Wuhan, China. (Fifty-seven of those citizens landed in Omaha on Feb. 7 and were shuttled to Camp Ashland to wait out a quarantine.) That was the first time I realized this was going to be a big deal. Just being able to witness that, and see how well organized the machine is, was a big confidence-builder for me and let me know this is going to be serious. (The UNMC campus later housed 13 passengers who had tested positive for or been exposed to the coronavirus on a cruise ship off the coast of Japan.) Those experiences gave us a little bit of a head start in how to respond.

Q. What were your biggest challenges at the start of the pandemic?

A. It was keeping up. We were having (near) daily press briefings with the governor for the first year and a half. Things were changing by the hour. I remember at one of the press briefings that the reporters in the audience were finding out about changes even as we were up at the podium.

And being in a new position, I had to learn about our public health infrastructure. I relied on the people that surrounded me at NDHHS, especially Dannette Smith, our CEO.

What made it easier was the relationships I formed with the state's hospitals as well as with the Nebraska Hospital Association and the Nebraska Health Care Association, which represents various parts of the long-term care industry. We set up calls with them on a weekly basis, and those calls were invaluable.

During the first part of the pandemic, I mainly relied on personal communications with hospital executives, calls and texts, for data on hospitalizations and hospital capacity.

I can't even imagine how other states did that. We were lucky that we had those close relationships with everybody here in Nebraska.

Q. Going back to that infrastructure, do you still see holes?

A. We are light years ahead of where we were 3½ years ago. Even just getting data about the number of people who were in the hospital with COVID was hard at the beginning. I used to write it down on my sheets so I'd have it available for the press briefing that day. It was all based on personal communication — how many COVID patients, how many beds, whether they were feeling stressed, how we can help.

But we put together a governor's briefing team — our data specialists were part of it — so it didn't take it long to get it digitized. I still get the data on a daily basis. I still do weekly calls with the hospital association and keep in communication with the long-term care association.

There are still some things we'd like to do, though, and we're working on those. There's a big push nationally for data modernization for the public health sector. We're going to rely on some funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to modernize our data structure.

It basically highlighted what we were deficient in, and now we know going forward that we can't be caught like that again.

Q. Once this modernization occurs, what additional data will the agency be able to provide to the public?

A. Data about the importance of vaccines and other mitigation efforts and how they prevent people from going to the hospital or dying. You don't just want to say it anecdotally, you want to have data

to prove it.
Dr. Donahue and his team were insightful about providing that data. It showed that in December 2020, those who were vaccinated but not yet boosted were 11 times less likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 than those who weren't fully vaccinated. Those who were vaccinated and boosted were 46 times less likely to be hospitalized. That's the kind of data we're talking about. We're almost there in getting that.
Of course everyone is asking right now about the bivalent vaccine and how effective are those. And that's the type of data we need to get out to the public.

Q. How much did political concerns play into the discussions about the state's response to the pandemic? What variables were you weighing when you decided on whether to impose restrictions?

A. The governor asked me and our governor's briefing team to give him the data. He wanted to base all his decisions on the information we gave him. We tried to keep out of the political arena and leave that to the governor and the governor's team.
We would have our disagreements, there's no doubt about that. We were focused on health care. But the governor had to take into consideration all of the other areas, like education, social well-being and the economy.
Nebraska was ranked No. 1 in its response to the pandemic by Politico. And we were one of only three states to receive an A+ for the response to the pandemic from the National Bureau of Economic Research.
We did pretty well. And we did it without really doing any mandates or shutdowns.
We had our relationships with the local health departments and communities and the Global Center at UNMC. We used that information to inform the governor.

Q. How much pressure did you get from business groups, medical officials and others over the state's response, and how did you handle that?

A. I have a lot of friends who are doctors. A lot of them didn't agree with what we were doing, and they didn't hesitate to let me know that.
But that was the beauty of it. They knew they could call me. They knew they could voice their opinion and they knew that I would relay that information to the Governor's Office. They knew that we were taking everything into consideration.

Q. How many hours were you working at the start of the pandemic?

A. I was a surgeon, so I was used to working long hours. But I was working up to 14 hours a day some days, even on weekends. We all were. And at first, it was seven days a week. We didn't shut down on the weekends. We still had our meetings on the weekend and kept up with the data.
I really want to give a shout out to my wife, Annlouise, for putting up with this. I can't think of anything more worthwhile that I could have done with my time or my life than during this last 3½ years. It's been absolutely an honor and a privilege to do this. God gave me this opportunity to make a difference. I hope I was able to and I hope I'm able to in the future. In a way, it's almost like a dream come true for me.

Q. With your insights now, are there other things Nebraska should do to strengthen public health?

A. Our structure, from what I've learned from other states, is the envy of the nation. We're regionalized into 19 public health departments. Some states had to deal with public health on a county-by-county basis. One of our surrounding states had to deal with 103 counties and county boards of health.

That was one advantage. And we've learned to form these relationships where everybody can just pick up the phone and call each other.
Our data infrastructure, we're continuing to work on that. If something happens to stress our health care system, we'll have the data to know what it is. As chief medical officer, I was tasked with making sure that we had enough hospital capacity to not only get COVID patients treated but also to make sure everybody else could get the health care that they needed. And that's based off seeing that data.
As you know, we're going through the influenza and RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) seasons. Luckily, RSV is dwindling now, but our pediatric hospitals were getting very stressed. We knew it was coming, so we put together a medical emergency operations center group so we could communicate with each other. That was something we learned during the pandemic, to be proactive.
The beauty of Nebraska hospitals is everybody pitched in. Early in the pandemic, nearly every employee at an assisted living facility in Blair became ill with COVID-19, and residents were starting to become ill, too. We had to do something quick. On a Saturday evening, we convened the hospitals, and every one said they'd help transport the residents to their facilities.
But we'd had the foresight to have beds available for such a situation. The state of Washington had had a large outbreak at a nursing home early in the pandemic, and we learned from that. We had 40 beds at St. Elizabeth Regional Medical Center in Lincoln and 24 at Midlands Hospital in Papillion, beds the hospitals hadn't used in a while, set aside for that purpose. Most of the residents went to Midlands.
I remember going to Midlands that day to see how things were set up. The nurses ... were so excited about helping out. It was quite a sight to see.
It's been an honor and a privilege for me to be in this position the last 3½ years. (Anthone noted that he received awards for his work from the hospital association and UNMC.)
But probably the most significant thing ... I formed a relationship with a chief medical officer in Scottsbluff (the late Dr. Matthew Bruner, chief medical officer at Regional West Medical Center). He'd call or text me every morning before briefings and give me an update of what was happening in the Panhandle area. He had a tragic plane accident and died (in November 2021, with his oldest son and a Gering teen).
Out of the blue, his wife called me and said, 'I don't know you, but Matt knew you.' She asked me to come and speak at the funeral. I thought, 'This is the highlight of my career to know that we formed these relationships.' And it wasn't just with Matt. I thought, 'This is what Nebraska is all about.' I was honored to go out and speak about his role and how he helped us with our response.
When I look back, that's going to be my biggest achievement, the relationships I formed with the health care systems here.
By Julie Anderson

Nebraska Examiner: Will Nebraska need not one, but two new prisons at a cost of nearly $500 million?

LINCOLN — Could Nebraskans be on the hook for building not only a $270 million replacement for the Nebraska State Penitentiary, but also for renovating the aging Penitentiary?
That appeared to be a distinct possibility following a legislative hearing last fall about upcoming issues facing the Nebraska Department of Corrections.
When asked at an October legislative hearing if the department will require additional prison beds,

even after a proposed 1,500-bed prison is built to replace the State Pen, the state's interim corrections director, Diane Sabatka-Rine, responded "yes."

"We'll need to have additional bed space. I don't know if that includes repurposing the penitentiary or if that includes other options that we've not yet explored," Sabatka-Rine said.

If it's refurbishing the State Pen, that's a project the department has estimated would cost $220 million of taxpayer funds.

State Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha, who heads the Legislature's Judiciary Committee, said the response by Sabatka-Rine was the first time he can recall that state officials have acknowledged that a new prison is just the beginning of a spending spree on prison beds.

"If there's not some meaningful prison reform — which by the way will make our communities safer — then we're looking at spending half a billion dollars to accommodate our prison population to the year 2030," Lathrop said recently.

Ricketts: Bill soft on crime

The Omaha senator, who declined to seek re-election this year, was among the lawmakers pushing for changes in Nebraska's sentencing laws to allow inmates who behave an earlier opportunity to be released on parole. That, in turn, could avoid the need to build more prisons, he argued.

But a proposal to do that, Legislative Bill 920, was shot down by opponents in the Legislature, along with Gov. Pete Ricketts, who portrayed the measure as "soft on crime."

LB 920 contained data-driven reforms developed after months of study of nonprison strategies to reduce prison overcrowding. It was done in conjunction with the Crime and Justice Institute, which has helped dozens of states avoid prison construction.

Lathrop, who led legislative probes into prison overcrowding and problems at Corrections during a 12-year legislative career, called the defeat of LB 920 his biggest disappointment.

'The state that won't listen'

"We're going to be known as the state that won't listen," he said back in April, referring to the ideas generated by the CJI process.

Since then, Lathrop has sought to understand what plan the state has to address prison overcrowding. He has maintained that Nebraska can't "build its way" out of the overcrowding crisis and that unless alternatives to incarceration are adopted, the state will be on a continual cycle of building expensive prisons.

Ricketts, during a recent interview, said some reforms are still being considered. Meanwhile, incoming Gov. Jim Pillen, in a separate interview, said he plans to get "aggressive" in seeking funds for new prison construction.

The Legislature, during the 2023 session that will begin Jan. 4, will be asked to allocate the final $115 million to build a replacement for the State Penitentiary, the state's oldest prison.

Displaced inmates

The Pen, located on Lincoln's southwest side, was the site of a major water line break in November. It underscored the infrastructure problems at a 1,300-bed facility that has been operating, with some improvements, since 1869.

The water line break, and the resulting flooding of a housing unit, caused 135 elderly, medium/maximum security inmates to be transferred to another prison. Officials have said it might take a year or two before the water line and other damage is repaired.

Six potential sites in the Lincoln, Omaha and Fremont areas have been studied for the new prison.

Ricketts said that a replacement for the State Pen must be built but that some "justice reinvestment" reforms came out of the CJI study worth pursuing.

One possibility he mentioned was development of “prep houses” that could be used by the State Parole Board to give troublesome parolees a structured environment to get them back on track, thus avoiding a return to prison.

Drug courts an alternative

Ricketts also cited problem-solving courts, such as drug courts, which treat inmates’ addictions through tough love rather than a prison cell. But court officials have said the state lacks the capacity to expand such programs beyond a small percentage of convicted felons.

Pillen said the state can’t continue to “kick the can” down the road on building a new prison.

Both he and Ricketts said a properly built new prison, with proper space for rehabilitation, should help reduce the rate of released inmates returning to prison. About 29.8% of released inmates return to prison within three years, according to Corrections.

Pillen also said Nebraska has a relatively low prison incarceration rate so the problem is not that the state is sentencing too many people to prison.

That claim was disputed by Omaha Sen. Terrell McKinney, who has said the over-incarceration of Black men must be addressed.

Sabatka-Rine, during her Dec. 2 testimony before the Judiciary Committee, said her preference is not to repurpose the State Pen. But she said projections in the growth of the state’s inmate population will require more prison space, and she’s not dismissing the possibility of rebuilding the State Pen. When asked to expound on that, a Corrections spokeswoman said the “future of (the State Pen) rests in the hands of the Legislature.”

Lathrop has said there’s no proof that building a new prison will improve recidivism rates. But adding new prisons definitely would mean more staff and more spending, he said.

Master plan in final editing

He said study after study has indicated that inmates who are under parole supervision, which includes requirements to work and attend rehabilitation program, become more successful citizens than those who just “jam out” of prison with no post-release supervision.

The senator said it’s essential to complete a facilities master plan to determine the needs of Corrections so state legislators know what kind of new prison is needed and how large it should be. That prison facilities study was expected to be completed last summer and more recently was projected to be done by the end of the year.

Laura Strimple, the chief of staff for Corrections, said Wednesday that the report won’t be done by the end of the year but that it is in the final editing stages.

Most overcrowded in nation

The Nebraska prison system, the most overcrowded in the nation, regularly holds about 1,900 more inmates than its nine prisons were designed to house.

Dozens of inmates sleep on floor cots every night. Some cells designed for one inmate are double bunked.

Prison officials have expressed frustration that overcrowded prisons mean less space for needed rehabilitation programs.

By Paul Hammel

OWH: 2022 Midlanders of the Year: Nebraska's volunteer firefighters

CAMBRIDGE, Neb. – Less than 24 hours after a monster wildfire in southwest Nebraska killed his father – a retired volunteer fire chief – Kyle Trumble, himself a volunteer firefighter, was back on the

fire lines.
The winds had shifted, and the April wildfire was threatening Cambridge, the community of 1,000 he called home.
“When I went back out to fight the fire, I left two young boys and a wife,” he said, his voice cracking. “Ninety-nine percent of the time, you come home. But you just never know what will happen.”
That same month, during another nearby megafire, emergency responders feared for their lives as they used the Jaws of Life to pull two of their colleagues from a fatal wreck in the middle of the fire. Visibility was maybe five feet, and somewhere out in the smoke was the wail of another firetruck headed their way. They had driven at a crawl to the scene and still had to swerve into the the grass to avoid the crashed vehicles.
“Would the firetruck stop in time?” they asked each other.
“We could hear it coming, but we couldn’t see it,” said Bronson Soucie, a Cambridge volunteer firefighter. “We all bailed into the ditch.”
Only after the fire, when he saw a photo taken at the scene, did he realize another danger they faced: blackened ground under his truck. While they were working to rescue the two men, the fire had crawled up to the road and under the vehicle.
If Cheryl Moody could tell you one thing about her husband, an assistant volunteer fire chief who died battling another of the state’s massive wildfires last year, it would be this:
“He fought fires not because he liked it,” she said. “He didn’t do it for the adrenaline rush. He was just one of those guys who was there to help somebody else.”
The wildfires that struck Nebraska in 2022 defied comprehension. No area of the state, from the Panhandle to the Missouri River, was spared. Fueled by deepening drought and fanned by winds of 50 mph to 70 mph, fires threatened towns, burned homes and left in their wake unbearable heartache.
Three people from the ranks of Nebraska’s volunteer firefighters died: Elwood Chief Darren Krull was in an SUV that collided with a water truck; retired Cambridge Chief JP Trumble was overtaken by flames after he fled from his disabled truck; and Purdum Assistant Chief Mike Moody collapsed while refilling a water tank.
Several others were critically injured, either in crashes, being hit by a firetruck or by being caught in the flames. Many more suffered smoke inhalation, with some now expecting lifelong respiratory problems.
More than 200,000 acres burned, according to the Nebraska Forest Service. That makes 2022 the state’s second-largest fire year on record.
That ranking masks the ferocity of last year because the state’s record fire year, 2012, claimed no lives and left far fewer people injured — despite burning more than twice as many acres.
On one day in April, “it felt like the whole state was on fire,” said Erv Portis, assistant director of the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency.
“There were fires all over the place, and guess who was responding? Our volunteer firefighters,” he said. “Who staffs those? Your neighbors, your families, your employees, your employers.”
For their sacrifices and heroics, Nebraska’s volunteer firefighters are the 2022 Omaha World-Herald Midlanders of the Year.
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“They were moving faster and and stronger than any we’ve ever seen,” Justin Mowry, chief of the Wilsonville Volunteer Fire Department, said of the April fires in southwest Nebraska. “The flames were 15 to 20 feet into the air — and this was in grass. It radiated so much heat, you couldn’t get the

trucks close to it to knock them down.
“It was like being next to the sun.”
Firefighters did what they could to protect themselves. In one instance, they clustered together and aimed their hoses into the air, hoping the water would shower down and protect them.
Sometimes, they just pulled back. Other times, they ran for safety.
Brian Sisson, volunteer fire chief for Arapahoe, said winds pushed embers so far and fast that flames traveled more than a mile in 15 minutes. The old way of fighting fires — working from already burned ground or backburning (using fire to fight fire) — didn’t work.
Normally, firefighters would be out of harm’s way, Sisson said, if they fought the fire from already burned ground, which they call “the black.” “But with the wind the way it was,” he said, “it was blowing past the black, going across highways and across areas you think it would never cross.”
A volunteer firefighter was severely injured in October trying to light a smaller fire to protect a home southwest of Lincoln.
Brad Elder of the Crete Volunteer Fire Department said winds were blowing about 55 mph and the main fire wasn’t visible when he and his partner pulled up to the rural home. But as he bent over to light the counter fire, he was enveloped in flames as fire seemingly came from nowhere.
Elder said he found himself first running, then crawling through flames. The fire burned the back of his pants from his belt to his ankles.
“I was running inside a wall of fire. I couldn’t even see my own feet,” he said.
He lifted his hand and streamers of burned flesh flapped in the wind.
“It looked like a pompon,” he said.
He was convinced he would die and worried about his partner at the scene.
Suddenly, he was hit in the back by a spray of water. His buddy was clearing a path through the fire.
“When his water hit me in the back, it felt like someone cracked a whip on me,” he said. “I knew he was alive and was coming for me.”
And that was just the beginning of the desperate effort by first responders to save Elder’s life. More than two months later, he remains in recovery at Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital in Lincoln, contemplating a future he thought he wouldn’t have.
Elder, a professor at Doane University who travels across North America teaching about controlled burns and using fire to fight fire, said the 2022 fires are a wake-up call for eastern Nebraska.
“It was so big and so fast, the things we needed to fight it weren’t in place,” he said.
In southwest Nebraska, ash, soot and debris from the April fires billowed in thick, disorienting clouds that filled the horizon and obscured roads, vehicles and landmarks. The poor visibility contributed to two of the year’s firefighter deaths and at least three injuries from crashes.
“The visibility was virtually zero,” Sisson said. “We call it ‘driving by Braille.’ You had to drive with your tires on the rumble strips because you had no concept of space or distance ... You couldn’t see anything, you didn’t know if you were on the highway or going into a ditch. You tried to piece (the route) together in your head, you’d think a road should be coming up, but it was already behind you.”
The ambulance that carried one of the injured away from that smoky crash did so at a crawl, sometimes stopping in the midst of the fire because the smoke was so thick.
“I had to stop because I didn’t know where I was,” said Mitch Houser, an Arapahoe volunteer firefighter. “You had to wait for the wind to blow the smoke out of the way so that you could see the road. There were flames all over the place, but there was no choice.”
Houser said the only reason the ambulance made it to safety was because he inadvertently drove

into the oncoming lane. He was able to look down from the driver's side window and see the white line along the shoulder.
"That was the only thing I could see," he said. "It was just pure luck."
Throughout these fires, even as they pressed forward, firefighters worried about others.
When an accompanying firetruck disappeared in the smoke, Sisson said he wondered: Did it go off the road? Down a ravine?
And there was constant thought of family back home: Were they safe?
"It was nonstop," Sisson said. "The majority of us are married with kids ... (The families) are worried, the fire is coming toward the town. It was a terrifying experience for everyone, even those not fighting the fires."
Sisson said he still has flashbacks, "memories you don't want to have."
"If it's doing that to me, what's it doing to other guys?"
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Multiple towns were evacuated across Nebraska last year, which included ferrying patients from the local hospital to safety. The town of Cambridge was evacuated twice on back-to-back days.
The largest of the fires occurred in April and October.
On April 7, the 739 Fire ignited in Gosper County, burning through 35,000 acres and destroying at least eight homes. This was the fire that took the life of Krull and left Phelps County Emergency Manager Justin Norris critically injured. Their SUV collided with a water truck on a road where visibility was nearly zero. The driver of the water truck was not hurt.
Farnam Volunteer Firefighter Travis Metzler was severely injured in the same fire when the truck he was riding in hit a hole in a smoky pasture and rolled. Firefighters carried him to safety on a stretcher made of heavy firefighter clothing secured across the handles of two spades. Metzler suffered multiple broken bones and has been through numerous surgeries.
On April 22, the 702 Fire ignited in northern Kansas and burned into Nebraska and back, consuming about 45,000 acres. This fire took the life of Trumble and injured at least 15 firefighters.
On Oct. 2, another large blaze, the Bovee Fire, burned about 18,900 acres and claimed the life of Moody. That fire burned through the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey, destroying a cherished 4-H camp.
The fire that injured Elder occurred Oct. 23 in Gage and Lancaster Counties and destroyed three homes. On that volatile day, four big fires broke out in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa (the fire southwest of Lincoln, one near Wisner and others near Mondamin and Red Oak, Iowa). Multiple smaller ones also flared up.
Southwest Nebraskans knew their area was tinder dry before the first big fire broke out. And after it erupted, they thought they had seen one for the ages.
"You always hear about 100-year floods, 100-year rains," Sisson said. "Everybody said, 'That was a 100-year fire. You'll never see another one in your life.' "
Barely two weeks later, they did. The 702 Fire was even larger.
During that first fire, firefighters worked 12-hour shifts for days on end. Some of their rigs ran around the clock.
They had barely finished mopping up hot spots when the second one struck.
"We were not at full strength, our vehicles were not all healthy, our guys were not all recovered, we were depleted," Furnas County Sheriff Doug Brown said. "Every fire agency in our county and surrounding area was depleted."
Still, firefighters climbed back into their rigs. Among those answering the call was JP Trumble. Even

though he was retired, he told his colleagues he would check on homes, spot the fire and call in its movements.
Delaine Soucie, chief of the Cambridge Volunteer Fire Department, described conditions that day:
“You couldn’t see anything. You couldn’t see the fire until it was right in front of you or right beside you.
“The conditions were horrible, the worst conditions to fight a fire you could ever ask for. The wind was terrible, I mean that fire was impossible to fight. The fire would blow over the grass rigs, and on the other side of the truck it would already be burning. You could never stay in front of it.
“The smoke and dirt was so bad,” he said, “you couldn’t see where you were. And the next thing you knew, you were in the fire or the fire is all around you.”
Soucie and his crew were among the last to see Trumble — he was pulling out of the driveway of the home of an evacuating family whose house ultimately would burn.
Trumble’s body was found that night near his truck, which had gone off the road and gotten stuck.
His son, Kyle, described conditions the day his dad died as “terrifying.”
“If you got in it, you didn’t know how you were going to get out, it was moving so fast,” he said. “We tried fighting it at the very beginning, but everybody pulled back because it was moving too fast. You couldn’t see anything. We were lucky to get away.”
Even though the danger remained and his family was grieving, Kyle said he couldn’t have lived with himself if hadn’t gone out the next day to fight alongside his fellow volunteers.
And that’s the underlying reality for those who live in rural and small-town Nebraska. Fire departments — and often ambulances — are staffed by volunteers. If unpaid, everyday Nebraskans don’t step up, there will be no one to protect their families and property. The state is too vast, the tax base too thin.
“For a lot of us, it’s to help preserve our homes, to help the community we live in,” Mowry said. “We wouldn’t have anyone else in this area to do it.”
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According to the Nebraska State Fire Marshal’s Office, 449 of the state’s 478 fire departments are staffed by volunteers. Many are farmers, but the ranks also include a range of professions, such as teachers, utility workers and salespeople.
And these departments are in need of help, the firefighters say. Their ranks are thinning.
Departments have gone from waiting lists for volunteers to vacancies on their rosters, said Mark Meints, volunteer fire chief at Wymore and an officer with the Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association. As a result, fewer people are doing more work while, at the same time, their work is becoming more complicated because of changing materials in homes and cars.
Neighboring fire departments now routinely cover for each other.
And their budgets are tight, despite grants, local tax revenue, donations and fundraisers.
“It’s sad to say, but that truck that is going to save your life, your house — it has to be paid (in part) by a pancake feed,” Meints said.
Volunteer fire departments are no different from other service groups that are seeing numbers drop off, he said. The nature of community and volunteerism is changing. Young people are moving out of rural Nebraska. For those who stay, jobs often are a good distance away, so volunteers require more time to respond to an emergency, which adds more pressure on the departments.
These fire chiefs describe their work as essentially a second job or similar in complexity to that of a full-time, paid chief.
“The best way I can describe it, is I work my regular job 8 to 5, but also have a second job without

really calling it a job," Sisson said. "It's something I enjoy doing, helping others. That's why a lot of people sign up, they are helping their friends."

Meints figures he puts as much time into his volunteer work as a paid fire chief does. He stops by the firehouse daily to process paperwork, work on grant applications, answer messages and check equipment.

"What would happen if I turned the key and the truck didn't start?" Meints said. "Somebody has to make sure the truck starts."

Mowry estimates that he spends the equivalent of a full day a month in meetings related to the fire department.

Any kind of help is appreciated, firefighters said. Stop by the firehouse and mow the lawn or wash a rig, they said. Pitch in some money for new equipment.

Delaine Soucie said they received phenomenal support as they fought the fires.

"We had so much good food, people brought in water, I can't believe how much people brought in, even people from surrounding states," he said.

Houser, the Arapahoe volunteer who drove the ambulance, said the outpouring of donations in the wake of the fires has been humbling and gratifying.

"We've been very fortunate in that people have given a lot to us," he said. "We've been able to upgrade equipment, we've been able to get more safety equipment. It will enable us to support our community."

Arapahoe will be equipping each of its firetrucks and ambulances with thermal cameras, which will enable drivers to see through the smoke in future emergencies.

JP Trumble's daughter, Staci, has started a GoFundMe campaign to raise money toward a new fire barn for Cambridge. A larger barn would allow all rigs and equipment to be stored in one spot so that firefighters can suit up and head out more quickly.

These volunteer firefighters are quick to say they aren't the only ones volunteering when fire breaks out. Alongside them are a host of others, from farmers disking up firebreaks and hauling water to townspeople hustling up food, water and support.

Take the day one of the mega fires erupted. A smaller fire had broken out earlier that morning in Wilsonville, but according to several firefighters, it was stopped before it could grow thanks to help from farmers. They disked up a firebreak, which allowed firefighters to bring it under control. Had it not been stopped, it likely would have burned into Cambridge, and by that afternoon, firefighters would have been battling simultaneous major fires.

Also critical to pushing back fires has been state and federal assistance.

The fires were so bad this year that Gov. Pete Ricketts issued a standing declaration for state resources to be available from the spring into fall. In years past, individual emergency declarations were required to activate state resources to fight a fire. In tandem with that, Portis said, the state contracted for two firefighting planes this year. One was on standby from April to November and the other from July through October. In a normal year, the state places a single airplane on standby from July to August.

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Three-fourths of the lower 48 states and all of Nebraska is in drought or near-drought. Within Nebraska, the driest areas are the southwest and northeast portions of the state, where extreme to exceptional drought has taken hold, according the National Drought Mitigation Center housed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Firefighters already are looking ahead, worried about what will happen if the rains don't return.

No matter what happens in the months ahead, climate scientists say drought years like 2012 and 2022 will become more common as Nebraska becomes more arid with climate change.
“Firefighters are seeing it, fires are getting bigger and worse,” said Elder, who also teaches about climate change at Doane. “Our departments are built for an environment that doesn’t exist anymore. We need to find a way to change with the environment, and that may mean we need better equipment, we need more personnel, we need to up the size of our departments.”
Nebraska updated its firefighting capabilities after the 2012 fire year, and 2022 has been a reminder that more work remains.
Various firefighters noted that radio communication was difficult because departments operated on different frequencies. Thermal imaging cameras, for example, would help more firefighters see through smoke. And grant writing takes time.
Elder and other firefighters say they would like to see farmers preemptively plow 100-foot firebreaks around the perimeter of their fields after harvest. This would slow any winter or spring fires that flare up.
So far, Nebraska has evaded what has befallen some other Great Plains states. The town of Carbon, Texas, burned in a spring wildfire last year. In December 2021, winds sent flames into the Kansas town of Paradise.
In the end, said Mowry and others, firefighters will simply have to double down.
“Volunteers are going to have to put in more time as far as wildland training and that kind of thing,” he said. “It’s going to take more commitment.”
By Nancy Gaarder

LJS: Legislature returns with contentious issues looming

The 2023 Legislature will convene Wednesday with an array of hot topics waiting in the wings.
Contentious issues ranging from allocation of state school aid to implementation of a constitutional amendment requiring voter photo identification are on the likely agenda along with new restrictions on abortion rights and unrestricted recognition of gun rights.
And a whole lot more.
A continuing array of new and accelerated tax cuts, ongoing proposals for correctional reform and a green light to proceed with construction of a new state prison are also among issues that await legislative action.
The 90-day legislative session sets sail in the raw January winter on a journey that is scheduled to end with adjournment during the second week of June.
The allotment and distribution of state aid to schools will be a contentious issue, with Governor-elect Jim Pillen signaling his determination to rewrite the state aid formula to distribute more state funding assistance on a per-student basis.
The state now directs the vast amount of state assistance to school districts that cannot meet their needs with local property tax support.
That's an urban-rural battle waiting to erupt.
The 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down Roe v. Wade abortion rights previously guaranteed by the court in 1973 opens the door to proposals for new state restrictions.
Abortion currently is legal in Nebraska up to the 20th week of pregnancy.
An effort supported by Gov. Pete Ricketts to call a special session of the Legislature last summer to amend the Nebraska law to reduce abortion access by prohibiting abortions after the 12th week of

pregnancy was ultimately abandoned, but the issue is certain to be a hot topic in the 2023 legislative session.
Sharp divisions were previously on display in the waning days of the 2022 regular session when a bill that would have enacted a ban on all abortions if Roe were overturned fell just two votes short of the 33 required to break a filibuster and proceed to enact the bill.
Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon has signaled his intention to renew his effort to enact a "constitutional carry" gun rights bill that would allow Nebraskans to carry a concealed handgun without the need to acquire a state permit or receive gun safety training.
That proposal relies on the U.S. Constitution's 2nd Amendment language guaranteeing "the right of the people to keep and bear arms."
Implementation of the voter photo ID constitutional amendment may divide the Legislature along both political party and urban-rural lines amid concerns that requirements could reduce voter participation by making it more difficult for low-income, racial and ethnic minority, elderly and disabled people to vote.
With state government pocketing a large surplus of revenue during the current biennium, an array of substantial new and accelerated tax cuts is certain to be a feature of the 2023 legislative session.
A comprehensive prison reform package blew up in the fading days of the 2022 legislative session, but is likely to be part of a continuing debate when senators determine whether to give the green light to proceed with construction of a new state prison to replace the aging penitentiary in Lincoln.
Substantial funding has been parked in the state budget to meet a big share of the cost of the proposed $270 million prison, but its price tag no doubt has increased during the delay.
Workforce development proposals are likely to be a major topic as Nebraska struggles to fill a stunning 80,000 unfilled jobs.
Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn is expected to be selected to again lead the Revenue Committee as it continues to fashion tax policy, including more major tax reductions, but the Appropriations Committee will be led by a new chairperson with Sen. John Stinner of Gering departing after completing his two-term limit this week.
Sen. Robert Clements of Elmwood appears positioned to be elected as the Appropriations chairman.
It's all likely to start with a bang Wednesday as senators decide whether to choose their leaders, including committee chairpersons, by open and recorded votes rather than continuing the nonpartisan Legislature's tradition of secret balloting through slips of paper that are collected from senators and tallied without recording individual votes.
That decision could impact the tone of the entire 90-day session by potentially turning its nature more partisan as senators may feel the pressure of electing leadership that is affiliated with their own party.
With registered Republicans holding 32 of the 49 seats, that change conceivably could deny Democrats most, and potentially all, leadership positions.
But, at the same time, that figure of 32 Republicans is one short of the 33 votes required to end a filibuster, potentially arming Democrats with the power to trap legislative proposals.
Eyes are likely to center Wednesday on the choice of who will lead the Legislature's Education Committee when senators begin the task of choosing 14 standing committee leaders.
With public education increasingly under political attack based both on cost and curriculum and proposals to rewrite the state school aid formula now in play as a priority for Pillen, the choice of Education Committee chairperson will be in the spotlight.
Sen. Lynne Walz of Fremont, a former teacher, is seeking reelection as chairwoman and is being

challenged by Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil, who has declared that "there is no more important place for change than our education system."
Two years ago, Walz, a Democrat, defeated former Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte, a Republican, on a 25-23 secret ballot vote.
Following Wednesday's opening session, the Legislature will conduct inaugural ceremonies Thursday, highlighted by the inauguration of Pillen to succeed Gov. Pete Ricketts, who will be completing eight years in the office as he reaches the end of the state's two-term limit.
And next Sunday, Sen. Ben Sasse will officially leave the Senate after submitting his resignation to become president of the University of Florida.
Pillen appears ready to appoint Ricketts to the Senate seat.
By Don Walton

LJS: Lincoln man sues Nebraska officials, all of the state's county election commissioners alleging fraud

Attorneys for all 93 county election commissioners in Nebraska and high-ranking state officials have asked a district judge to toss a Lincoln man's lawsuit against them as frivolous.
Rick Hill's suit — against Gov. Pete Ricketts, Secretary of State Bob Evnen, Attorney General Doug Peterson, Speaker of the Legislature Mike Hilgers and Election Systems & Software — includes nine pages of vague allegations of election fraud and QAnon conspiracy theories.
At a hearing Dec. 19, Hill asked Lancaster County District Judge Andrew Jacobsen to allow him to amend his complaint.
"Honestly, it was done on a rant," he said.
If given the chance, Hill said, he would file a pared-down version alleging about 11 claims rather than the 40 in his current complaint.
As it stands, Hill's complaint says that he is suing the group "for allowing unconstitutional elections."
"This is an impeachment of the entire executive and legislative branch for allowing out-and-out violations year after year after year," he wrote, with nothing to substantiate his claims.
The same day of the court hearing, Evnen, Nebraska's chief election officer, said an expanded, statewide audit of the 2022 general election that included a hand count of more than 48,000 ballots cast found just 11 discrepancies, for a 0.023% error rate.
Hill's lawsuit, which seeks $10 billion, alleges that every U.S. president since Ronald Reagan has been "heavily saturated in pedophilia with the exception of Trump," that COVID-19 was a scam to remove Trump from office and that President Joe Biden wasn't elected but "installed," along with 90% of Lincoln's city council.
"The elected officials of this state think we have fair and honest elections. They are gaslighting us," he said. "That tells me they are in on the corruption."
In September, Hill asked the judge to enter an order protecting election records without the other side being notified. Soon after he was denied, Hill filed an amended complaint including every county election commissioner in the state.
At the Dec. 19 hearing, a troop of lawyers representing them, the state officials and Election Systems & Software argued for the case to be dismissed.
Attorney John Matson, who represents ESS, said Hill's claims boil down to complaints about how government operates and how elections take place, which aren't within the purview of the court.
Courts across the country, both state and federal, regularly are asked by citizens to throw out results

of democratically completed elections, and "regularly and consistently dismiss these claims," he argued.
Matson said ESS is seeking sanctions, since this is the second lawsuit Hill has filed based on essentially the same allegations.
"While that may seem innocuous," the attorney said, "it really does create a real prejudice on the defendants that are sued. In our case, Mr. Hill has drug 96 defendants into court."
Attorney Patrick Guinan, who represents a bulk of the election commissioners, said most of Hill's allegations involve the 2020 election and Hill failed to file notice of a tort claim in the counties first, as required to get in the court's front doors.
"As Mr. Hill said, this is just him venting and filing a lawsuit," Guinan said. "Well, him venting and filing a lawsuit has caused how many hundreds of hours of attorney time, clerk time, our elected officials' time to respond to a rant?"
Assistant Attorney General Jennifer Huxoll, who represents the state elected officials, said they understand Hill feels strongly about this.
But Hill "already had an opportunity to clarify his disjointed, rambling and often incoherent arguments made against the state defendants. He chose to file an amended complaint that contained no more specific facts," she and Assistant Attorney General Justin Hall wrote in their brief.
Jacobsen gave Hill time to respond to the briefs seeking to dismiss the case and took the matter under advisement.
By Lori Pilger

Nebraska Examiner: Nebraska's top five political stories in a tumultuous 2022

LINCOLN — Having a congressman convicted of federal crimes is enough to make any political year in Nebraska wild.
But the state met that mark in March, and the year was just getting started.
Here is the Nebraska Examiner's take on the state's top five political stories of 2022:
Fortenberry convicted
A federal jury in California found nine-term U.S. Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., guilty after a trial in mid-March.
Prosecutors said the Lincoln congressman misled or lied to federal agents about illegal foreign funds raised for his congressional campaign. He has appealed the conviction on three felony charges.
Fortenberry resigned from office at the end of March, although it came too late to remove his name from the primary election ballot.
Republican State Sen. Mike Flood of Norfolk, who stepped in to challenge Fortenberry after charges were filed, won the GOP primary in May.
Special election confusion
The timing of Fortenberry's exit forced Nebraska to hold a separate special election June 28 to fill the 1st Congressional District seat for the remainder of Fortenberry's current term in 2022.
It was the state's first special election to fill a U.S. House seat since 1951. Early estimates for the state and local costs of the extra election: $500,000.
The election was a confusing one for some suburban voters in Papillion and La Vista. The Nebraska Legislature's redistricting plan had moved more of Sarpy County from the 2nd Congressional District into the Lincoln-heavy 1st District.
And the campaign turnaround was short — seven weeks after the May primary.

Flood defeated Democratic State Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks of Lincoln by only 6 percentage points, compared to the 20-point wins Fortenberry had recorded in previous elections.
One factor: The special election came just four days after the U.S. Supreme Court reversed Roe v. Wade in its Dobbs decision, overturning national abortion rights, which amplified the issue in the race and motivated more Democrats to vote.
Pansing Brooks is an abortion-rights advocate who helped Democrats filibuster a potential abortion ban in the Legislature that Flood sponsored.
While the special election was tight, Flood defeated Pansing Brooks in November's general election by 16 points.

Costliest governor's primary

The end of Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts' tenure drew nine GOP candidates into a bruising GOP primary race to replace him.
Ricketts, who is term-limited, endorsed and campaigned aggressively for the eventual winner, Jim Pillen. A University of Nebraska regent and Columbus-area hog producer.
Former President Donald Trump endorsed multi-state agribusinessman and Trump donor Charles Herbster, appearing at a rally about a week before the primary in Greenwood. Trump surrogates, including Kellyanne Conway and Corey Lewandowski, served as campaign consultants for Herbster.
The three strongest GOP candidates raised a record $28 million total for the primary, setting a new mark for state and local races in Nebraska and funding a torrent of negative ads about Pillen and Herbster.
The negativity later turned on a third candidate, State Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha, who built momentum as the top two sniped at each other.
Ricketts confirmed at the time that he and others had helped fund outside groups targeting Herbster and Lindstrom. Herbster, who largely self-funded his campaign, regularly attacked Pillen and his record in ads.
The race was jostled when the Nebraska Examiner published a report in April about eight women alleging that Herbster had inappropriately touched them, which attracted national attention.
Herbster denied the allegations and filed a defamation lawsuit against the first woman to come forward by name, State Sen. Julie Slama. He also ran political ads attacking the story.
Slama countersued him for defamation and sexual battery. In October, both agreed to drop their lawsuits.
Political observers said Pillen won by campaigning in the state more often than Herbster, whose former campaign staffers complained about how little time he spent on the campaign trail.
Observers also attributed the win to the blitz of negative ads funded by Ricketts and the outside groups. Pillen was criticized by some for choosing not to debate during the primary or general election campaigns. But he won the general election against Democratic State Sen. Carol Blood by 23 percentage points.

Leadership changes disrupt state GOP

Ricketts' push to help Pillen win the GOP primary angered a mix of Republicans who had grown unhappy about the role the governor's well-funded hand plays in Nebraska politics.
Trump-era populists, along with Republicans who said Ricketts and his political team had alienated them over the years, organized a takeover of the Nebraska Republican Party during the state convention in Kearney in July.
Ricketts supporters who ran and largely funded the state party apparatus were ousted.
They were replaced by a group that wants to move the party farther to the right, including a tighter

embrace of Trump. They say they are more willing to criticize and embrace primary challenges to GOP officeholders in order to hold them to party orthodoxy. After the general election, they supported a push by a losing legislative candidate in Lincoln who unsuccessfully sued to try to force a hand recount of ballots.

New state GOP Chairman Eric Underwood and his team have seen donations decline, but they say they are doing a better job of engaging rank-and-file Republicans.

The first election results under their watch were mixed. Many of the highest-profile GOP winners worked with Ricketts' team, including Pillen and Flood. U.S. Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., who faced fire from Trump and some in the state GOP, won re-election against Democratic State Sen. Tony Vargas by 3 percentage points.

Late this year, the Nebraska Democratic Party faced some infighting of its own about the lack of candidates recruited to run statewide, how the party is managed, how the party helps or hinders candidates and who should lead it.

Former Nebraska Gov. and U.S. Sen. Bob Kerrey criticized his fellow Democrats for recruiting and supporting too few centrists who he argued can win elections in a conservative state. The fight continued after state party Chair Jane Kleeb described his public comments as hurtful to the party's work. He responded by asking to have his name removed from the state party's annual fundraising dinner. The party agreed.

Sasse resigns his Senate seat

Then there is Nebraska's opening seat in the U.S. Senate, which is being vacated because Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., has been hired as president of the University of Florida.

Sasse shocked national pundits more than Nebraskans when he decided not to finish his term. Sasse had told local reporters he didn't want to retire as a senator.

But Sasse, the former president of Midland University in Fremont, Neb., has said he could not turn down the opportunity to lead one of the nation's largest and most prestigious public universities.

Sasse focused much of his Senate tenure on the "future of work" and what that might look like during the coming disruption expected by artificial intelligence.

Sasse has frequently been critical of Trump, and some Nebraska Republicans have speculated whether he decided to leave before being beaten in his next GOP primary. But Sasse, who regularly voted with his party, outperformed Trump statewide in Nebraska in 2020.

Others are irritated that Sasse will be working for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, the only GOP candidate outpolling Trump.

Sasse's resignation is effective Jan. 8. Gov.-elect Pillen, who takes office Jan. 5, will choose the replacement. Most political observers expect Pillen to pick his top political patron, Gov. Pete Ricketts.

Ricketts acknowledged in December that he is among those who have applied for the job. He lost a Senate bid in 2006 to U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson, the last Nebraska Democrat to hold the job.

Whoever Pillen picks will face election in 2024. In a rare quirk, because of when Sasse resigned, both of Nebraska's Senate seats will be up for election in the same year. Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., has said she plans to run for re-election.

That will also be a presidential election year, in a national political environment that could give 2022 a run.

By Aaron Sanderford

LJS: Pillen names interim director for Nebraska Department of Transportation

Jim Pillen, who will take over as Nebraska's next governor Thursday, has named an interim director of the Nebraska Department of Transportation.
Pillen said Monday that longtime department employee Moe Jamshidi will become interim director Thursday. Jamshidi is deputy director of operations at NDOT.
Jamshidi will take over from John Selmer, who is retiring. His last official day is Wednesday.
Selmer has been department director since March 2021. Before his appointment, he was director of the strategic performance division of the Iowa Department of Transportation, where he worked for 31 years.
Jamshidi has worked for the department for nearly 40 years and previously served as interim director in 2015.
By Matt Olberding

LJS: Don Walton: Secret ballot leadership vote impacts opening legislative day

Messages have been directed at state senators from two legislative veterans, both former Speakers of the Legislature and both Republicans, as lawmakers prepare to decide this week whether to end secret or closed balloting to select leaders in the 2023 Legislature.
Don't do it, they say.
The proposed change to open balloting that reveals how each senator votes on the leadership positions challenges the nonpartisan nature of the Legislature by applying some pressure to align senators with party affiliation.
"Nonpartisanship makes the senators more equal and independent," former Sen. Galen Hadley advises.
"Political parties get in the way of truly representing the will of the people," former Sen. Greg Adams says.
The current proposal to end secret ballot selection was initiated by Charles Herbster of Falls City, who was closely associated with former President Donald Trump during his administration and who was an unsuccessful candidate for the 2022 Republican gubernatorial nomination.
The decision by state senators will come Wednesday shortly after the Legislature launches its 2023 session and it could have an impact on the rest of the legislative session.
* * *
Where was I?
Was I not listening, not paying attention?
Jon Meacham's compelling and richly researched new Abraham Lincoln biography, buttressed by an amazing 155 pages of source notes, is a dramatic awakening for me.
"And There Was Light" is the title of the book and a perfect description of what it has done for me as a reader.
Somehow, I always thought that Abraham Lincoln's commitment to end slavery was far more gradual and came later than it did, maybe not even until after he was elected president.
But Lincoln became determined to block and end slavery while also trying to save the union from the beginning. And he was in clear danger of assassination even before he took the oath of office.
"Mr. Lincoln entered the Capitol as the poor, hunted fugitive slave reaches the North, in disguise, seeking concealment, evading pursuers," Frederick Douglass wrote in describing the new president's initial arrival in Washington as president-elect.

Thanks, Jon Meacham, for teaching me more about this man whose name honors our city.
I'm paying attention now.
* * *
It's a new year.
New governor, new U.S. senator, new Husker football coach, trifecta.
A new coach who seems to be focused on recruiting linemen to play in a linemen's league!
We've seen some skilled passing (along with courageous and battered Husker quarterbacks), but we haven't seen much emphasis on RTDB.
Run the damn ball.
The Huskers were successful when they did both well, often eating up the clock by keeping the ball on the ground.
"I will never not take a talented offensive or defensive lineman," Matt Rhule says. "That's what wins games."
"Rhule the Trenches," shouts the lettering on new T-shirts, hoodies and sweatshirts being marketed online.
Let's be patient now and see what 2023 holds.
A glance at the schedule suggests that this potentially could be a bowl year.
Remember when the Huskers used to do that bowl thing?
* * *
Finishing up:
* Sen. Ben Sasse will deliver his farewell remarks to the Senate on Tuesday; Sasse will officially leave office Jan. 8 to become president of the University of Florida, departing with four years remaining in his second term.
* Hey, members of Congress, 2023 is not an election year and you're elected to represent the people, not your party, and you're there to solve problems, not keep them unresolved for political advantage. It's way past time for immigration reform — and that happens to be very important for Nebraska now.
* A growing debate in Omaha: Development of a new streetcar system or increased bus service? Warren Buffett weighs in late in support of buses, but has the streetcar already left the station?
* And, by the way, when does that first high-speed train leave Lincoln for Omaha?
By Don Walton

Nebraska Examiner: Former legislative speakers, 11 other senators urge lawmakers to retain secret ballots

LINCOLN — Two former speakers of the Nebraska Legislature, along with 11 other former senators, are turning a thumbs down to a proposal to do away with secret ballots in electing legislative leaders.
Former Speakers Galen Hadley of Kearney and Greg Adams of York said that doing away with secret ballots would inject more partisanship into the nonpartisan, one-house Unicameral and, in the end, would place political party above good policy.
“Political parties get in the way of truly representing the will of the people. All senators, regardless of party, can represent their constituents equally,” Adams said.
Hadley said nonpartisanship makes the senators “more equal and independent.”
“Instead of party leaders having the only meaningful voices in the body, all senators contribute their

own strengths and experience to policymaking," Hadley said.
Falls City businessman Charles Herbster, who ran unsuccessfully for the GOP nomination for governor in May, has launched an effort through his political action committee, Nebraska First PAC, to push a more conservative agenda.

PAC sought pledges

Among Herbster's efforts is one to get pledges from senators and candidates to end secret balloting to elect chairs of legislative committees, which will be among the first orders of business when the Unicameral convenes its 2023 session on Wednesday.
Some predict a fierce fight over the rules to begin the session — as happened in 2017 — inspiring fears that hard feelings will persist over the 90-day session. In 2017, a slate of mostly Republican senators — including an unprecedented three freshmen legislators — were elected to lead legislative committees. Such leadership positions, which guide policymaking, are typically reserved for veteran lawmakers.
Rod Edwards, who represents the Nebraska First PAC, said Saturday that at least 28 senators in the 49-seat Legislature have pledged to end secret ballots.

In Legislature's hands

"It's in the hands of the Legislature now," said Edwards, who maintains that the State Constitution requires all legislative votes to be public.
Bayard Sen. Steve Erdman, who supports doing away with secret ballots, said people should be able to discover each vote he makes.
"Why make it secret?" he asked.
But Hadley and Adams say doing away with secret ballots for the leadership positions threatens the nonpartisan tradition of the nation's only one-house legislature.
State senators are elected on a nonpartisan basis and, unlike other state legislatures elected on a partisan basis, there are no party caucuses and party "whips" to enforce party-line voting. However, political parties do get involved in Nebraska legislative elections, and a few issues, such as redistricting, become highly partisan.

The most qualified

Adams, who served as speaker from 2013-15, said private ballots have long been used for selecting internal leadership positions within school boards, county commissions, private organizations and political caucuses in Congress.
The Republican Party has held a majority in the Unicameral since the 1990s, yet has maintained secret ballots for committee chairs because lawmakers have recognized the benefits of having committee leaders from all political affiliations, according to Adams.
Adams said using confidential ballots allows senators to vote for leaders they believe are "most qualified to serve" rather than "who is most politically powerful."
"Otherwise," he said, "senators might be pressured to vote for a senator simply because they belong to the same political party."
Hadley, who served as speaker from 2015-17, urged "newly elected senators to resist outside pressures to change these rules before they even experience serving in the Legislature."
Edwards said that the end of secret votes won't mean that only Republicans will chair committees.
And Erdman said he rejects the idea that making the votes public might hurt some senators feelings.
"If you're not big boy or girl enough to deal with that, go home," Erdman said.
Other former state senators who signed onto a press release issued by Hadley and Adams were: Mike Gloor of Grand Island, Matt Williams of Gothenburg, Mark Kolterman of Seward, John Stinner

of Gering, Robert Hilkeman of Omaha, Annette Dubas of Fullerton, Kate Sullivan of Cedar Rapids, Kathy Campbell of Lincoln, John McCollister of Omaha, Paul Schumacher of Columbus and Vickie McDonald of Boelus.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Lincoln senators share goals, priorities heading into legislative session

Medical marijuana, criminal justice reforms and education funding are just a few of the priorities for several Lincoln state senators in the upcoming legislative session.
The Legislature will open its 90-day session Wednesday, crafting new legislation and debating new laws through into early June.
Sen. Suzanne Geist, who represents southeastern Lincoln, said she'll focus on issues affecting law enforcement and the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services as she moves into her final two years in the Legislature.
Geist, a member of the Judiciary and Transportation and Telecommunications committees, said she plans to introduce a bill that would raise the penalty for individuals dealing drugs they know to be counterfeit that cause death from a Class 3 to a Class 2b, and also plans to sponsor legislation clarifying Nebraska's statutes concerning fentanyl.
She will also introduce a bill to once again allow law enforcement to use GPS to locate an individual or juvenile who has been ordered to wear an ankle monitor by a court without first obtaining a warrant, which she said would "enhance public safety."
Last year, a similar bill (LB1010) from Geist stalled on the floor of the Legislature amid questions about its constitutionality, but an opinion from the Nebraska Attorney General's Office found it would not be unconstitutional.
Similarly, Geist said she also plans to sponsor legislation that seeks to enact some of the criminal justice reforms sought in a sweeping package that aimed to reduce the number of people incarcerated in Nebraska that was defeated by a filibuster in the waning days of the 2022 session.
Nebraska's prison system is among the most overcrowded in the country, and has seen faster growth than any other state in the country, with studies projecting an additional 1,300 inmates could be added to the current 5,500-inmate population by 2030.
Geist, who was part of a panel that engaged with the nonprofit Crime and Justice Institute that developed a suite of recommendations, later led opposition to that bill (LB920).
Her opposition centered on concerns about softening sentencing for minor drug crimes, when judges could order inmates to serve consecutive sentences and capping minimum sentences to provide inmates more time on parole.
Geist said she planned to reintroduce portions of the failed reform attempt focused on community-based support for inmates leaving prison, and said she would work with Omaha Sens. Justin Wayne and Terrell McKinney on other reforms where they can find agreement.
"It's not a rebirth of LB920, but some of the things I felt were important like additional probation officers and transitional housing for people coming out of corrections," said Geist, who is challenging Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird in the city's spring election.
Sen. Anna Wishart, who represents southwestern Lincoln, said she'll try once again to legalize medical marijuana in Nebraska after falling a few votes short in the 2021 session and leading a petition drive that failed to get the number of signatures needed to be put on the November 2022 ballot.

"We're working and hoping that we have a chance to get something through that helps those who are most in need to be able to get that plant-based medicine," Wishart said.
A member of the Appropriations Committee, Wishart said she is also planning to introduce a legislative package providing for public-private partnerships that focus on economic development opportunities in Lincoln.
Specifically, the bills will focus on affordable housing, public safety, and infrastructure investments, she said.
Wishart is also planning legislation to expand access to mental health services through certified community behavior health clinics, and ensure new mothers on low incomes can access health care benefits.
"It's vital for new mothers to have access to the best health care possible, not only for themselves and the conditions that occur like heart attack and stroke, but also for the child," she said.
Senator-elect George Dungan, who will assume the District 26 seat representing northeast Lincoln, taking over for the term-limited Sen. Matt Hansen, said he'll focus his efforts on protecting schools and supporting teachers.
One of four new senators representing the Capital City, Dungan said he will also bring legislation that helps young Nebraskans access resources when they are in state custody or the justice system.
Dungan said he was "very curious to see" the recommendations that emerge from the School Finance Reform Committee, which was announced by Governor-elect Jim Pillen to study and potentially reform the Tax Equity and Educational Opportunities Support Act.
TEEOSA, as it is better known, considers a district's needs against its resources. Districts with needs beyond the resources that can be generated through property taxes receive additional funding known as equalization aid.
The formula, which has been in place for three decades, has drawn fire from rural senators because most districts do not receive equalization aid because their needs fall within their resources — which has led to several proposals to change the formula in recent years.
Dungan said he was leery of any proposals that would limit funding to schools, pointing to deep tax cuts in other states that threatened the public school system: "We saw what happened to schools in Kansas during the (Gov. Sam) Brownback experience."
Instead, Dungan said Nebraska should do what it can to support teachers by ensuring they have good pay and support from administrators.
He said he'll also look at introducing legislation that focuses on providing youth without families or family supports resources, as well as youth on probation, a "bridge to independence."
"We want to make sure good kids in bad situations that have earned help from the state have an opportunity to get the benefits they need to age into adulthood properly," he said.
In her return to the Legislature, Senator-elect Danielle Conrad of District 46 representing north Lincoln, said she'll focus on "kitchen table issues" — echoing her mantra on her campaign to replace outgoing Sen. Adam Morfeld — as well as the institutional health of the nation's only unicameral legislative body.
"Most stakeholders agree workforce is our No. 1 challenge," she said. "When you start to think about how you address that challenge, the solutions are infrastructure, education, child care, health care, job training.
A rosy revenue picture, with tax receipts running higher than projections most of last year, gives Nebraska the opportunity to make what Conrad called "critical investments" in addressing those challenges, which would allow Nebraskans to "fully participate at their best and highest abilities in

our economy."
Conrad, who previously served on the Appropriations Committee and said she intends to seek a spot on the budget-writing committee once again, said the Legislature should also look at where it can deliver tax relief to working Nebraskans through expanding an earned income tax credit and a child tax credit.
Crafting those policies should be the focus of lawmakers instead of "divisive social issues" that could derail the Legislature from the opportunities ahead of it, she added.
"I think we have a chance to do something really special together and perhaps shock the political world," Conrad said. "If we are tempted to spend our time and energy attacking individual civil rights and civil liberties, I think it will be destructive to the tone and tenor of the session and limit our ability to find common ground on other issues."
Conrad said she would also work to ensure the Legislature retains its nonpartisan status.
"It might sound a little inside baseball and removed from Nebraskans, but I think it's very integral to maintain the nonpartisan nature of the unicameral," she said. "One, it's the law, and two, it works. It helps mitigate against the partisan dysfunction that has crippled Congress and our sister states."
Along with securing a second water source for Lincoln, Sen. Eliot Bostar said he also plans to focus on a package of legislation designed to improve access to child care and early childhood education.
"In a lot of places, you can't find it," Bostar said, "and if you can find it, you can't afford it."
Expanding the availability of both is a "significant workforce issue" that will be key to growing the state's economy, he said. Bostar has previously served on the Revenue and Banking, Commerce and Industry committees.
Four of the eight senators who represent Lincoln or Lancaster County will be new this year: Senator-elect Beau Ballard, who was appointed to fill the District 21 seat vacated by Attorney General-elect Mike Hilgers; Conrad; Dungan; and Jane Raybould of District 28 representing central Lincoln.
Ballard and Raybould did not respond to requests for an interview.
Sen. Rob Clements of Elmwood won a second term to District 2, which now stretches into eastern Lincoln, while Sen. Myron Dorn of Adams won a second term representing District 30, which includes Gage County and a portion of southern Lancaster County.
By Chris Dunker

OWH: Healthy state revenues have lawmakers eyeing tax cuts, infrastructure in new session

LINCOLN — Flush state coffers have Nebraska policymakers dreaming big about politically popular tax cuts and infrastructure projects during the new legislative session.
Fiscal estimates show projected state revenues topping estimated expenses by $1.9 billion for the two budget years ending June 30, 2025. That's even after accounting for spending increases and the required 3% budget cushion.
In addition, Nebraska's cash reserve fund is expected to reach $2.3 billion, equal to a whopping 35.7% of state tax revenues for the biennium.
"We have an unprecedented amount of money available and that leads to an unprecedented opportunity," said State Sen. Tom Briese of Albion.
But figuring out what to do with that opportunity could split lawmakers and potentially put them at odds with Gov.-elect Jim Pillen.
Battles loom over whether to focus on property tax relief or income tax cuts, revamp school aid to

help property taxpayers, put money into projects like roads and broadband, shore up safety net programs or keep a healthy reserve to help with future economic woes.
Even a newly elected state senator, Brian Hardin of Gering, said he knows the choices will be difficult.
“I’ve been warned about having so much money,” he said.
Some level of tax cuts is practically assured, given their political popularity and the amount of money available. Pillen has made tax cuts his top priority.
Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, who chairs the Revenue Committee, said she expects to pursue equal amounts of property and income tax relief, as lawmakers did in the 2022 session to keep advocates of each on board with the tax package.
One proposal likely to win support would be speeding up the property and income tax changes passed during the 2022 session.
Several changes are slated to be phased in over four or five years, including the elimination of taxes on Social Security benefits, the creation of a new income tax credit for community college property taxes paid and the reduction of the top rate for individual and corporate income taxes.
Linehan said the phase-ins should be eliminated and taxpayers should get the maximum savings now. She said lawmakers have already agreed to the policy and fiscal estimates already account for the loss of revenue, so that should not be controversial.
She also argues for more aggressive income tax cuts. She said Nebraska should cut the top income tax rate to 4%, down from the 5.84% level targeted by the 2022 changes.
Getting to 4% would make Nebraska’s income taxes competitive with Iowa, which passed a 3.9% flat income tax this year, Linehan said. The move would effectively eliminate Nebraska’s top individual income tax bracket and shrink the rate difference between the new top bracket and the one below it.
But cuts that only target the top income tax brackets would bring out opposition. Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha fought the 2022 tax cuts because they did not benefit Nebraskans in the middle and lower tax brackets. She hopes for a different outcome this time.
“I hope this Legislature will see that now it’s time to cut taxes on the actual working poor,” she said. “We can afford to do it now.”
On the property tax side, Briese said lawmakers could expand existing credit programs or revamp state aid to schools to drive down property tax bills.
“Those really provide a stark choice,” he said. “Do we want to send money back to taxpayers directly or do we give to schools and hope it gets to the taxpayer?”
Nebraska has two types of property tax credit programs now. One offsets part of a property owner’s tax bill. The other provides income tax credits equal to a portion of the school property tax paid and, more recently, a portion of community college property taxes.
Neither type of program reduces the actual property tax bill, although they help ease the strain on taxpayers’ wallets. School aid changes could bring down property taxes initially and potentially moderate their growth in the future.
Briese and Linehan said state aid changes need to be accompanied by a cap on school spending growth, as a way to ensure that increased aid translates into lower property taxes. But school officials have fought spending cap proposals repeatedly, arguing that they would be too restrictive.
“That’s where everybody gets off the bus,” Linehan said.
Finding support to revamp the school aid formula has not been any easier. Unless lawmakers increase the total pool of aid, changes in distribution create winners and losers among school

districts. But even proposals that included more aid have met with skepticism.
Sen. Lynne Walz of Fremont, the current Education Committee chair, said the issue largely came down to a lack of trust between state and school officials. School officials have a hard time trusting that the state will continue to support them in an economic downturn, while some state officials don't trust that schools won't overspend if they get more funding.
She suggested creating an education trust fund as a sustainable financial resource that the state can build on each year.
But Walz doesn't see a need to completely revamp the current aid system, because she said it provides funding for every public school system and is equitable for high-need districts.
All public schools get a portion of the income taxes paid by district residents. They also get reimbursements for special education students. About a quarter of school districts get equalization aid to fill the gap between educational needs and district resources, which largely means property taxes.
Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil, who is running against Walz to chair the Education Committee in the upcoming session, said he doesn't believe it is possible to lower property taxes without increasing state funding for schools.
But he believes an increase should come with "major modifications" in the school funding formula. He called the formula "broken," mainly because it is too reliant on property taxes, only provides equalization aid to a minority of school districts and doesn't properly measure poverty levels.
Murman isn't entirely convinced that Nebraska should adopt Pillen's plan to distribute state aid on a per-pupil basis, although he said that would be better than the state's current formula.
Neither Linehan nor Briese are sold on another Pillen idea: to change how property valuation is done in Nebraska. Briese said he is not convinced such a change would produce long-term property tax relief.
The soon-to-be governor and key lawmakers agree, however, that not all of the state's built-up revenue should be used for tax cuts. They also want to see some go for major projects — speeding up road construction or delivering broadband service to all Nebraskans.
Linehan said the state should put money into completing projects started this year. Among those is the Perkins County canal, which would allow Nebraska to protect its share of water from the South Platte River under a century-old compact. Another is a proposal to create a lake between Omaha and Lincoln.
"Before we start new things, let's get these done," she said.
Briese wants to see more money go toward building affordable housing across Nebraska and addressing other issues that would help Nebraska businesses attract and keep more workers.
"I'm a fiscal conservative, and I believe we need to be cautious and conservative with spending growth," he said, "but at the same time we have to deliver services that Nebraskans need and deserve."
Cavanaugh argued that those services should include child care benefits, food assistance, mental health and housing assistance. She said Nebraska families are struggling to get by, with wages falling behind inflation, and the state should use some of its revenue to ensure programs that support working families are adequately funded.
"The people's money should be used for serving people or going back to the people," she said.
By Martha Stoddard and Erin Bamer

OWH: Multiple delays stall progress on Nebraska's $335 million economic recovery effort

LINCOLN — Multiple delays have slowed the progress on a high-budget effort to aid underserved areas of Nebraska, reducing the time lawmakers have to complete an accompanying bill.

The $335 million project, approved during the 2022 legislative session, still has the majority of its funding — about $250 million — left unallocated. It's up to lawmakers to pass a bill in the upcoming session to allocate the remaining money.

However, Olsson, the engineering firm hired to develop a list of recommended projects to include in the bill, has yet to release its recommendations nearly a month after its initial deadline. The firm originally was scheduled to share its recommendations in early December, then the release was pushed to late December, and now it isn't expected until early January.

State Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha, the leading lawmaker for the project, said he hopes the list will be finalized by Jan. 9, but it could come later. He said multiple minor problems, primarily a slew of illnesses, contributed to the delays.

The delays give lawmakers limited time to introduce the bill, as senators have only the first 10 days of each session to introduce all their bills. For this legislative session, the deadline is Jan. 18, which means that if the recommendations come when expected, lawmakers will have just over a week to complete and introduce the accompanying legislation.

Despite this, Wayne said he is not concerned about having a bill ready in time. He said work on the legislation already has begun, and there are ways to change the bill after it has been introduced.

"I can amend it at any time," Wayne said.

Wayne said his team already has submitted the general ideas for the bill to the state's bill-drafting department, though it has yet to get the first draft back. In the event that Olsson doesn't release its recommendations before Jan. 18 — which Wayne said would be the worst-case scenario — Wayne said he would introduce what he called a "shell bill," which is legislation that explains the general ideas of a proposal but leaves certain areas blank to fill in with specifics later.

Regardless of what bill is introduced, Wayne said he expects amendments will be added. He said the bill will be a "complicated process" of hashing out specific regulations depending on which projects are recommended.

"I just don't want to set anybody up to fail," he said.

If Olsson finalizes the recommendations before Jan. 18, Wayne said, he expects to introduce a more detailed bill shortly after the list is released. The bill will follow Olsson's recommendations, he said.

Wayne and other lawmakers were involved in Olsson's development of the recommendations, but even if there is disagreement over what projects are recommended, Wayne said he already is planning to introduce a different bill in a future session to allocate additional funds for remaining proposals.

For context, Olsson received more than 365 proposals to review, which Wayne previously estimated would cost more than $3 billion combined. If applicants don't see their projects included in the upcoming bill, Wayne urged them to "hold tight," as he anticipates future funding will become available.

The bulk of existing funding comes via the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. The money must be spent by 2026. Some projects that already have received funding include about $60 million for an industrial park near Eppley Airfield and about $20 million for affordable housing in Omaha.

By Erin Bamer

OWH: Dangerous winter storm brings ice, snow to Nebraska, Iowa

The powerful storm that brought snow, ice and rain to Nebraska on Monday is expected to move out by Tuesday night, leaving behind heavy snow and icy conditions in some areas of the state
The National Weather Service forecast 10 to 18 inches of snow across northern Nebraska and up to half an inch of ice in parts of central and eastern Nebraska.
The agency has warned that travel in the most heavily impacted areas could be difficult to impossible.
For the most part, as of Monday evening, it appeared people had hunkered down, with no significant reports of crashes or traffic tie-ups.
In terms of power outages, Nebraska Public Power District reported about 2,300 customers without power in Ogallala on Monday evening, and crews were on-site making repairs.
The Nebraska Department of Transportation reported that roads across the western half of the state were partially to fully covered.
Omaha was expected to dodge the worst of the storm, given that temperatures were forecast to remain in the mid- to upper 30s overnight.
On Tuesday, temperatures are expected to drop in the late afternoon, according to the weather service, generating the potential for slick spots during the evening commute.
Katie Gross, meteorologist with the weather service, said Omaha can expect a cold, but not bitterly cold, week.
Temperatures the rest of the week are forecast in the 20s to low 30s, she said.
There's a slight chance for snow on Wednesday, but the rest of the week is forecast to be dry, she said.
By Nancy Gaarder

OWH: Nebraska's COVID cases, hospitalizations drop

Cases of COVID-19 and hospitalizations for the coronavirus dipped last week in Nebraska after case numbers ticked up the week before.
The state recorded 1,738 cases during the week ending Dec. 28, according to data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
That was down significantly from the 3,982 cases reported the preceding week. Last week's tally was the first time that cases had been in the 1,700 range since early November.
Cases generally have been trending upward since late October, although weekly counts have been up and down in recent weeks.
Case counts, however, are widely considered to be underreported, with many people either not testing or using at-home tests that aren't reported to health departments. Holiday disruptions in testing and data reporting also may be impacting case trends.
Nationally, cases also were trending down slightly. Nebraska stood roughly at the top of the lower third of states in terms of case rates. Cases, however, were trending up in parts of the Northeast, and several Southern states also have seen increases. The proportion of tests nationwide that are positive, or the positivity rate, also has ticked up.
A new variant, XBB.1.5, now is becoming dominant in the U.S., according to CDC. But that variant remains a minor player in the four-state region of Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri and has not yet appeared in Nebraska variant surveillance reports.
Nationally, the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 remained relatively flat last week,

increasing 1% from the week before.
In Nebraska, the daily average of people hospitalized with the virus dropped to 217 last week, down 17.5% from 262 the week before.
The two other respiratory viruses circulating in the state, influenza and RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus, also were trending downward, though both remain elevated. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' respiratory illness dashboard indicated that both positive tests for flu and visits to emergency rooms for flu-like illness were dropping.
Locally, the Douglas County Health Department reported a significant drop in confirmed flu cases last week. However, the 6,307 cases confirmed for the season so far ranked the second highest in the past decade with roughly four months remaining.
Statewide, more than 555,000 cases of COVID have been reported since the pandemic began three years ago. One additional COVID-related death was reported in the state last week, bringing the pandemic total to 4,685.
By Julie Anderson

Nebraska Examiner: Google seeks to stretch farther in northwest Omaha

OMAHA — Google wants to expand its Nebraska footprint with an additional 187 acres that abuts its roughly 270-acre data center site already under construction in northwest Omaha.
In all, the developer representing Google would control about 460 acres of once rolling agricultural hillside northwest of State Street and Blair High Road.
City documents show that Westwood Solutions LLC, representing the California-based global tech giant, has asked the city to rezone the additional land to allow for more light industrial use.
Around-the-clock activity
Operations are to be located within multiple buildings totaling more than 2.2 million gross square feet in floor area, with various equipment yards and parking areas throughout. A security entrance and Omaha Public Power District switchyard are to be on site.
The data center would operate around the clock. Though the plan submitted to the city says skilled, technical full-time jobs would be created, it does not detail how many.
A Google spokesman for the Omaha area was unavailable for comment.
Records outlining the growth plan also revealed that Google's developer has agreed to donate $100,000 to make up for the destruction of a coveted virgin prairie plot from the development site.
The Nebraska Examiner reported in September that a 5-acre, never-plowed prairie along State Street had been bulldozed away for the initial phase, despite City of Omaha guidelines to protect natural features.
Piece of natural history lost
City planners said the prairie ecosystem was not flagged prior to grading. The rezoning request to be presented to the Planning Board this week states that the developer agreed to mitigate the loss by the financial donation, which is to maintain 43 acres of reconstructed prairie at Glacier Creek Preserve north of 144th and State Streets.
Glenn Pollock, who for decades has managed area prairies, is still miffed about the loss of a piece of the area's natural history and heritage. He said the city should have a better system of identifying such features and believes they could be preserved as assets on a real estate development site.
Of the mitigation agreed upon by the city and Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District, Pollock said: "It's the best we can get."

The latest Google growth would take the data center site northward up to Rainwood Road and westward to 120th Street, said Eric Englund, assistant city planning director.
City planners recommend the developer install sidewalks along all street frontages — along with a 10-foot-wide concrete trail on the west side of Thomas Creek, which runs north to south across the eastern part of the property, parallel to Blair High Road.

Construction underway

A visit to the project site this week shows construction in progress at the southeast portion of the broader nearly 460 acres.
Google has been rather quiet in the past about data center plans in Nebraska, but representatives offered some basic details about its growth trajectory last April during an event at its expanding Papillion campus.
It was at that time that officials announced the new Google data center to be developed at State Street and Blair High Road (Nebraska Highway 133). Then, the project site was still the smaller, roughly 260 acres and was said to span 1.4 million gross square feet.
Google then also outlined expansion of its Papillion data center campus and said the company's investment in Nebraska in 2022 was to reach $750 million.
When adding the Council Bluffs data center to the Papillion and northwest Omaha projects, the Google representatives said then that the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area would have the largest Google operational presence in the country.
By Cindy Gonzalez

OWH Editorial: Nebraska's volunteer firefighters deserve state's gratitude and support

"It felt like the whole state was on fire."
That's how Erv Portis, assistant director of the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, described Nebraska's wildfires last year in a story published in today's World-Herald.
Written by reporter Nancy Gaarder, the front-page article describes the Nebraskans who risked their lives — and those who lost them — in responding to those fires.
To honor and thank those brave volunteer firefighters, our newspaper is recognizing them as Midlanders of the Year. Since 1965, it's been an annual tradition for The World-Herald to highlight individuals and groups for their contributions to the region.
The wildfires that struck Nebraska in 2022 left no corner of the state untouched. As Gaarder wrote: "Fueled by deepening drought and fanned by winds of 50 mph to 70 mph, fires threatened towns, burned homes and left in their wake unbearable heartache."
More than 200,000 acres burned, according to the Nebraska Forest Service. That makes 2022 the state's second-largest fire year on record.
Three volunteer firefighters died: Elwood Chief Darren Krull, who was in an SUV that collided with a water truck; retired Cambridge Chief JP Trumble who was overtaken by flames after his truck became stuck; and Purdum Assistant Chief Mike Moody, who collapsed while refilling a water tank.
Several others were critically injured, either in crashes, being hit by a firetruck or by being caught in the flames. Many more suffered smoke inhalation, with some now expecting lifelong respiratory problems.
Nebraska's volunteer firefighters are essential to fighting fires that have become larger and more intense in recent years. Some 449 of the state's 478 fire departments are staffed by unpaid volunteers. Many are farmers, but others are from a diverse range of occupations such as teachers,

utility workers and salespeople.
What they share is a desire to help protect the lives of their families and neighbors, as well as their homes, farms and businesses. Without the volunteers' efforts, it would be impossible to provide fire protection across such a vast, thinly populated state.
Moody's wife, Cheryl, said this about her late husband:
"He fought fires not because he liked it. He didn't do it for the adrenaline rush. He was just one of those guys who was there to help somebody else."
Firefighters weren't the only Nebraskan who gave their time amid last year's fires. Farmers helped create firebreaks or hauled water. Others provided food and other help. And of course, volunteer fire departments have long relied on pancake feeds and similar community efforts to supplement their property tax revenue.
Going forward, these departments will need more volunteers, more donations and perhaps additional legislative support to ensure they have the necessary staffing and equipment to protect Nebraska's rural communities.
In the end, though, the success of those efforts comes down to the willingness of individual Nebraskans to put their lives on the line, battling furious blazes that one firefighter described as "like being next to the sun."
Today's article relates how volunteer firefighter Kyle Trumble — just a day after a southwest Nebraska wildfire in April had killed his father — returned to the fire lines to protect his hometown of Cambridge, Nebraska.
"When I went back out to fight the fire, I left two young boys and a wife," Kyle told Gaarder. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, you come home. But you just never know what will happen."
Thankfully, Kyle did return home safely. But his selfless dedication to serving his community exemplifies the commitment of so many volunteer firefighters across the state.
They deserve Nebraskans' gratitude, appreciation and support.

OWH Midlands Voices: Remembering Sen. George W. Norris

January 5 is "George W. Norris Day" in Nebraska. Established in 1981 to coincide with the start of the legislative session, the day is meant to remind Nebraskans of the life and legacy of one of our nation's greatest statesmen: Sen. George W. Norris of Nebraska.
It would be difficult to overstate the impact Norris has had on the United States and his home state of Nebraska. The first inductee into the Nebraska Hall of Fame and often considered history's "greatest United States senator," Norris served Nebraska for five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1903 to 1913, and five terms in the U.S. Senate from 1913 to 1943.
Norris first came to national attention in 1910 when he introduced a resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives to reform the rules by stripping Speaker Joe Cannon of his appointment power and removing him from the Rules Committee. These reforms, which mirror the nonpartisan philosophy at the heart of Nebraska's unicameral experiment, were meant to decentralize power and disrupt the partisan monopoly in Congress.
Among his many legislative accomplishments, Norris is known for sponsoring the 20th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which shortened the "lame duck" gap from 13 months to one month between the election of a new member of Congress and that member taking office; the 1932 Norris-La Guardia Act, which strengthened organized labor's collective bargaining hand; the Rural Electrification Act, which brought electricity to farms across America; and, as his greatest legislative

accomplishment, the Tennessee Valley Authority which introduced the first use of self-sustaining water-power in the United States.

Norris was fiercely loyal to the people of Nebraska. He believed elected officials should represent the interests of their constituents well before that of political parties and even served his final term in the U.S. Senate as an Independent (having been a Republican his entire career) before he lost his bid for reelection in 1942.

Norris' nonpartisan vision culminated in his promotion and Nebraskans' ultimate adoption of a one-house legislature in 1934. Approved 2-to-1 by Nebraska voters, the initiative amendment gave Nebraska not only the sole unicameral state legislature in the U.S., but also the only nonpartisan one.

Unfortunately, in recent years some have argued against key aspects of Norris' nonpartisan design — chiefly the use of secret ballots by lawmakers when electing officers and committee chairs on the first day of the legislative session. These written ballots, used since the Unicameral's maiden session in 1937, play a crucial role in preventing undue influence from political parties or monied interests and help ensure lawmakers are free to select the most qualified and experienced candidates for leadership posts.

In today's political climate dominated by division and partisanship, it is refreshing to appreciate the many contributions of Norris, especially his extraordinary example of statesmanship and public service. When Nebraska lawmakers convene again this January for the start of a new legislative session, we encourage them to reflect on the life and legacy of Norris and to think twice before abandoning his nonpartisan reforms.

Nathan Leach of Kearney wrote this on behalf of the Norris Institute, a 501©(3) corporation, which was founded in 2006 in McCook, Nebraska. The institute was started to promote and improve the social, cultural and economic strengths of rural communities located on the Great Plains.

OWH Midlands Voices: Agriculture and renewables are friends for the future

If there is one constant in agriculture, it's that farmland functions as an investment in family, in our culture, our economy, and in our American way of life. Our farmers and ranchers today have an attractive option that works alongside their agricultural operations to provide income and to aid in the conservation of land: renewable energy projects.

Maintaining the land itself through uses such as renewable energy ensures conservation of the farmland for future generations. Renewable energy projects harvest a crop just like other farming methods. Therefore, it should be clear that landowners have the right to allow renewable energy projects on their farmland.

Most importantly, these projects allow the land to rest and regenerate, similar to a longer crop rotation or any other conservation effort. Solar and wind operations function as a conservation strategy and another source of income to stabilize farming and ranching operations.

Growing up as the son of a dairy farmer, I witnessed firsthand the everyday struggles of farmers. Many of us that live or have lived a farm or ranch life are familiar with hard work. It is the farming lifestyle that instilled a work ethic in me, not just on the farm, but later in my public career where I supported farmers and ranchers across America.

Through my decades working with farmers and ranchers, I learned firsthand that harvesting wind and solar energy works in tandem with current agricultural methods. These renewable projects are another tool and another crop to provide farmers and ranchers with reliable income while allowing

the land to rest and regenerate, aiding in conservation and increasing productivity for future uses. Since the 1980s, the Department of Agriculture working hand-in-hand with our farmers and ranchers, has developed conservation programs to rest and revitalize the land. Today's solar and wind energy projects do just that — rest soil, conserve land and water, and create a better environment — all while continuing to harvest already existing resources like the wind and the sun.
Farmers and ranchers have always used new technology to improve their operations. From tractors to seed, very few of the tools in farming mirror their predecessors from 15 years ago, much less the farms of our parents and grandparents.
While serving as the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, I constantly promoted the use of science and technology to improve farming and ranching practices. Better cropping practices, better genetics, and new opportunities for farmers and ranchers were central to my agenda. I championed leveling the playing field for farmers and ranchers in foreign markets to increase income opportunities.
I have seen firsthand that new technology developed in America increased demand for our products worldwide. New markets, new practices, new methods have been a part of the natural evolution of American agriculture for generations.
Conversations about solar and wind farms are becoming more common across rural America, and what was once an exotic and expensive idea is now a cost-effective reality that you see driving down a county road. Among the great beauties of agriculture is that while the technology around it advances every day, the men and women who farm and ranch are just as committed to feeding, clothing, and providing energy to the entire world as my ancestors were.
In the coming months and years, some farmers will plant corn or soybeans on their land while others will set aside some acreage for solar or wind projects. Both will yield a harvest and continue to let the land produce for their families, and their investment in farmland will pay off for future generations.
Mike Johanns is the former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, serving from 2005-2007. He currently serves as a co-chair and Nebraska state chairman for the Center for Infrastructure and Economic Development.

OWH Midlands Voices: Flush coffers and legislative prudence could lead to powerful state investments

The big fiscal news heading into the upcoming legislative session is that Nebraska lawmakers are projected to have a lot of extra cash — about $1.9 billion — that could be used to enact new policy initiatives.
This money is a welcome development, particularly as we continue to work to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent high inflation. There are, however, some important caveats to keep in mind regarding these dollars.
First, the extra cash is likely to be temporary. It may not fully materialize and it is not the result of state policy decisions. Rather, the projected extra revenue is largely a byproduct of the $24 billion in federal relief dollars that have flowed into Nebraska's economy since the onset of the pandemic. This federal relief accomplished its purpose in that it helped buoy our residents and our state's tax receipts as the pandemic raged. But Nebraska's current $1.9 billion surplus is just a projection. In the event of a recession, historically high state tax revenues may not continue.
It is critical that policymakers in the next legislative session be judicious in using the projected extra money — particularly given talk of new tax cuts — as they could leave future lawmakers in a pinch

when the $1.9 billion is gone and future state revenues lag.
It's also vital to remember policymakers already have a major ongoing cost to account for in the future, thanks to the tax package they passed last session — the largest in Nebraska's history. When fully implemented, the tax cuts will annually reduce revenues by nearly $1 billion, while largely benefitting the wealthiest Nebraskans. However, given the temporary nature of the extra cash, it would not be wise or responsible to cut taxes for the wealthiest Nebraskans again, especially while hard-working residents continue to struggle with inflation and higher living costs.
Rather, policymakers this session can protect the state by ensuring new legislation focuses on proven initiatives that empower hardworking Nebraskans to care for their families and ensure their communities thrive.
Nebraskans across the state face significant economic and social challenges that could be addressed through thoughtful use of state dollars. These include:
Rents for one-bedroom apartments in some parts of the state running as high as 58% of minimum wage income;
Hundreds of children in mid-sized cities unable to access quality and affordable childcare — a situation that has been referred to as "childcare deserts;"
Seniors stranded at local shopping centers for hours because of a lack of public transportation; and
A lack of services and information in multiple languages to meet the needs of all Nebraskans.
In visiting with community leaders, service providers, and journalists from across the state, it's clear that hard-working Nebraskans have some specific ideas about where state dollars could be helpful. These include support for affordable housing, quality childcare, mental health care and accessible transportation, all of which will strengthen our workforce.
The $1.9 billion in projected cash gives policymakers a chance to take steps to address some of these challenges in powerful ways through targeted, one-time investments. Prudence and good judgment by policymakers can ensure this happens in a manner that also protects Nebraska's budget, which is essential to ensuring expanded opportunities for every Nebraskan in the years to come.
Rebecca Firestone is the executive director of OpenSky Policy Institute.

OWH Midlands Voices: Child Nutrition Reauthorization needs to happen to support Nebraska children

The value of good nutrition to a strong education cannot be overstated. Without full stomachs, children are more likely to struggle with health, academic, and behavioral issues. For this reason, the Nebraska Department of Education is committed to supporting child nutrition program providers as they provide healthy school meals throughout the year.
Unfortunately, child nutrition programs are currently operating on regulations passed in 2010 — missing out on the last 12 years of learning and experience that could inform and refresh these programs going forward. This winter, Congress has a chance to pass critical child nutrition program updates that would better take care of students and support our schools. The federal omnibus bill that needs to be passed to fund our federal government by the end of the year must include support for child nutrition.
During the pandemic, schools became the front line for feeding hungry kids. The free meals provided by the USDA during this time bridged the gap between household needs and hunger for many families.
Since the end of federal free school meals this fall, food costs have gone up and inflation has grown.

Food insecurity rates stayed about the same during the pandemic, but food insecurity in families with children has skyrocketed. The lessons we learned during the last two and a half years must inform how child nutrition programs are structured for the future.

A strong child nutrition program reauthorization would have the following three provisions, already proposed in the House of Representatives through the Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act:

1. Expanded community eligibility, which allows high-need schools to offer free meals to all students.

More students eat when healthy school meals are free. Free meals for all students at high-need schools prevents low-income students from feeling stigmatized, and it helps families who are over the income threshold for free or reduced price meals but still struggle to make ends meet. It's also great for schools whose nutrition programs benefit from increased participation as they struggle with supply chain and inflation themselves. Under current regulations, many schools have to subsidize their school meal programs with general fund dollars. This expansion would help that greatly.

2. Authorization of a Summer EBT program through which families with school children would receive a $75/summer EBT benefit per child to spend on groceries if they received free or reduced-price school meals.

Summer is a time of hunger for many kids. Without access to regular school meals, some of our most vulnerable children don't receive proper nutrition for their growing bodies. The Summer Food Service Program, which provides free meals for kids ages 1-18 in high poverty areas, can leave many kids out because of a lack of program sponsors, program limitations, and long driving distances. A summer EBT program would help kids who have already been identified for free or reduced-price meals based on their family's income by providing modest support to reduce food insecurity during the summer months. This program would be a smaller version of the Pandemic-EBT program that has supported students with replacement dollars for missed school meals since March 2020.

3. Set parameters for the collection of unpaid school meal fees, including limiting most communications to the parent or guardian, not the student; prohibiting the disposal of food that has been served to a child whose household has unpaid school meal fees; and prohibiting overt identification of students whose households have unpaid school meal fees.

Unpaid meal debt has risen quickly since the national free school meals program expired this fall. School nutrition directors in Nebraska have expressed concern that the levels of unpaid meal debt they're seeing after just a few months are as high as the balances from the end of pre-pandemic school years. While recouping the costs of unpaid meal debt is critical to the existing structure of our school meals programs, protecting students from practices that shame them for not having funds, or having a negative balance, is the right thing to do.

These basic principles, as outlined in the House's proposed Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act, would support nutrition access and dignity for all students.

We know that Nebraskans value supporting one another. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided example after example of people stepping up when a neighbor is in need, demonstrating our commitment to the common good. Congress has one more chance to do right for the 30 million children in our nation, including over 300,000 kids in Nebraska, who rely on school meals for proper nutrition. A federal omnibus bill will pass before 2023 — it's up to our members of Congress to ensure that our kids are included.

Matt Blomstedt is the Nebraska Commissioner of Education.

OWH Column: Let's maintain the uniquely rational nature of Nebraska politics

In school, we learned about our unicameral Legislature and how Nebraska's political system is unique. As one of only two states to divide their Electoral College votes, Nebraska voters are afforded a louder voice in presidential elections.

And this arguably affords Nebraska voters the most empowered voice of any state legislature. As governor, Bob Kerrey worked with senators in the Unicameral. Kerrey also served 12 years in the U.S. Senate. When asked, he shared that in creating the Unicameral, Nebraskan George Norris "led the successful effort to terminate both of these institutions with a constitutional amendment that abolished one of the legislative bodies and ended the practice of identifying a candidate's political party on the ballot. Together, these two have given Nebraskans the most efficient and responsive legislature in the country."

Norris served in the U.S. Senate from 1913 to 1933. His legacy includes the creation of our Unicameral. Norris' "Rubber and Glass Campaign" fought for the one-house legislature because it made elected officials more accountable to voters, tamped down party influence, held the governor's office in check, and thwarted special interest groups.

Today, the vast majority of Americans view our political system as untrustworthy. PEW Research finds only 7% of conservatives and 32% of centrist Democrats trust government.

After Watergate, Congress responded with efforts to make governance more transparent. Research found that that elected officials' motivations and behaviors changed, but not for the better (Zelizer). Officials took positions based upon polls, media attention and manipulating the appearance of their actions to appease voters (Heclo). Cross-aisle engagement and compromise went down as partisan rhetoric demonizing the opposition went up and divides got deeper (Fiorina). Supporting and passing legislation was bogged down as partisans punished officials for deviations from the party line.

Instead of governing, elected officials focused on reelection in lieu of tackling tough issues and making hard choices. Statesmen morphed into politicians as political action committees (PACs) and special interest groups successfully drowned out the voice of voters with big donations by funding campaigns of compliant candidates, and, as we saw in 2022, let the wealthy exploit anonymous dark money campaigns to run brutally negative ads against others such as Brett Lindstrom and Tony Vargas.

Lee Terry told me the only time he could discuss issues across the aisle was when the congressmen flew on military planes overseas, and thereby would not be seen talking.

Since its inception 85 years ago, the nonpartisan Unicameral has voted secretly for the body's leadership. Next week, a motion is expected that will make these votes public. This would be the culmination of an effort pushed by the Nebraska First PAC. Nebraska First was founded and funded by Donald Trump endorsed, unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate Charles W. Herbster.

Lead by Rod Edwards, Nebraska First argues, "Electing leadership by a secret and unrecorded ballot deprives everyday Nebraskans of information they could use when deciding who to elect as their state senator. Additionally, keeping the leadership votes a secret gives even more power and influence to lobbyists, special interests, and Capitol insiders. Most citizens are not aware of this practice and most would not support the secrecy if they knew."

Sounds reasonable, or does it?

When the nation's founders met to write the U.S. Constitution, they cloaked the windows and forbade transcripts of the process so that participants could act and speak freely. Those who participated in composing the Constitution, a document written and debated in secret, include George Washington, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin and Roger Sherman. Of the 55 that

participated, 40 had or would serve in a legislative body.
Along with Maine, Nebraska is the most moderate state in the Union. Certainly the officially nonpartisan Unicameral and the diminished role of political parties factor into the calm and uniquely rational nature of Nebraska politics.
Today, officials bemoan the "brain drain" as young Nebraskans move for work to other states. Over the last four years, I have read 1,000 essays that asked students to describe America in 25 years. By very large numbers, their essays describe a failed political system, inequality and an unhealthy cynicism of ever achieving the "American Dream."
Nationally, those under 40 prefer socialism to capitalism. If we're serious about slowing Nebraska's brain drain, elevating vitriolic partisanship is exactly the wrong thing to do.
Today, I doubt most Nebraska could name the Unicameral speaker: Mike Hilgers steps down to become state's attorney general in January. And yet, despite the fact Nebraska voters are 49% Republican, 28% Democrats and 23% other, the system has worked according to Norris' plan since 1937. Unnecessary transparency will, as we've all seen in the U.S. Senate and Congress, strengthen political party control, increase partisan extremism and gag voters.
Students of our model of self-governance know that the system was designed to be slow and inefficient: thereby forcing the political debate, negotiation and compromise. By doing so, it gives voice to those in the minority and stops political extremism.
"Nebraskans should listen to Mr. Herbster and ask themselves this question: Do you like what you seen in our nation's Capitol? Do you want our legislature to behave like the Congress?" — Bob Kerrey.
Protect your vote and contact your state senator
today: nebraskalegislature.gov/senators/senator_find.php.
Rick Galusha, Ph.D., teaches political science at Bellevue University. He's hosted a blues radio show for 30 years and was the president of Homer's Music Stores. Galusha was active in the creation of the Old Market Business Association and served as the group's first president.

OWH: Clear picture

Kudos to the World-Herald for their Q&A with Jim Pillen. It painted a clear picture as to why Pillen refused to debate — no semblance of any sort of research done on any issue, no concrete details on anything, and nothing but "gee whiz" and assumptions as to how poorly government is run in this state. If that is his true opinion, here's hoping that he does not select Pete Ricketts as the next senator (assuming Pillen has read enough to at least realize that Ricketts has been governor for the last eight years). Pillen used "I'm not a politician" as his weak defense against having to debate an opponent. As he will be taking on the job of governor and has, in fact, entered the political realm, what will be the excuse next time? People get the government they deserve, and Nebraskans deserve no pity for continuing to vote against their own self-interests. And we wonder why the best and brightest leave the state. Gee, whiz.
Michael Zack, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 1/1: Reflection on new year, new resolutions

New Year's Day, for some, involves feasting, football or, perhaps nursing a hangover after ringing out the old.

Whatever one does to celebrate (or recover), turning the page on a new year often involves resolutions — those promises we make to ourselves as we start a new calendar year with a clean slate.

Maybe it's as simple as resolving to be patient with new Husker football Coach Matt Rhule and not call for his firing at halftime of the spring game if the red offense sputters. Or playing nice during our city elections. Maybe it's as taxing as running a marathon or just getting in better shape. Or maybe it's as life-affirming as doing one good deed a day.

Next week, we'll be back with our Journal Star Editorial Board 2023 agenda — our key issues we think our community needs to address — but for this week, as we have done on holidays past, we offer some wise words on fresh starts and new beginnings.

"Be at war with your vices, at peace with your neighbors, and let every new year find you a better man." — Benjamin Franklin, American inventor and diplomat

"Your success and happiness lies in you. Resolve to keep happy, and your joy and you shall form an invincible host against difficulties." — Helen Keller, American author

"On New Year's Eve the whole world celebrates the fact that a date changes. Let us celebrate the dates on which we change the world." — Akilnathan Logeswaran, German activist

"Youth is when you're allowed to stay up late on New Year's Eve. Middle age is when you're forced to." — Bill Vaughan, American columnist

"It is never too late to be what you might have been." — George Eliot, English novelist

"Tomorrow is the first blank page of a 365-page book. Write a good one." — Brad Paisley, American singer-songwriter

"Write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year." — Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist

"Cheers to a new year and another chance for us to get it right." — Oprah Winfrey, American talk show host and author

"No matter how hard the past, you can always begin again." — Buddha, religious teacher

"I don't know where I'm going from here, but I promise it won't be boring." — David Bowie, English singer-songwriter

"Be the change you wish to see in the world." — Ghandi

"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow." — Albert Einstein, German-born theoretical physicist

"It's never too late to become who you want to be. I hope you live a life that you're proud of, and if you find that you're not, I hope you have the strength to start over." — F. Scott Fitzgerald, American author

"You'll never get bored when you try something new. There's really no limit to what you can do." — Dr. Seuss, American author

"We spend January 1st walking through our lives, room by room, drawing up a list of work to be done, cracks to be patched. Maybe this year, to balance the list, we ought to walk through the rooms of our lives ... not looking for flaws, but for potential." — Ellen Goodman, American journalist

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Whatever approach you take to a new year and personal improvement, may we all pledge, promise, resolve or just try really hard to listen better, care more and treat each other like we'd want to be treated.

LJS Local View: Working for people, not party

The nonpartisan structure of our Legislature has been the pride of Nebraskans since 1937. As former speakers and senators of the Legislature, we saw firsthand how the rules and traditions of the Legislature preserve this nonpartisanship, which produces more thoughtful policy that serves the state as a whole.

Our unique nonpartisan, one-house structure improved on several aspects of a partisan bicameral system. Instead of party leaders having the only meaningful voices in the body, all senators here are equal and independent and can contribute their own strengths and experience to policymaking. All senators, regardless of party, can represent their constituents equally.

Every bill introduced receives a public hearing –- not just those introduced by senators of the same political party as the committee chair. Every senator has the chance to make the case for his or her bills, and, more importantly, the public is afforded the opportunity to voice their opinions on every single one. This is how Nebraskans serve as the Legislature's "second house."

Another way this nonpartisanship shines is when senators elect their internal leadership positions for speaker and committee chairs using a private ballot. This allows senators the autonomy to vote for leaders they believe are most qualified to serve in those roles rather than who is most politically powerful.

Otherwise, senators might be pressured to vote for a senator simply because they belong to the same political party. With only 49 members in the body, this preserves relationships so senators can work together and have a productive session.

Private ballots have long been used for selecting internal leadership positions within school boards, county commissioners, private organizations and political caucuses in Congress. Republican-majority Legislatures have maintained this process for decades because state senators from all political affiliations have recognized its benefits to the Legislature and to the state.

Returning senators demonstrate their statesmanship and commitment to Nebraska when they safeguard the rules that safeguard this unique institution. And newly elected senators should resist outside pressures to change these rules before they even experience serving in the Legislature.

It's unwise to change the longstanding and well considered rules of a branch of government before they can see for themselves why the rules exist.

Sen. Galen Hadley and Greg Adams are former speakers. This piece was also signed by 11 other former state senators. They are Matt Williams, Mark Kolterman, John Stinner, Robert Hilkeman, Annette Dubas, Kate Sullivan, Kathy Campbell, John McCollister, Paul Schumacher and Vickie McDonald.

LJS Letter from the editor: Thank you to all who write -- and read

In a way, it's nice that readers are enjoying their holidays so much they aren't writing letters to the editor for a few days. On the other hand, this part of the page looks a lot better with letters than a column and my headshot.

But the light letter load gives me a chance to say thanks to everyone who wrote — and everyone who read — letters to the editor in 2022. We published roughly 850 letters, each in print and online. That's about four dozen more than we ran in 2021.

As the person who calls letter writers, edits letters and does his best to keep everyone playing nice on the Opinion page, I can tell you that's a lot of letters.

The spring primary and the mid-term general election drove a fair chunk of traffic to our in-box —

writers endorsing candidates and issues. But readers also had a lot to say about the performance of President Biden, the lasting impact of the Trump presidency, a number of legislative bills, the Fairness Ordinance and a handful of city development issues.

We allow readers one letter every 45 days to ensure we get a range of topics and perspectives on the page, and we have our writers, as in years past, who, like clockwork, contribute every every six weeks and three days.

We allow writers up to 300 words (the online form cuts off at 250 in case we need to add words in the editing process), and we have folks who count carefully to use every one of them. The shortest letter of 2022 was a mere 16 words. We get the vast majority of letters via online form or email to oped@journalstar.com.

One question I frequently field — usually from folks who haven't written a letter for publication — is why one side of an argument has more letters than the other. The answer is obvious, though some prefer their own conspiracy theories: We can't publish letters that don't get written.

We try really hard to get almost every letter in. If we get many making the same point on the same topic, we may pick a representative few to run. Almost every letter we receive undergoes some minor editing. And some get a little more attention when we need to check a fact or address matters of tone and civility.

While our goal is to give writers as much rein as possible, we do aim for a constructive and useful conversation.

With a 90-day legislative session, a city primary in April and a city election in May, we already have some predictable letter-generating topics for 2023. And a new governor and Husker football coach will only add to the fun.

As editor, I'm grateful for the readers who write, for writers who read and for the conversations I get to have in the process.

Dave Bundy is editor or the Lincoln Journal Star. Reach him at dbundy@journalstar.com.

AP: Biden's new year pitch focuses on bipartisanship

CHRISTIANSTED, U.S. Virgin Islands — President Joe Biden and top administration officials will open a new year of divided government by fanning out across the country to talk about how the economy is benefiting from his work with Democrats and Republicans.

As part of the pitch, Biden and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell will make a rare joint appearance in McConnell's home state of Kentucky on Wednesday to highlight nearly $1 trillion in infrastructure spending that lawmakers approved on a bipartisan basis in 2021.

The Democratic president will also be joined by a bipartisan group of elected officials when he visits the Kentucky side of the Cincinnati area, including Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear of Kentucky and Republican Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio, the White House said.

Biden's bipartisanship blitz was announced two days before Republicans retake control of the House from Democrats on Tuesday following GOP gains in the November elections. The shift ends unified political control of Congress by Democrats and complicates Biden's future legislative agenda. Democrats will remain in charge in the Senate.

Before he departed Washington for vacation at the end of last year, Biden appealed for less partisanship, saying he hoped everyone will see each other "not as Democrats or Republicans, not as members of 'Team Red' or 'Team Blue,' but as who we really are, fellow Americans."

The president's trip appeared tied to a recent announcement by Kentucky and Ohio that they will

receive more than $1.63 billion in federal grants to help build a new Ohio River bridge near Cincinnati and improve the existing overloaded span there, a heavily used freight route linking the Midwest and the South.

Congestion at the Brent Spence Bridge on Interstates 75 and 71 has for years been a frustrating bottleneck on a key shipping corridor and a symbol of the nation's growing infrastructure needs. Officials say the bridge was built in the 1960s to carry around 80,000 vehicles a day but has seen double that traffic load on its narrow lanes, leading the Federal Highway Administration to declare it functionally obsolete.

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