From: Pinkerman, Justin
To: Pinkerman, Justin
Cc: Shelburn, Andrew
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 2-23-22
Date: Wednesday, February 23, 2022 8:40:07 AM

AG VALLEY CO-OP

Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Feb 2022	6.56	-16.00	08:29
Corn	Oct 2022	5.70	-35.00	08:29
Milo	Feb 2022	6.67	-5.00	08:29
Milo	Oct 2022	5.55	-50.00	08:29
Soybeans	Feb 2022	15.80	-71.00	08:29
Soybeans	Oct 2022	14.14	-65.00	08:29
Wheat	Feb 2022	8.29	-55.00	08:29
Wheat	Jul 2022	8.29	-60.00	08:29

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NCN: Nebraska would build canal 15 miles inside of Colorado
KETV: Nebraska State Patrol and Legislative panel to investigate Groene photos
WOWT: Nebraska State Patrol investigating State Sen. Groene
NTV: Nebraska lawmakers discuss resignation of Sen. Mike Groene
KLKN: NSP investigating former Sen. Mike Groene incident
NPM: Senators discuss harassment following Groene's resignation
KSNB: Nebraska’s delegation urging federal government for disaster declaration for December storms
KMTV: GOP leaders pick Iowa governor for State of Union response
NPM: After Cutbacks, Nebraska Gamblers Assistance Program May Need Casino Gambling To Expand

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KSNB: Nebraska's delegation urging federal government for disaster declaration for December storms

WASHINGTON, D.C. (KSNB) - Nebraska's delegation sent a letter to President Joe Biden for Major Disaster Declaration request for storms in December.
U.S. Senators Deb Fischer (R-Neb.) and Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) and Representatives Jeff Fortenberry (NE-01), Don Bacon (NE-02), and Adrian Smith (NE-03) echoed support for Governor Pete Ricketts request.
The request follows severe storms, winds, and tornadoes that hit communities across the state on Dec. 15, 2021.
The counties highlighted in the request include: Adams, Buffalo, Burt, Cass, Cuming, Fillmore, Gage, Hamilton, Harlan, Jefferson, Johnson, Kearney, Nemaha, Nuckolls, Otoe, Pawnee, Platte, Polk, Richardson, Saline, Sarpy, Saunders, Thayer, Washington and Webster. Assistance is also requested

for Hazard Mitigation statewide.
Read the letter to President Biden below:
Dear Mr. President:
We write in strong support of Governor Pete Ricketts's request for a Major Declaration of Disaster for Public Assistance for Nebraska due to a period of unstable weather on December 15, 2021 for the following counties: Adams, Buffalo, Burt, Cass, Cuming, Fillmore, Gage, Hamilton, Harlan, Jefferson, Johnson, Kearney, Nemaha, Nuckolls, Otoe, Pawnee, Platte, Polk, Richardson, Saline, Sarpy, Saunders, Thayer, Washington, and Webster. We also support the Governor's request for Hazard Mitigation statewide.
As a result of severe weather on December 15, later determined a derecho with wind damage extending more than 250 miles, numerous cities in Nebraska, including Beatrice, Bradshaw, Columbus, Fairbury, Geneva, Guide Rock, Syracuse, Tecumseh, Red Cloud, and Wymore, experienced damage to electrical distribution infrastructure, primarily to power poles and electrical lines, which left approximately 34,000 customers across the state without power. The high winds and ensuing weather also caused extensive damage to agriculture, including to center pivot irrigation systems, augers, and livestock, and the resulting losses are among the largest caused by a December storm in over 130 years. A preliminary damage assessment has estimated costs totaling $6,791,680.
This event comes after Nebraska suffered another federally declared disaster during the past 12 months, and while the state and small rural communities are still recovering from the largest disaster in our state's history, DR-4420, in March 2019. We ask that the federal government once again join in our state's recovery efforts and ensure prompt evaluation of this request. Our offices stand ready and willing to assist in any way possible.

KMTV: GOP leaders pick Iowa governor for State of Union response

WASHINGTON (AP AND KMTV)) — Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds will deliver the Republican response to President Joe Biden's State of the Union address on March 1. GOP congressional leaders made the announcement Tuesday.
Reynolds is being praised by Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell as fighting COVID "without forgetting common sense" by protecting Iowans' health and their rights at the same time. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy says "disastrous decision-making in Washington" has been offset by real leadership in states across the country, and cited Iowa as an example.
"Governor Reynolds is a phenomenal choice to tell the story of all that can be accomplished at the state level. She led Iowa's balanced response to the pandemic and fights every day to lower taxes for hard-working Iowans and provide parents more choice in their children's education," said co-chair of the Republican Governors Association, Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts in a statement.
Reynolds is the 43rd governor of Iowa and has served since May of 2017.

OWH: State Patrol investigating allegations Sen. Mike Groene took inappropriate photos of staffer

LINCOLN — The Nebraska State Patrol opened an investigation into the conduct of North Platte State Sen. Mike Groene on Tuesday, while legislative leaders outlined the next steps in the Legislature's investigation.
Groene officially resigned from the Legislature on Monday after it surfaced that he took photos of a

former female staff member without her knowledge.
Nebraska State Patrol spokesman Cody Thomas confirmed in an email Tuesday that the patrol opened an investigation into the matter after consulting with the Nebraska Attorney General's Office.
"Once complete, the findings will be delivered to the Attorney General," Thomas wrote.
The confirmation came as female lawmakers, including members of both parties, took to the legislative floor to talk about the prevalence of sexual harassment and to call for a better internal system for handling allegations of workplace and sexual harassment.
Sen. Dan Hughes of Venango, chairman of the Legislature's Executive Board, started off the day by sharing information about the legislative investigation, which is separate from the State Patrol's undertaking.
Hughes said he initially sought to resolve the complaint through an informal process provided for in legislative policy. He said the staffer who filed the complaint informed him Friday afternoon that the informal resolution was not agreeable.
In response, Hughes said he had contacted three lawmakers — Sens. John Arch of La Vista, Tom Briese of Albion and Anna Wishart of Lincoln — to start a formal probe of the situation. The three were among six members of a special personnel panel named last year to be available for such situations.
Hughes said members of the panel met Tuesday morning to begin their work. They will hire an outside investigator and will be provided "whatever resources they need."
He said he has asked them to prepare a report when finished that can be shared with the public and the Legislature. They also will refer any evidence of potential criminal activity to the attorney general. If appropriate, he said the panel could also give recommendations to improve the Legislature's policy.
"This formal investigation will be thorough, prompt, will continue to protect the complainant's rights while also ensuring that the Legislature, and the public, has confidence in our process," Hughes said.
Groene, a two-term lawmaker who gained a reputation for being a rough-edged conservative, officially resigned at the end of the day Monday in the wake of a controversy that emerged Friday.
Nebraska Sunrise News, a recently launched news website whose leadership includes Sen. Suzanne Geist of Lincoln, was the first to report the allegations against Groene.
The staffer who was photographed, Kristina Konecko, discovered the photos of herself on Groene's laptop in the course of her work. (Konecko has asked The World-Herald to use her name in its reporting.)
The report said the photos appeared to have been taken by Groene, then sent with "email captions of a sexual nature." It said that the emails were described as "objectifying and demeaning" and that some were zoomed-in photos of "provocative body parts."
Konecko said details regarding the photos are accurate, except she did not see that the photos were sent to others.
Groene previously told The World-Herald that he took photos of the staffer but didn't send them to other people. He also said that he took full-length photos but did not zoom in, and that the staffer was not in "compromising positions."
In text messages Tuesday, Groene told The World-Herald that he regretted his "insensitive indiscretion" but did not break the law. He said the matter is over as far as he is concerned.
"It was private information on my personal accounts. I never shared anything involving this issue. My privacy was invaded (by) another individual," he wrote. "I did exactly as the Executive committee

requested."
He said he has apologized and admitted he broke the Legislature's rules, and that he resigned "for those reasons and to spare my family and colleagues an embarrassing circus."
"Looks like I have failed in that effort," he wrote.
On Tuesday, Hughes addressed the alleged sharing of the photos. He said legislative information technology staff had searched Groene's laptop, including his emails and hard drive and his cellphone as part of the informal resolution process.
Hughes said he was not aware of any evidence that Groene sent the pictures to any third party or that any other senator or staff were involved in, shared or received the pictures.
In response to a point of speculation, Hughes said he does not know of any evidence that any senator or any staff member had attempted to discourage the staffer from exercising her rights. He said his own communications with her were done with Janice Satra, the legal counsel for the Executive Board, present.
Hughes said that additional action would be taken if any other senators or staff are found to have been involved with the incident or to have tried to discourage Konecko from pursuing her complaint.
Groene's conduct has commanded the attention of his now-former colleagues since the allegations became public.
On Saturday, Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha called for a formal investigation of Groene's behavior. In a letter to the Attorney General's Office and law enforcement, Hunt flagged potential areas of criminal wrongdoing based on media reports of the allegations.
In addition, Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks of Lincoln on Monday released a statement voicing concern about the Legislature's processes for dealing with workplace harassment.
Both were among the female lawmakers who stood up Tuesday morning to talk about their experiences with sexual harassment, its impact on women and the need for a better system to handle those cases when they arise.
Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha started off the discussion by asking for a "call of the house," a motion that requires all senators to return to their seats.
"I did a call of the house to say to the men in this body they need to listen," she said.
Cavanaugh said Konecko "turned the tables on the power dynamic of this institution" by going to the press with her allegations and creating consequences for Groene. She argued leadership has failed, going so far as saying she'd impeach Hughes and Sen. Mike Hilgers, speaker of the Legislature, if she could.
"When the Legislature won't hold one of its own men accountable for this abuse of power against a subordinate woman, how are we, as women, ever supposed to believe that the body has our best best interest in mind when they're discussing legislation that affects us?" Cavanaugh said.
Lawmakers pointed to a need for reform.
"Sen. Groene is just a mirror of what's been systemic," said Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue. Blood said people feel their voices aren't heard when they make complaints, and said she thinks the Legislature can do better.
Hunt urged the body to examine the institution and improve it.
"Colleagues, can we have the strength to turn and look at the system and the institution and what has happened here to create a fertile ground for problems like this to occur?" she said. "The institution is this way because people make choices for it to be this way."Several legislators, including Cavanaugh and Sens. Wendy DeBoer of Bennington, Julie Slama of Sterling and Jen Day of Omaha, shared their own experiences with sexual harassment and assault.

“There’s an outsized effect when someone you trust breaks your trust,” DeBoer said. “Especially when it’s in an egregious way, especially when you don’t expect it. Then, suddenly, you’re going through the world, you’re having to do the work — through no fault of your own, nothing you did — of having to rebuild that trust so you can, in my case, take a cab again. The next cab driver won’t attack you, or your next boss won’t, or your next colleague won’t.”

Slama, Pansing Brooks and others called for the creation of a legislative ethics panel. Former Sen. John Kuehn of Heartwell introduced a bill in 2018 to create an ethics board. At the time, Kuehn said existing policies gave too much discretion to the chair of the Executive Board to decide how ethical lapses or harassment complaints are handled. The bill generated discussion, but didn’t advance.

An independent ethics committee, Slama said, “would’ve saved us from the convoluted process we currently have.”

“To any female working in this building: Just know I stand with you as an ally in the fight against sexual harassment,” Slama said. “I’m all in. Let’s fix this policy with the framework proposed by Senator Kuehn, with an ethics committee.”

As female legislators from across the political spectrum spoke, Pansing Brooks said this is not a partisan discussion, urging the Legislature to have those most directly affected by sexual harassment lead on the issue.

“We need a conversation but, above all, we need action,” Hunt said.

Gov. Pete Ricketts is tasked with appointing a person to serve the remainder of Groene’s term. On Tuesday he interviewed a handful of candidates for the seat, a spokesperson confirmed. The governor has said he intends to fill the seat quickly.

By Sara Gentzler and Martha Stoddard

LJS: Investigation into charges against former Sen. Groene opened by Legislature

The Legislature has launched a formal investigation into a workplace sexual harassment complaint lodged against former state Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte who abruptly resigned over the weekend in the wake of allegations by a female member of his staff.

At the same time, Attorney General Doug Peterson informed Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha that "we will begin our review of the matter" in a response to her request for an investigation of what transpired.

Hunt requested such a probe in a letter to the attorney general and the Nebraska State Patrol. Groene is accused of taking photos of the staff member without her knowledge and then distributing them in private communications accompanied by allegedly inappropriate remarks.

Sen. Dan Hughes of Venango, chairman of the Legislature's Executive Board, informed his colleagues that he has named Sens. Anna Wishart of Lincoln, John Arch of LaVista and Tom Briese of Albion to launch a formal investigation and hire an outside investigator to conduct an official legislative probe.

"I am aware of no evidence that any other senator or staff were involved in, shared or received pictures from Sen. Groene," Hughes told members of the Legislature.

"Legislative IT staff searched Sen. Groene's laptop and his personal cellphone, including his e-mails and hard drives. They discovered no evidence that Sen. Groene sent pictures to any third party, and not to any senator or staff," he said.

In text messages Tuesday, Groene told the Omaha World-Herald that he regretted his "insensitive indiscretion" but did not break the law. He said the matter is over as far as he is concerned.

"It was private information on my personal accounts. I never shared anything involving this issue. My

privacy was invaded (by) another individual," he wrote. "I did exactly as the executive committee requested."

He said he has apologized and admitted he broke the Legislature's rules, and that he resigned "for those reasons and to spare my family and colleagues an embarrassing circus."

"Looks like I have failed in that effort," he wrote.

The uproar over the fast-moving weekend disclosure that prompted Groene's abrupt resignation occupied the Legislature's morning session Tuesday with a number of female senators challenging their male colleagues to deal with the reality of sexual harassment and discrimination which they said they have confronted throughout their lives and during incidents within the Legislature.

"You need to listen to us," Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha said after filing a legislative motion that required all senators to return to the floor of the Legislature if they were not already there to hear what they had to say.

The ensuing discussion then consisted almost solely of remarks by the Legislature's female senators directed at their male colleagues as well as all American males.

"We minimize these things so often," Sen. Wendy DeBoer of Bennington said.

"It happens to so many of us," Sen. Jen Day of Omaha said.

"You can do better," Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue said.

"We need an outside formal investigation," Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks of Lincoln declared.

"I stand with you as an ally," Sen. Julie Slama of Sterling, who often is in disagreement with many of her female colleagues, said. "I'm all in."

Sen. Tony Vargas of Omaha was the only male senator other than Hughes to participate in the debate.

"I'm committed to address this," he said. "It's not just Groene's actions; it's the culture."

Hughes said the three-member committee he has appointed will prepare a report following its investigation that will be shared with the public as well as the Legislature.

"I want to stress that if the panel uncovers evidence of any potential criminal activity, that information will be referred to the attorney general for appropriate action," he said.

"Further, while the information to date has shown that Sen. Groene acted alone, and that no other senators or staff were aware of his actions, if the formal investigation uncovers that more individuals were involved, or were aware and did nothing, appropriate action will be taken."

Hughes told his colleagues that he is aware of "no evidence that any senator, whether on the Executive Board, or otherwise, or any staff, discouraged the complainant from exercising her rights."

Gov. Pete Ricketts will appoint a replacement to serve out the rest of Groene's term.

By Don Walton

AP: Female Nebraska lawmakers call for change amid photo probe

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Several female Nebraska state lawmakers on Tuesday railed against the Legislature's handling of a male state senator who resigned after admitting that he took photos of a female subordinate without her consent, calling for an overhaul of their internal policies and recounting their own experiences of being groped, harassed and belittled.

The push by half a dozen female lawmakers from both parties in the officially unicameral Legislature came less than a day after state Sen. Mike Groene, of North Platte, abruptly stepped down and abandoned his campaign to be a University of Nebraska Regent.

Groene, a blunt and often abrasive Republican lawmaker, acknowledged Friday that he took photos

of the legislative staffer in his office. But he said none of the images were sexual in nature and that he also snapped pictures of other staffers and office visitors, including his wife.

The former staffer, Kristina Konecko, filed a complaint with the Legislature's Executive Board in which she described the photos as "objectifying and demeaning." She said some included zoomed-in close-ups of provocative body parts with explicit subject lines — an allegation Groene has denied.

Konecko, who consented to have her name used, told The Associated Press that no one pressured her to come forward with the complaint against Groene or tried to stop her. She declined to comment further on her allegations, citing an investigation launched by lawmakers.

The female lawmakers said Tuesday that the Legislature's method of handling such complaints isn't adequate. Several called for the creation of a legislative ethics committee, which was an idea that was briefly floated after another former Republican lawmaker, state Sen. Bill Kintner, acknowledged that he had cybersex with a woman using his state-issued laptop.

State Sen. Wendy DeBoer, of Bennington, said she had an encounter years ago that led her to question herself and affected how she interacted with others. DeBoer said she became wary around other men and would ask herself if it was OK to wear certain colors of clothing.

"If you haven't had something like this happen to you, you may not understand the gravity of the situation," she said, at times fighting back tears. "It may seem like too much fuss is being made. It happened to me years ago, and your basic trust level of the world is disrupted."

State Sen. Julie Slama, of Sterling, recalled how she was groped at a political event but buried her feelings because she had experienced worse trauma in college. She noted that she has also received rape and death threats while serving in the Legislature.

"Our policies definitely don't protect staff and they don't protect female senators," said Slama, a Republican. "As a young female, you worry that it's going to be the thing that defines you."

And state Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh, of Omaha, shared a story about her time as a congressional staffer in Washington when she was 22. She said she once got on an elevator with a male senator who was not her boss, and the senator groped her in front of his staffer. Cavanugh said she was later told, "You don't get on an elevator with him."

"I would hope this (Legislature) would be better than that," Canvaugh said. "We aren't there yet."

State Sen. Megan Hunt accused Groene of victim-blaming, pointing to his comments to reporters that Konecko was "kind of a strait-laced person" and that he hadn't meant to offend her.

"This incident is another routine, typical and all-too-common situation of a younger woman experiencing boorish, inappropriate, unwanted behavior from a male superior in power," said Hunt, of Omaha, who has asked Attorney General Doug Peterson and the Nebraska State Patrol to investigate the alleged incident.

State Sen. Carol Blood, of Bellevue, said the Legislature's current practices for investigating harassment claims reminded her "of what I experienced in the workforce in the 1970s," when allegations were often brushed aside.

"We've never really caught up to this decade," Blood said. "When we have concerns and sometimes complaints, the response is usually, 'Well, that's just how the person is.'"

The Legislature's current workforce harassment policy begins with the chairman of the Executive Board meeting with the accuser and the accused to try to reach an informal, confidential agreement. If that option fails, the accuser has the right to seek a formal investigation. Informal investigations are kept confidential to try to protect accusers who may wish to keep the matter private.

Sen. Dan Hughes, the Executive Board chairman, said he followed that process and contacted three state lawmakers who will conduct an investigation with help from an outside consultant.

The panel members are state Sens. John Arch, a La Vista Republican; Tom Briese, an Albion Republican; and Anna Wishart, a Lincoln Democrat.
Hughes said the investigation will be “thorough, prompt” and is designed to protect the accuser’s rights and ensure public confidence in the process. He said he has asked the panel to prepare a report that will be released publicly, and any evidence of criminal behavior will be given to the attorney general. The panel may also recommended changes to the Legislature’s harassment policy.
“While we all hope that nothing like this happens again, it is our responsibility to find ways to improve our policies,” Hughes said.
Hughes, a Republican, also said he hadn’t seen any evidence to suggest that Groene had shared his photos with anyone else. He said legislative technology staffers searched Groene’s laptop and personal cellphone, including his emails and hard drives, and found no evidence that Groene forwarded the images.
Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts said Monday that he plans to appoint Groene’s replacement soon. Groene represents a swath of western Nebraska that includes the city of North Platte.
By Grant Schulte

OWH: Nebraska's congressmen request federal aid for damage caused by December storms

Nebraska sustained at least $6.79 million in damage to public infrastructure in December's unprecedented storms, according to an appeal by the state's congressional delegation to President Joe Biden.
Nebraska's senators and representatives wrote Biden in support of a request by Gov. Pete Ricketts seeking federal disaster aid.
The state experienced a record number of December tornadoes and its first-ever winter derecho on Dec. 15. A derecho is a series of long-lived straight-line winds.
Much of the damage to public infrastructure was to the electrical grid. According to the delegation's letter, 34,000 electric utility customers lost power, including in Beatrice, Bradshaw, Columbus, Fairbury, Geneva, Guide Rock, Syracuse, Tecumseh, Red Cloud and Wymore.
The federal aid request is for the following counties: Adams, Buffalo, Burt, Cass, Cuming, Fillmore, Gage, Hamilton, Harlan, Jefferson, Johnson, Kearney, Nemaha, Nuckolls, Otoe, Pawnee, Platte, Polk, Richardson, Saline, Sarpy, Saunders, Thayer, Washington and Webster.
Writing in support of Ricketts were Sens. Deb Fischer and Ben Sasse and Reps. Jeff Fortenberry, Don Bacon and Adrian Smith.
The storms also caused the state's largest ag insurer its most December agricultural damage on record. Affected were center pivot irrigation systems, augers and livestock.
By Nancy Gaarder

LJS: City Hall: A generous contract for county corrections employees; city moves to find new water source

Call it the trickle-down effect.
Months after the state agreed to generous raises for its corrections staff, Lancaster County correctional officers will get a similar bump in wages as part of a three-year contract approved Tuesday by the Lancaster County Board.

County Board Chairwoman Deb Schorr said the state's new contract influenced negotiations with the union representing county correctional officers, extending negotiations that typically are done by summer.
"Everyone is having a hard time recruiting people," Schorr said. "We not only wanted to continue to recruit people to work at the correctional facility but to retain them."
The result: a generous contract that Corrections Director Brad Johnson said will make Lancaster County corrections officers the highest-paid county corrections officers in the state.
The three-year contract will raise starting wages from $21.43 an hour to $27 an hour, or $56,160 annually. The top step of the pay scale will be $32.26 per hour ($67,100 annually), up from $30.11. Additionally, officers are guaranteed a 3% raise in August 2022 and in August 2023. The contract will be retroactive to August 2021 for current employees.
In November, Gov. Pete Ricketts announced an agreement that increased starting wages for state corrections corporals and prison caseworkers from $20 an hour to $28 an hour. Sergeants got a bump from $24 an hour to $32 an hour, plus some incentives.
The agreement addressed what has been a growing staffing crisis at state corrections, and within a week after the deal was announced the department received more than 70 applications, according to union officials.
Johnson said Lancaster County hasn't lost any employees to state corrections, though county corrections has suffered some staffing shortages in the last 12-18 months.
"It's been exacerbated by the pandemic and a record-setting unemployment rate in Lincoln," he said.
County corrections can be staffed with 147 officers, Johnson said.
"Today I could hire 25."
Part of his motivation in negotiations, he said, was to help find qualified applicants to fill positions and normalize schedules.
"I would say that this pay scale better reflects the professionalism and dedication that our correctional officers exhibit," Johnson said.
While Lancaster County hasn't lost correctional officers, Schorr said she's talked to other managers in state government who have seen employees leave to work for corrections.
"The work they've done to solve their staffing problems are impacting other staffing entities," she said.

Searching for water

Lincoln's search for a second water source is about to take a big step forward.
The city has issued a request for proposals for engineering firms to complete the first phase of a two-phase plan to find and acquire a source for an additional water supply for the Capital City.
"To me it's a big step, because it points us in the direction we will be going in the next four years," said Donna Garden, assistant director of Lincoln Transportation and Utilities. Ultimately, she said, it will lead to a second source of water that will impact Lincoln for many years.
But Garden says this is important for residents to understand: Lincoln's current water supply is adequate and safe for another 20-25 years, if not longer.
So this is a beginning, a start to a process that will likely take 25 years to complete.
There are a couple of things that make now a good time to start: the availability of millions in American Rescue Plan Act dollars and the possibility of securing funds from the recently-passed federal infrastructure bill.
Lincoln Transportation and Utilities Director Liz Elliott testified last week in support of LB1081, a bill

introduced by Lincoln Sen. Eliot Bostar, which would appropriate $200 million in federal stimulus money to help fund the Capital City's efforts.
Elliott told the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee last week that the 2019 floods — which knocked out power to Lincoln's well fields near Ashland — prompted the city to accelerate its efforts to secure a second water source.
But, really, the process began back with a master plan completed in 2014 that recommended the city find a second water source.
The request for proposals begins the search for an engineering firm to start that process: to identify an alternative water source by January 2023, then complete any studies necessary to validate a number of technical issues related to the source within the following two years.
There are no costs associated with the request for proposals — those will be determined later. And the RFP says the process is intended to be "highly visible to the community" through a consortium of city administration and staff, consultants and other stakeholders that will provide input and make recommendations.
So far, the city has identified two possibilities: a link to the Metropolitan Utilities District's connection to the Missouri River, and building a direct connection to the Missouri River.
Garden said other possibilities can be considered.
The cost to acquire and develop a new water source could be as much as $800 million.
Firms can present proposals to the city until March 16.
By Margaret Reist

OWH: Bonus pay for front-line nurses in Nebraska could be a morale booster

LINCOLN — There are moments that will always haunt Kaitlin Rogge after two years of watching COVID-19 take its toll on the patients in her intensive care unit.
She can close her eyes and see the man struggle to breathe. Hear the alarm going off at the nurses station and the helplessness in her voice as she called other staff to his room. Feel the tears welling up as the pulmonologist tells the man he is dying.
"The panic in his eyes is forever engrained in my memory," the Lincoln nurse told lawmakers. "It's heartbreaking to watch someone suffer and know there's nothing we can do to help them."
Rogge and other nurses relayed stories from the front line of the pandemic Tuesday in support of a bill that would provide bonus payments to an estimated 20,000 Nebraska nurses.
Legislative Bill 1055, introduced by State Sen. Mike McDonnell of Omaha, would allocate $50 million of federal pandemic recovery funds for the payments. Nebraska is in line to get $1.04 billion through the American Rescue Plan Act.
The bill would provide one-time payments to nurses who provide direct care for patients in hospitals and federally qualified health centers, such as the OneWorld Community Health Centers and Charles Drew Health Center in Omaha.
The size of the payments would depend on the number of nurses in that category. McDonnell estimated they would be about $2,000 each. The bill limits payments to a $5,000 maximum.
McDonnell called the payments "minimal" but said they would be a way to express the state's appreciation to nurses. He also said he hoped they would encourage nurses to stick with the profession, despite the stresses.
"I don't think it's enough," he said. "I don't know if there is enough for what they've done, what they've sacrificed and what they continue to do."

Kari Wade, president of the Nebraska Nurses Association, said the payments would represent a much-needed morale boost for nurses, who have shown “ceaseless devotion” to their work as the pandemic reaches its 100th week.
“They are exhausted emotionally, mentally and physically,” she said.
Linda Stones, testifying for the Nebraska Board of Nursing, said the pandemic has worsened an anticipated shortage of nurses in the state. She said the number of nurses renewing their licenses last year dropped for the first time in 20 years, with 2,600 nurses opting against renewal.
Some of those leaving the profession had been nearing retirement already, but others left because of the stress created by the pandemic.
No opponents appeared to speak against LB 1055. The Appropriations Committee will consider it along with numerous other proposals for ARPA money.
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Lawmaker proposes grants for Nebraska schools that voluntarily drop Native American mascots

Public schools that voluntarily dump their Native American mascots would be eligible for grants of up to $200,000 under a bill proposed in the Nebraska Legislature.
The money would help offset the costs of discontinuing the mascots, removing an excuse school officials sometimes give for not ending them, the bill’s sponsor said Tuesday.
“We’re not telling any school that they have to change their longstanding mascots, if they’re truly averse to that,” State Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha told members of the Education Committee. “But for those schools that do realize that their mascots are hurtful and wish to change them, but may not have the resources to do so, the state is offering them the funds.”
Legislative Bill 1027 comes before the committee amid a national push to eliminate offensive mascots.
Earlier this month, the naming saga of the NFL team formerly known as the Washington Redskins reached an apparent conclusion as the team unveiled its new name, the Commanders.
Those pushing for further change hope that such decisions in pro sports will motivate change in the schools that continue to embrace Native American mascots.
Twenty-two Nebraska schools have Native American mascots, according to the Nebraska Department of Education — such names as warriors, braves and chieftains. If each school got the maximum amount of the grant, the cost to the state would be $4.4 million.
Hunt said the bill is not about shaming or telling schools how racist they are.
“It’s about growing, and it’s about giving the institutions the opportunity to correct their wrongs, which frankly, realistically, let’s be honest, in 2022 cost money,” she said.
When pushed by critics to make changes, school officials have sometimes pointed to the cost of replacing gymnasium floors, scoreboards, signs, uniforms, gear, letterhead and other items bearing school logos.
Judi gaiashkibos, executive director of the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs, testified that she supports the bill as “a first step.”
If the incentive didn’t move districts to change their mascots, lawmakers should then revisit the issue, gaiashkibos said.
“I think it’s time for our state to walk the talk and take action,” she said. “And this bill isn’t the ideal solution, but at the end of a certain time frame, I would hope that if the 22 schools don’t agree to

this, then you revisit."
Committee member Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks of Lincoln said she liked the bill's approach.
"It would be a lot better if we just say 'quit doing it,' but I do think it's a good idea, because it's taking away the excuse" of the cost, she said.
Several members of Nebraska tribes testified how mascots create negative stereotypes, diminish the self-esteem and aspirations of Native students, and encourage racism among non-Native students. Such imagery has "real world consequences," said Darren Wolfe, a member of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska.
Instead of honoring Native people, mascots stereotype them as primitive, aggressive savages, Wolfe said.
"It basically gives license to schools who dress up to play Indian and mock Native song and dance," he said.
By Joe Dejka

Nebraska Examiner: Nebraska medical providers line up for slices of federal relief funds

Nebraska's nurses, nursing homes, assisted living centers, behavioral health providers, medical clinics, rural care providers and people serving those with developmental disabilities all are seeking funding boosts, a legislative committee heard Tuesday.
Combined, those seven bills seek to spend $294.5 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds if all were approved. The Appropriations Committee, which sets the Legislature's spending priorities, heard how those funds could help ease staffing and funding challenges facing parts of Nebraska's health care system.

Recruiting, retention

Legislative Bill 996, proposed by State Sen. Myron Dorn of Adams, would target $5.5 million in federal relief funds to help staff recruiting and retention at Nebraska's assisted living facilities. It would also pay for masks and other personal protective equipment and COVID-19 testing.
Jeff Fritz, executive director of a combined assisted living and nursing home facility in Adams, said the pandemic is far from over for staff at Gold Crest Retirement Center. The center employs about 95 people to help 20 assisted living residents and 40 nursing home residents.
Gold Crest recently had its worst week of positive COVID-19 tests since the start of the pandemic, Fritz testified. Five residents tested positive. Thankfully, he said, all were vaccinated and boosted, and they're doing OK.
But every positive test means staff members have to add gowns, goggles and gloves to their protective equipment, he said. They must deliver food and beverages in disposable containers. And staff have to be tested more often. The costs add up quickly, he explained.
"Assisted livings are receiving a lot of increased costs due to the pandemic," Fritz said.
He said LB 996 would provide $400 for every qualifying assisted living bed in the state, helping more assisted living facilities hold onto the workers who help care for the elderly.

Bonuses, 'front-line' nurses

LB 1055, proposed by Sen. Mike McDonnell of Omaha, would spend $50 million in federal relief funds for hospitals and federally qualified medical providers to offer bonuses and higher pay to "front-line" nurses caring for patients. About 20,000 of Nebraska's nurses could receive about $2,000 each under the proposal.
Virginia Wolking, a nurse in the medical-surgical unit at Children's Hospital & Medical Center in

Omaha, said many of the nurses working with patients during the pandemic could use the gesture of goodwill. Many have spent months stressed about the health of their patients and the safety of their families.

Children's, for example, has had trouble replacing 60% of the nurses it lost in 2021, she said. Like many hospital systems across the state, they've had to fill in with contracted nurses, also known as traveling nurses. That means local hospitals, like others nationally, are competing for a smaller pool of health care workers who are in high demand, she said.

"When we nurses are stretched so thin and do not have time to ease a parent's fears or make a child laugh, that takes away from the art of nursing and what we enjoy most about our work," she said.

Many of the nurses who testified Tuesday spoke about the mental strain of caring for so many sick patients, including Linda Stones, a member of the Nebraska Board of Nursing. That's partly why Nebraska saw its first decline in 20 years in the number of nurses, she said.

Since the start of the pandemic, the state has lost about 2,600 nurses, or 9.5% of its nursing workforce, she testified. Nearly 1,000 more nurses in the state told researchers they might leave the field over the next year, she said.

"We know that monetary (compensation) doesn't always retain nurses," she said. "But appreciation is one of the strongest forms of influence for our employee retention."

Nursing home pay

LB 1089, proposed by Sen. John Stinner of Gering, would set aside $60 million in federal relief funds to help nursing homes boost pay for direct-care employees. It would use $45 million of those funds on Medicaid beds at all nursing homes statewide and would concentrate $15 million on the nursing homes with the most residents in rooms funded by Medicaid.

Jalene Carpenter, president and CEO of the Nebraska Healthcare Association, said her group's 190 nonprofit nursing homes in Nebraska need the money to help hold onto staff. Nursing homes were having to pay more to hire and retain staff before the pandemic. COVID-19 made things worse, she said.

The bill would provide retention bonuses for certified nursing assistants, medication aides, nurses, housekeeping and laundry staff, all of whom help keep patients healthy, she said.

Kari Wockenfuss, administrator of the Louisville Care Center, which offers 61 nursing home beds and 26 assisted living beds in Louisville, Nebraska, said facilities like hers need help to compete with larger hospital systems and jobs in other states. They're hiring costlier traveling nurses to fill in.

They would use the funding for bonuses to staff who pick up extra shifts, scholarships for staff and help with licensing.

"I think that that would bring other people that have been, that would like to come to long-term care instead of maybe the hospital," Wockenfuss said. "Some of my nurses, they didn't want to leave, but the money was there."

Rural care providers

LB 1269, proposed by Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil, would earmark $10 million in federal relief funds to help medical professionals working in rural areas to repay more of their student loans. It would do so under the Rural Health Systems and Professional Incentive Act.

This bill would boost funding of an existing student loan repayment program administered by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services that pays off educational costs if doctors and other medical professionals agree to practice in a rural area for three or four years.

The program is open to doctors, physicians assistants, nurse practitioners, dentists, pharmacists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychologists and more.

Murman said the program has had a wait list in recent years, so the Legislature boosted funding. These federal funds would give rural areas more medical professionals who want to work and live in their communities.

"Currently it is my understanding that there are approximately 200 providers in the program," he said. "This funding would accommodate approximately a thousand providers, making a huge immediate impact in rural health care."

Neediest patients

LB 1183, proposed by Sen. Ray Aguilar of Grand Island, would create $25 million in grants for the outpatient community clinics that serve Nebraska's neediest patients, without regard to whether they can afford the care they need. The grants would be used on clinic-related construction projects.

Kenny McMorris, CEO of the Charles Drew Health Center in North Omaha, said the money would allow his center to build additional space and address more mental health needs, including more treatment for people battling substance abuse.

Statewide, he said, the bill would inject $40 million a year in economic inpact into local economies each year, boost local public health and create more than 400 high-paying jobs. It would add primary care, clinics, nurses, doctors, dentists, behavioral health professionals and support staff.

"This will give us an opportunity to have some bricks and mortar build additional locations that allows us to be able to do more," McMorris said.

Rural mental health

LB 1066, proposed by Sen. John Stinner of Gering, would aim $5 million in federal money at grants for adding new mental health beds in rural Nebraska and $28 million at the University of Nebraska's Behavioral Health Education Center to create a new internship program, add online mental health services and more.

Dr. Marley Doyle, a psychiatrist who directs the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska at the University of Nebraska, testified in her private capacity about the importance of the state continuing to invest in the behavioral health workforce. She called it essential, regardless of the pandemic.

But she said the pandemic has negatively affected many people's mental health. She cited an October 2021 survey that found about a third of Nebraskans saying they were depressed or anxious.

"There's a dire need for behavioral health professionals in our state," she said. "With the pandemic, we've seen an increased demand for services, so it's just exacerbated the shortage that we already had."

Doyle said the combination of the internship program and increased telehealth services for mental health would help make more mental health care accessible in more parts of Nebraska.

Developmental disability providers

LB 1172, proposed by Sen. Robert Hilkemann of Omaha, would earmark $111 million in federal relief funds, or $37 million a year for three years, to help DHHS pay more to providers who serve people with developmental disabilities and would help offset COVID-19-related losses and cost increases.

Hilkemann said people who got sick and were quarantined didn't receive services, and fewer people sought services out of fear of getting their loved ones getting sick. He said the money should help make providers whole and help them pay staff more.

Leslie Bishop Hartung of the Autism Center of Nebraska said many service providers like hers, which employs 144 people, are unable to fill more than a third of their open positions because of funding challenges tied to reimbursement rates and competition for workers.

"We have staffs that are working 100 hours each week, and this is simply not sustainable," she said.

"Providing quality care and supports to persons with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities can be exhausting, physically and emotionally."
By Aaron Sanderford

Nebraska Examiner: Lawmakers decry handling of Groene case as State Patrol opens investigation

LINCOLN — Voices rose and painful stories were recounted Tuesday morning as senators debated whether the allegations of inappropriate conduct by now-former State Sen. Mike Groene were handled appropriately in the State Legislature.
The Nebraska State Patrol also announced that it was opening an investigation into whether any laws were broken when Groene, 66, of North Platte, took photographs of a former aide, who described them as "objectifying and demeaning."
Speaking on the floor of the Legislature, State Sen. Dan Hughes, chairman of the Legislature's Executive Board, which handles such complaints, said he had followed existing procedures in first seeking an "informal resolution" of complaints by a legislative staffer against Groene. He said he was also required to keep the issue confidential.

Informal resolution rejected

The aide, Kristina Konecko, decided Friday that the informal resolution was not sufficient, Hughes said, so, as his her choice, she asked for an investigation.
Three state senators, he said, have now been appointed to a special committee to handle the probe: Sens. Tom Briese, John Arch and Anna Wishart. If they find evidence of a criminal act, Hughes said the committee will forward that to the Patrol and the Nebraska Attorney General's Office.
Groene, an often outspoken legislator, announced his decision to resign Friday afternoon soon after the allegations were reported that he took inappropriate photos of Konecko.
The senator, who resigned effective at 11:59 p.m. Monday, has denied that the photos were sexual in nature. But he has also apologized for taking them without the permission of Konecko, who worked as a legislative aide to Groene on and off for six years.

'We need action'

Several female senators took to the microphone Tuesday to question whether the case has been handled appropriately and to call for a better system in the Legislature to handle workplace harassment complaints. Some of them painfully recounted incidents when they had been victims of sexual harassment or assault.
Omaha Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh said that under current policies, the only recourse women have when confronting superiors in power is to go to the press.
Cavanaugh added that if she could "impeach" Hughes and the Speaker of the Legislature, Sen. Mike Hilgers, over their handling of the matter, she would.
"You two men, men in the body, have failed," she said, in a loud voice.
Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha said the body should now have the courage to review its policies for handling complaints of workplace harassment.
"We need to have a conversation. But above all, we need action," Hunt said.
Hunt, along with other female senators, asked for changes such as creating an independent human relations agency to handle such complaints from staff, rather than having senators do that, and creating an ethics committee in the Legislature.
"We know this stuff has been going on for a long time," Blood said, but complaints about sexual

harassment are still often dismissed as “that’s how he is” or “boys will be boys.”

Current policy ‘convoluted’

Cavanaugh said that when she was 22 and working in Washington, D.C., she was groped in an elevator by a U.S. senator in front of his aide.

She was told, “Oh, you don’t get on an elevator with him.”

“That was the beginning and end of it,” Cavanaugh said. “I hope this body would be better than that.”

Sen. Julie Slama told her own story about being groped at a political event. She called the current policies “convoluted.”

“It’s clear the policy needs to be overhauled,” Slama said. “Our policies don’t protect staff and definitely don’t protect female senators.”

Both Slama and Pansing Brooks spoke in support of creating an ethics committee in the Legislature. Such a proposal was introduced in 2018 but failed to advance.

Hughes, who sought an informal resolution to the complaints per legislative policy, said the three-senator committee will provide valuable advice on whether to change the workplace harassment complaint process.

No one, he said, ever discouraged Konecko from seeking an investigation.

Patrol opens probe

He added that contrary to initial press reports, there is no evidence at this point that Sen. Groene shared the photographs he took with anyone else.

Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson (Paul Hammel/Nebraska Examiner)

The State Patrol announced Tuesday that it has opened an investigation into the matter after consulting with Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson. The Patrol’s results will be forwarded to the Attorney General’s Office.

Hunt had sent a formal request for an investigation to the Patrol and the AG’s Office on Saturday. Peterson emailed Hunt Tuesday, saying, “Senator Hunt, thank you for forwarding this information to us. We will begin our review of the matter. Sincerely, Doug Peterson.”

Konecko. speaking to the Nebraska Examiner over the weekend, said she had no comment on whether she supported a criminal probe. But she did say that the complaint procedures for legislative employees could be improved.

By Paul Hammel

LJS: Fiji fraternity alleges it was targeted by UNL leaders for support of Trump

An inactive fraternity at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that has been suspended twice since 2017 is suing a pair of administrators in federal court for allegedly violating members' rights to free speech and due process.

UNL handed down a three-year suspension to Phi Gamma Delta — better known as Fiji — in 2017 for "reckless alcohol use, hazing and inappropriate sexually based behavior" following an investigation into members hurling sexually harassing comments at participants during the Jan. 21, 2017, Women's March.

In a complaint filed Feb. 18 in U.S. District Court, the fraternity argued it was punished and retaliated against for its members' political viewpoints and protected political speech in support of then-President Donald Trump.

The lawsuit, which names UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green and Director of Student Conduct and Community Standards Andrea Barefield individually, alleges the fraternity and its members suffered from investigations, suspensions and false and misleading public statements made by university officials.

It also accuses the university of failing to follow its Student Code of Conduct and Title IX policies, of enhancing punishments because of Fiji's political viewpoints, stigmatizing the chapter and its members, and depriving the organization of its status and due process rights.

A spokeswoman for UNL declined to comment, citing pending litigation.

UNL opened a Title IX investigation into Fiji after participants of the Women's March reported hearing sexually harassing comments being shouted by members at the chapter house at 1425 R St. as marchers passed the house on their way to a rally at the Capitol.

According to Brian Brislen, an Omaha attorney representing the fraternity, Fiji members were conducting their own political demonstration on the front lawn of the property.

The Title IX investigation did not result in any sanctions against the fraternity, but a second investigation focusing on violations of UNL's student code of conduct was later opened, and by March 2017, the university announced it was suspending Phi Gamma Delta through 2020.

According to the lawsuit, subsequent action taken by UNL against the fraternity resulted from the Jan. 21, 2017, event, which the fraternity argued was protected political speech "in support of then-President Trump" that UNL administrators disagreed with.

"The chapter's members' political speech on or around January 21, 2017, played a part or a role in Chancellor Green and Director Barefield's decision to revoke its recognition of the chapter as a student organization," the fraternity alleged.

Fiji alleges UNL administrators had already decided the chapter should face a lengthy suspension when they met with representatives of the fraternity days after the Women's March, and said the university based the suspension on a lesser violation of UNL's Student Code of Conduct.

"'Inappropriate sexually based behavior' and 'sexually harassing conduct' are charges that involve moral turpitude and depravity, and are not equivalent or comparable to violations of the university's alcohol policy," Brislen wrote in the complaint.

Fiji says it continued to face retaliation after its suspension was lifted in early 2021, being placed on probation again after two UNL police officers reported seeing members drinking in the basement of the chapter house.

While on probation, which the fraternity alleges was a continuation of being punished for its political speech, a 17-year-old student reported being sexually assaulted by a 19-year-old member of Fiji during the early morning hours of Aug. 24, 2021.
Word of the reported assault spread quickly on social media, and later that night, thousands of students gathered in front of the chapter house to protest the fraternity.
UNL placed Fiji under temporary suspension, but the protests continued for several more nights, including chants, marches and calls for the fraternity to be permanently banned from campus.
The 19-year-old fraternity member accused in the reported sexual assault has not been charged with a crime in Lancaster County. The Lincoln Police Department investigation into the incident remains open.
Fiji accused Green of stoking the "unverified rumors" in a statement he made on social media on Aug. 25, 2021, announcing the fraternity was on probation and would be temporarily suspended while the investigation moved forward without noting the previous punishment was for an alcohol violation.
The fraternity also alleged UNL ignored fraternity members' offers to assist in the investigation by giving statements and helping collect evidence, and said the university refused requests from parents to meet to discuss their sons' safety.
UNL, through the University Conduct Board, a committee of students and faculty, suspended Fiji through 2026 for violating several Student Code of Conduct rules related to alcohol use — but not sexual misconduct — and stripped the fraternity of its status as a recognized student organization.
The complaint says both Green and Barefield failed to train or supervise UNL staff "in a manner sufficiently calculated to prevent them from violating" fraternity members' constitutional rights.
"Chancellor Green and his leadership promulgated an official policy or unofficial custom by which the chapter, for engaging in constitutionally protected political speech, was known to be a 'bad fraternity,' and subject to enhanced penalties based on that status," Brislen wrote.
The lawsuit alleges the university violated the First Amendment rights of freedom of speech and freedom of association, as well as the 14th Amendment right of due process of both the chapter and the housing corporation that owns the 1425 R St. property.
By Chris Dunker

Hastings Tribune: Health official: South Heartland on downhill side of latest COVID-19 surge

For the first time in more than six months, the South Heartland Health District has seen a key measure of community transmission of the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, drop out of the "high" range.
Giving her weekly Tuesday night report on local conditions related to COVID-19, Michele Bever, executive director of the district health department, announced the rolling seven-day number of new confirmed cases of the viral infection equaled 73 per 100,000 population on Tuesday.
The threshold for high community transmission by that metric is 100 cases per 100,000. The last time the number was below 100 was Aug. 16, 2021.
A count of 73 cases per 100,000 is in the "substantial" range. "Low" community transmission would be fewer than 10 cases per 100,000.
In terms of the test positivity rate, or "positivity," the district's overall positivity was 7.4% and community positivity was 19.9% for the week that ended Feb. 19. Community positivity excludes

residents and workers at long-term care facilities.
Positivity readings above 10% are considered to indicate “high” community transmission of the novel coronavirus and/or its variants. A test positivity rate of 7.4% is called “moderate” transmission.
Positivity, by definition, is the number of new confirmed cases of COVID-19 in a given week, divided by the total number of tests known to have been administered in that same time period.
Bever said that while COVID-19 clearly continues to circulate in the health district at a significant level, the trend lines are encouraging.
“While we have not yet reached ‘low’ community transmission across the district, the good news is we’ve seen a steady decline in case rate and positivity since our local peak during the last full week of January,” Bever said. “We appear to be on the back side of this most recent surge of the virus.”
The South Heartland Health District encompasses Adams, Webster, Clay and Nuckolls counties. The health department offices are in Hastings
Forty-three new confirmed COVID-19 cases were logged by the health department last week. That’s down 65% from the previous week.
Seventeen additional confirmed cases were reported Sunday through Tuesday of this week.
Since March 2020, a running total of 10,173 district residents have tested positive for the infection. (Bear in mind that, now that at-home COVID-19 test kits are available and are being used to identify new cases of the infection without the involvement of a health care provider, not all positive results are being reported to the health department any longer.)
Bever said South Heartland completed a data quality review over the weekend, resulting in removal of duplicate cases and addition of positive test results for October 2021 through January 2022 only recently reported to the health department. The review resulted in a net increase of 54 cases, which for statistical purposes now have been apportioned to the weeks in which the test for each was performed.
The district saw another drop in known COVID-19 testing last week, with 541 tests logged — down 27% from the previous week.
Positivity in long-term care facilities decreased to 1.5% last week compared to 4.7% the prior week.
In the past two weeks, four long-term care centers in the South Heartland district have reported outbreaks, with a total of six staff and 11 residents testing positive.
Resident vaccination rates are high for most skilled nursing facilities in the district, and residents who test positive typically are asymptomatic or have mild symptoms, Bever said.
As of Tuesday, just one solitary patient was being treated for COVID-19 in a South Heartland hospital, and 63.6% of staffed intensive care beds in the district were available for new patients.
Bever used Tuesday night’s update to announce the arrival earlier in the day of just under 3,500 eMed COVID-19 at-home test kits at the health department. The test kits will be distributed to schools and child care centers for their use and will be made available for free distribution to the general public at various locations across the district.
The eMed test kits have a virtually-guided option for doing the test and receiving a verified result. Otherwise, individuals can simply follow the instructions and complete the test on their own.
A list of locations where members of the public can pick up free eMed test kits will be posted on South Heartland’s website: southheartlandhealth.org.
Bever continues to promote vaccination against COVID-19 and urges residents to monitor their health and get tested if they experience symptoms.
The timing of treatment for a positive case of the infection is critical, she said, especially if the patient has risk factors for complications from COVID-19 illness.

“These people should not wait to see how their illness progresses,” she said. “People who are more likely to get very sick from COVID-19 should keep some at-home COVID-19 test kits on hand or seek testing early. If you have even mild symptoms, get tested.”
Vaccination against COVID-19 is recommended for anyone age 5 and up. South Heartland still offers weekly Wednesday vaccine clinics at the Allen’s building in Hastings, 1115 W. Second St., from 4-6 p.m. Walk-ins are welcome.
For vaccine and testing information, call your health care provider or contact South Heartland at 402-462-6211 or 877-238-7595.
By Andy Raun

LJS: UNL economic indicator rises again in January

Nebraska’s leading economic indicator rose in January, according to the most recent report from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.
The indicator, which is designed to predict economic activity six months into the future, increased by 0.58% during the month
“The indicator has improved steadily for four consecutive months, suggesting moderate economic growth in Nebraska through the summer of 2022,” said Eric Thompson, director of the Bureau of Business Research at UNL.
The leading indicator improved for three primary reasons, Thompson said, with the first being positive business expectations.
Respondents to the January Survey of Nebraska Businesses reported plans to increase sales and employment over the next six months.
“With demand growing, businesses remain confident about growth despite supply chain challenges,” said Thompson.
There also was another decline in initial claims for unemployment insurance during January, and Nebraska businesses competing in international markets benefited from a decline in value of the U.S. dollar, he said.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: More brutal cold, a little snow ahead in Nebraska

Technically, this is just another seven-day week in the midst of the shortest month of the year.
But Tuesday’s bone-chilling arctic winds made it feel like winter had hit its longest stretch.
It was so cold, trash collection was canceled for the day in Omaha. That means trash and recycling pickup will be delayed by a day the rest of the week.
Residents also are advised to check with local news and social media for any additional changes to the schedule. Missed collections may be reported to the Solid Waste Hotline at 402-444-5238 after 7 p.m. on the scheduled collection day.
Wind chills dropped to around minus 15 degrees in the metro area Tuesday morning. Winds gusting in excess of 30 mph sucked the warmth away from anyone outside.
Wednesday is forecast to feel even colder in the morning. The low is forecast around minus 3 degrees, and wind chills could drop to around minus 20 degrees in the metro area.
The good news is that the winds die down on Wednesday, said Scott Dergan, meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

Light snow is forecast in the metro area Wednesday night through Thursday, he said.
Expect another cold day Thursday, with single-digit lows and highs in the midteens, before a gradual warmup begins Friday.
By the weekend, highs are forecast in the 40s in Omaha. And on Tuesday, temperatures could reach 50 degrees.
By Nancy Gaarder and Kevin Cole

OWH Midlands Voices: Tailored education could reduce risks of cancer for Nebraskans

According to the American Cancer Society, nearly half of all cancer diagnoses and almost half of all deaths from cancer are preventable. The statistics are striking, but as the great Dr. Irving Selikoff said, "statistics are merely numbers with the tears wiped away."
So how can we reach a goal to turn such statistics from tears into cancer victories? Education is the key.
According to the ACS, lung, colorectal and breast cancers are the top three cancer killers in the U.S., accounting for 1,240 deaths in Nebraska this year. In Nebraska, pancreatic cancer replaces breast cancer as the third most common cause of cancer deaths. We could reduce incidences of all cancers if we just did what we already know to do — limit sun and UV light exposure, avoid tobacco products, limit alcohol consumption, be active, eat healthily, maintain a healthy weight, get anti-cancer vaccines, undergo cancer screening, know your family history and embrace preventative health care.
Sounds great, but do you know what these recommendations mean? How much alcohol is OK? What is a healthy weight for me? What is a healthy, anti-cancer diet? What is an anti-cancer vaccine? What is important about family history?
How can we best answer these questions to achieve this preventable cancer goal for Nebraskans? Education tailored to a community's needs is critical.
Nebraska has many unique determinants of cancer care, including our large rural population (34%), scattered over 67 of our 93 counties. In the case of colorectal cancer, we know that variables within this distribution lead to disparities in early diagnosis with rural areas diagnosed at a later stage than some urban areas. Similar disparities likely exist with other cancers.
Just as there are rural-urban disparities, Nebraska has many disparities based on race, ethnicity, refugee status, household income, poverty and level of education.
Each of Nebraska's communities, individually, are best equipped to understand and implement strategies to answer these questions, delivered by a trusted peer in a way that will be accepted and understood in that community.
A Nebraska-based organization consisting of health care professionals, survivors, caregivers, individuals and public and private organizations with the ability to develop and execute available resources would be of invaluable assistance in building the trust and long-term, sustainable partnerships necessary to accomplish our goal.
State Sen. Robert Hilkemann introduced LB 1230 to provide funding for a nonprofit organization to work toward these education goals. Grassroots input from each of our 93 counties would feed a neutral, diversely governed, Nebraska-based organization working with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to build on the foundation provided by the CDC's Comprehensive Cancer Control Program. This, along with support from national, regional and local partners, leverages the best opportunity to coordinate services, prevent duplication, and utilize the approach a local

community needs to reach its unique populations.
History has shown effective public education and policy initiatives have achieved some of the most significant reductions in cancer morbidity and mortality. For example, education and policy helped reduce cigarette smoking rates among U.S. adults by 67% from 1965 to 2019.
If we do nothing more, there will be just over 11,000 new cancer diagnoses and more than 3,500 cancer deaths in Nebraska this year. With 108,000 cancer survivors, Nebraska has shown good progress in reducing cancer incidence and increasing survival. However, there is more work to be done to meet the needs of all Nebraskans. Knowledge is power.
During National Cancer Prevention Month, my colleagues and I pledge to continue to raise our voices in favor of tailored education on cancer prevention. Additionally, I encourage Nebraskans to spend time speaking with their health care providers about what they can do now to reduce personal risks for cancer.
Dr. Alan Thorson is the chair of the Nebraska Cancer Coalition, a statewide, non-profit organization of more than 200 organizations comprised of local health departments, cancer centers, medical associations, health systems and individual medical providers.

OWH: Rotunda rules

On Valentine's Day, there was a rally in the Capitol rotunda called "Stop the AltEn Coverup." The AltEn ethanol plant used pesticide treated seeds to produce ethanol resulting in tons and tons of contaminated byproducts that have been polluting and continue to pollute the ethanol plant site and the surrounding area. LR159 will have a hearing on Feb. 24. This resolution, if passed, will appoint a special investigative and oversight committee on the AltEn crisis. This committee will investigate how, why and when things went wrong at AltEn and how weak the regulatory response was and why the problem persists. This committee would create an open process for finding solutions to this unprecedented and unique to Nebraska problem.
Before the rally, organizers were told that we could bring signs no larger than 11- by 17-inches. Having observed photos of another recent event in the rotunda that had a huge backdrop, I decided to create a banner for our backdrop to see what would happen. Sure enough, I was told that banners were not allowed. I quickly produced a photo of Gov. Pete Ricketts in the rotunda endorsing Mike Flood featuring a huge backdrop (called a step and repeat) with "Mike Flood, U.S. Congress" plastered all over the banner. I was then permitted to display my banner and an easel was provided to hold it. When I previously saw that the rotunda was being used to endorse a political candidate, as inappropriate as I thought that was, I endeavored to see how the rules were applied. The same rules should apply to everyone. At any rate, I'm glad that we could display our banner at the "Stop the AltEn Coverup" rally, but it raised another issue that needs a remedy — what should the rules be for signage in the rotunda and how can it be assured that the rules are fairly enforced?
David Corbin, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 2/23: Err on side of transparency in canal process

Gov. Pete Ricketts is selling his $500 million South Platte River canal project hard to Nebraskans. And he ought to. That's a lot of money, and whether it comes from federal relief funds or state reserves, it's taxpayer money. We are all investors in this plan to exercise our right to river water that Ricketts warns Colorado is trying to lay claim to.

So, based on both the importance of the project as Ricketts pitches it and the amount of taxpayer money involved, it was galling that the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee voted to shut out the media and public last week.

Unlike other public bodies in Nebraska, the Legislature isn't bound by public meetings laws. But members ought to very careful about when they decide the public doesn't have a right to know about what it's up to.

In this case, the rationale for closing the meeting was described by Suzanne Gage, spokesperson for the attorney general's office: "Historically, when the Attorney General's Office meets with a Legislative committee on matters involving interstate water compacts, we have met in closed session because the discussions involve pending or imminent litigation associated with these compacts."

Colorado's first legal salvo was fired shortly after Ricketts announced Nebraska's intent. It's hard to image a time during this entire canal project that there won't be the specter of "imminent litigation." So how much of the people's money will be spent without any public scrutiny because of the threat of "imminent litigation"? Who will decide what members of the public deserve to know, and when they deserve to know it?

That $500 million price tag, by many accounts, is vastly understated. In a project that could involve eminent domain, enormous court battles and expensive studies even before any real construction begins, it's inconceivable that the public could be shut out of much of the discussion.

If the stakes are as high as Ricketts says, the state bears a solemn responsibility to keep the process as open as possible. Last week, the meeting should've been kept open to the public. If the attorney general's office can't or shouldn't answer a question for legal reasons, its representative can decline to answer at that time and respond later.

"Imminent litigation" can't be a cover to rob residents and taxpayers of transparency on a costly project that is as critical to the state's future as this is being billed.

OWH: Nebraska's members of Congress condemn Russia, criticize Biden's response to Ukraine

Members of Nebraska's congressional delegation Tuesday roundly denounced Russia's incursion into Ukraine and called on President Joe Biden to intensify the United State's response.

Their remarks came a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized two pro-Russia regions in eastern Ukraine as independent and authorized the deployment of troops to the regions.

In response, Biden on Tuesday announced new sanctions on Russian oligarchs and banks and a repositioning of NATO troops to member states in the region.

The five members of Nebraska's all-Republican delegation added their voices to a growing, international chorus of condemnation aimed at Russia. But they also leveled varying critiques of Biden's response, with several members explicitly stating that the administration's actions have, thus far, been insufficient.

Biden on Tuesday held back on the toughest sanctions that could cause economic turmoil for Russia but said they would be implemented if there is further aggression.

"The sanctions are a good start, and I also support sending ground and aviation units to Poland and the Baltics. But for Ukraine, the response since December has been too little, too late, and too weak," said Rep. Don Bacon, who represents Omaha in Nebraska's 2nd Congressional District. "We should have sent Ukraine anti-shipping and anti-air weapons, but it is not too late to do so."

The U.S. and NATO allies have supplied some weapons to Ukraine, but U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse called for sending more weapons to the country, saying the U.S. “should be doing gun runs around the clock to arm the Ukrainian people to the teeth.”

The Nebraska senator was among a bipartisan group of 21 members of Congress who attended the 2022 Munich Security Conference this past weekend.

“Our goal should be pretty simple: Help the Ukrainian resistance hold on for as long as possible,” Sasse said in a statement. “Make Putin regret his flagrant disregard for the rule of law.”

None of Nebraska’s congressional members called for the deployment of U.S. troops to Ukraine — a move that Biden has repeatedly said is off the table.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, who also expressed support for arming Ukraine and criticized the Biden administration’s response, stressed the role of energy.

Russia is among the largest fossil fuel exporters in the world, and Europe is heavily reliant on Russia for its energy.

Fortenberry said the conflict highlights the importance of “American energy independence” and the need for Europe to end its reliance on Russian natural gas. He also called on Europe to increase its support of NATO, the international alliance created early in the Cold War. The U.S. has been and remains NATO’s biggest and most influential member.

“Only by reestablishing strength do we have leverage for diplomacy,” Fortenberry said.

Other members called for continued collaboration among NATO allies to, as Rep. Adrian Smith said, “hold President Putin accountable.”

“The U.S. must work alongside our allies when weighing our options,” said Smith, whose 3rd District extends across much of Nebraska. “In the meantime, President Biden must take steps to ensure — should Russia further violate Ukraine’s sovereignty — no American is left stranded.”

In a series of tweets, U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer said “Biden must show firm resolve, work with our allies and immediately put in place strong sanctions.”

“Strong action is necessary to deter Russia from widening the conflict,” Fischer said.

By Ryan Hoffman

LJS: Sasse, Fortenberry doubt impact of U.S. sanctions against Russia

Sen. Ben Sasse on Tuesday described President Joe Biden's sanctions against Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine as "too little, too late."

"These sanctions should have happened before (Russian President Vladimir) Putin further invaded Ukraine — not after," the Republican senator said.

"Second, economic sanctions now need to more aggressively target Putin's oligarchs to make sure they feel real pain," he said.

"Third, we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that today's incremental sanctions will deter Putin from trying to install a puppet government in Kyiv."

The United States should supply Ukraine with more weapons, Sasse said, and "arm the Ukrainian people to the teeth."

Republican Rep. Jeff Fortenberry said "late-game sanctions after a failed (Vice President) Kamala Harris visit to Germany are not going to stop this determined aggressor."

Fortenberry suggested immediate return to American energy independence, an end to European dependence on Russian natural gas, reestablishment of Europe's burden-sharing with NATO and "arms for and support of reform within Ukraine" as actions that would make a difference.

By Don Walton

AP: National Guard to help DC control traffic for truck convoys

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon has approved the deployment of 700 unarmed National Guard troops to the nation's capital as it prepares for trucker convoys that are planning protests against pandemic restrictions beginning next week.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin approved the request Tuesday from the District of Columbia government and the U.S. Capitol Police, the Pentagon said in a statement Tuesday night.

The troops would be used to assist with traffic control during demonstrations expected in the city in the coming days, the Pentagon said. Four hundred Guard members from the District of Columbia Guard will be joined by 300 Guard members from other states, according to the statement.

Guard members will not carry firearms or take part in law enforcement or domestic-surveillance activities, the Pentagon said.

Modeled after recent trucker protests in Canada, separate truck convoys have been planned through online forums with names like the People's Convoy and the American Truckers Freedom Fund — all with different starting points, departure dates and routes. Some are scheduled to arrive in time for President Joe Biden's State of the Union address on March 1, though others may arrive afterward.

The convoys follow the recent Canadian truckers' protest which shut down the busiest U.S. Canadian border crossing and besieged the streets of the capital, Ottawa, for weeks to protest government pandemic restrictions. The multiple blockades were broken up by police last week, with more than 100 arrests.

It remains to be seen if any of the U.S. convoys would seek to actively shut down Washington's streets, the way their Canadian counterparts did in Ottawa. Some convoy organizers have spoken of plans to briefly roll through the city, then focus on shutting down the Beltway, which encircles the capital.

A statement from the People's Convoy specifically says the trucks "will NOT be going into DC proper." That convoy is planning to embark Wednesday from southern California and arrive in D.C. around March 5.

The U.S. convoys seek an immediate lifting of what they say are heavy-handed government pandemic restrictions like mask mandates and vaccine requirements. The American Truckers Freedom Fund website says the group is protesting "the unscientific, unconstitutional overreach of the federal government."

Vaccines have proven highly effective at preventing COVID-19 infections, especially serious illness and death, and high-quality masks offer strong protection against spreading or contracting the disease. Public sentiment, especially among conservatives, has been shifting against government mandates as the pandemic heads into its third year.

People's Convoy organizer Mike Landis, in a video testimonial on the group's website, said the current COVID vaccine "is not proven yet" but supported individual choice on whether to take it or not. Landis said the convoy was open to all vehicles and said the primary goal was to pressure Biden to lift the national state of emergency.

"We want this government to bring back the Constitution," Landis said. "We do not want to be under a dictatorship communism-style regime, like where we are right now."

A state of emergency in the U.S. was declared by President Donald Trump in March 2020. Last week,

Biden announced his intention to extend it beyond the current March 1 expiration date.
The websites organizing the American trucker convoys directly reference the inspiration of the Canadian movement. A statement on the People's Convoy website pays homage to "our brave and courageous neighbors to the north — our Canadian brothers and sisters who led the charge."
Metropolitan Police Department Chief Robert Contee said Friday that his department was closely monitoring the shifting information and would be devoting additional police manhours in a rolling state of heightened alert over the next few weeks. In the meantime, he warned D.C. residents to stay alert for unexpected traffic snarls.
"There will be disruptions to traffic, that kind of thing," Contee said. "I think we need to be very candid with the public about what some of the expectations, based upon what we've seen in Ottawa, that we might see here in the District."
Contee called the Ottawa standoff "an incredible situation — one that we have not seen here in the District of Columbia."
Contee and Mayor Muriel Bowser memorably predicted unrest several days before the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol Building. They warned residents to stay indoors and called for additional resources, but the Capitol Police and National Guard were still caught unprepared when crowds of Trump supporters overran the building, resulting in several deaths and numerous injuries.
Lingering memories of that debacle have fueled a heightened sense of anxiety and speculation over the coming convoys. But Bowser said she wasn't yet warning residents to avoid the Capitol area or the National Mall.
"We're not at a point to give specific instructions to residents just yet. We will," Bowser said.

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