From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 2-10-20
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Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Feb 2020	3.55	-25.00	08:57
Corn	Dec 2020	3.51	-40.00	08:57
Milo	Feb 2020	2.92	-88.00	08:57
Milo	Dec 2020	3.06	-85.00	08:57
Soybeans	Feb 2020	7.86	-95.00	08:57
Soybeans	Dec 2020	8.12	-105.00	08:57
Wheat	Feb 2020	4.04	-70.00	08:57
Wheat	Jul 2020	4.12	-75.00	08:55

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Norfolk DN: Candidates file for primary as deadline approaches
Kearney Hub: Use water resources wisely, says retiring natural resources director
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Bloomberg Tax: State of the States: Tax Relief Leads Governors' 2020 Agendas

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GII: Five state senators, Lt. Gov. Mike Foley discuss pro-life legislation at event Saturday
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LJS: After 80 years in Washington, J. Sterling Morton will come home — all 5,500 pounds of him

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OWH Editorial: Prison director's visit to North Omaha was commendable outreach

OWH Editorial: OPPD and Sarpy County need to communicate, resolve their concerns

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KCAU: Nebraska Gov. Ricketts recognizes firefighters, first responders for heroism in 2019 historic floods

LINCOLN, Neb. (KCAU) – Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts recently visited the Fremont, O'Neill, and Spencer fire department and first responders to recognize firefighters for their heroism during the historic floods of 2019. Each fire department performed rescues that saved lives in the aftermath of the floods.

The fire departments were selected to receive the Governor's Flood Heroes award after being nominated by fellow Nebraskans.

In December 2019, Governor and First Lady Ricketts hosted a ceremony at the State Capitol to honor those

individuals and groups. Some of the fire departments were unable to attend that event.
Over the last month, Governor Ricketts has been traveling to the fire departments that couldn't attend to thank them and to present their Flood Heroes awards.
Earlier in the year, Ricketts visited the communities of Chapman, Pleasanton, and Wood River to recognize their fire departments.
By Reilly Mahon

GII: Governor's Ag Conference scheduled for March 9, 10

KEARNEY — Gov. Pete Ricketts will host the 32nd annual Governor's Ag Conference set for Monday, March 9, and Tuesday, March 10, at the Holiday Inn and Convention Center in Kearney.
The annual event gives producers and agri-business leaders in Nebraska an opportunity to discuss the state's number one industry and strategies to support future growth in agriculture.
"The Governor's Ag Conference brings together Nebraska's farmers, ranchers and industry leaders for a conversation about the important issues that matter to all of us," Ricketts said. "From growing Nebraska agriculture through entrepreneurship to developing emerging markets, the future of the ag industry in Nebraska depends on people willing to lead and learn. I hope you will join us in Kearney for this special event."
Nebraska Department of Agriculture Director Steve Wellman said knowledgeable experts at local, state and federal levels have already committed to speaking at this year's Governor's Ag Conference.
The conference starts at 3:30 p.m. Monday with a panel presentation featuring Nebraska entrepreneurs Sara Holmquist, Normal Roasting Co.; Matthew Brugger, Upstream Farms; Jeff Hornug, Blue River Trucks; Hannah Esch, Oak Barn Beef; and Steve Tippery, RealmFive Agriculture. Tom Field of the University of Nebraska's Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program will moderate this panel presentation that will include questions from the audience.
A "Celebrate Nebraska Agriculture" reception featuring an assortment of food and beverages from Nebraska follows at 6 p.m.
The conference resumes at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday with Michele Payn of Cause Matters Corp. and author of "Food Bullying: How to Avoid Buying B.S." Payn will provide insights into eating choices by challenging food beliefs and identifying neuromarketing tactics used to generate food sales.
Next on the agenda will be a panel presentation addressing new and emerging markets in Nebraska. Panelists include Tyler and Amy Bruch of Cyclone Farms, Inc., and Jacob Robison with the Nebraska Hops Growers Association.
Andrei Iancu, undersecretary of Commerce for Intellectual Property and director of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, will then talk about growing start-up companies in Nebraska.
The Governor's Ag Conference is coordinated by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture and co-sponsored by Farm Credit Services of America. A $125 registration fee covers activities and food for the entire conference. Registration and more information is available at nda.nebraska.gov or by calling NDA at (800) 831-0550.

AP: Nebraska lawmakers skeptical about redistricting reform

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) – Nebraska lawmakers who want to minimize partisanship when they redraw the state's political boundaries will make one final push to change the process before it begins anew next year, but creating an independent commission to guide their work appears to be a lost cause.
Barring any changes, the process that's set to begin in the 2021 legislative session will follow the same rules that led to a bitter struggle between Republicans and Democrats during the last redistricting in 2011.
Several proposals to create an independent commission to draw legislative, congressional and other districts have stalled, including one vetoed by Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts.

KLKN: Nebraska's attempts to minimize partisanship may be lost cause

In an effort to minimize partisanship when redrawing the state's political boundaries, Nebraska lawmakers are

pushing to change the process. But, creating an independent commission to guide their work seems to be a lost cause.
As of now, the 2021 legislative session will follow the same process as the 2011 redistricting.
Proposals made to create an independent commission to draw legislative, congressional, and other districts have stalled, including one vetoed by Gov. Pete Ricketts.
By Ashley Springman

OWH: Feds, state to help pay for repairs after canal collapse

The Panhandle's ag and irrigation community will be getting financial aid to help pay for repairs to a vital irrigation canal that collapsed last year.
The federal Bureau of Reclamation has announced that it will allocate $2.3 million toward the repairs. The loan will be in addition to a $3.8 million grant that Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts has said the state will provide.
Repairs to the canal that straddles the Nebraska-Wyoming border are expected to cost about $16 million, with the cost being split roughly in half between those on each side of the border, said Rick Preston, general manager of the Gering-Fort Laramie Irrigation District.
"We're very appreciative (of the aid)," he said. "Without it, we wouldn't be able to get this done."
The canal carries irrigation water from the North Platte River to farmers in semiarid western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming.
The collapse occurred July 17. Governors in Nebraska and Wyoming declared emergencies, and temporary repairs were completed by late August. Preston said completion of permanent repairs is targeted for April 2021.
Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., also welcomed the federal funding. In a statement last week, her office noted that the Bureau of Reclamation had previously said it couldn't fund repairs.
Preston said the aid will ease the financial burden on the district. He estimates that funding the repairs will cost members of the drainage district an additional $5 on their $31.25-peracre assessment - for 50 years.
The section of canal that collapsed was a tunnel through a hill. Preston said it's believed that wet weather and the weight of saturated soil above the tunnel caused the collapse.
By Nancy Gaarder

LJS: Missouri River vulnerable to more flooding as levee repair continues

The Missouri River levee system remains vulnerable to flooding with the approach of March, but a comparatively mild winter and early snow melt in the state may help alleviate some of the danger, the commander of the Omaha District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Friday.
The Corps already has spent $263 million on river levee restoration repairing damage from last March's record flooding with "hundreds of contractors working every day" to complete their work by March 1, Col. John Hudson said in a telephone interview.
"Life, safety and protecting communities is the priority for the Corps of Engineers," he emphasized.
Almost $400 million in additional levee restoration expenditures are currently in the works, Hudson said.
"There's a lot of work still be done, but we're well on our way in time for March 1."
Upstream, the Corps has increased the amount of water normally discharged into the Missouri River from Gavins Point Dam in South Dakota.
Current releases are more than double what is typical for this time of year.
"We are fortunate that the snow pack in the mountains is average (and) periodic snow melt locally is very helpful," Hudson said.
"However, we are concerned by saturation, particularly in the Dakotas, and expect an above-average flow."
Recent criticism that the Corps may be more mindful of protecting fish and wildlife, as a result of federal environmental protection requirements, rather than farmers and communities is "a very inaccurate characterization," Hudson said.
"All our decisions are focused on flood-control aspects," he said.
State Sen. Julie Slama of Peru has recently been sharply critical of the Corps, and Gov. Pete Ricketts has urged the

Corps to "put people and property first."
Ricketts has joined with the governors of Iowa, Kansas and Missouri in voicing their concerns to the Corps.
Hudson said he will meet soon with Slama and the governor in Peru, where flooding was severe but repair of a damaged levee is not a Corps responsibility.
"We cannot use federal funds to repair and restore that levee," he said, because local officials did not keep it actively engaged in the Corps system.
"We don't have authority," he said. "They're going to have to rely on assistance from the state."
The Corps is currently engaged in a study of how management of the Missouri River from Sioux City, Iowa, to St. Louis can be improved.
"We want to look at system capacity below Gavins Point all the way to St. Louis," Hudson said.
A range of potential solutions could include realignment of levees, higher levees and more resilient levees, he said.
Flood management issues include local and state zoning factors, with a focus on "what they allow to be built," Hudson said.
Last year's record flooding in Nebraska occurred in March, with rain, snow and ice flows ripping up roads, destroying bridges and burying farm fields, combining to result in more than $1 billion in damage.
By Don Walton

OWH: Workforce challenges prompt business leaders' call for a more inclusive Nebraska

Walk into the downtown branch of Wells Fargo in Omaha and the associate who greets you at the door is a former refugee from Sudan.
At the teller windows, a Latina woman works alongside a white Army veteran who is transitioning to a new career.
With the fast-changing demographic face of Nebraska and the nation, such diverse workplaces will inevitably become more common in Nebraska's future. And that's part of what's prompted a drive by business leaders to urge Nebraska's employers, policymakers and people to make a true commitment to diversity and inclusion.
For Nebraska to compete and prosper amid a worldwide shortage of skilled workers, business leaders say the state can't afford to exclude anyone, no matter their gender, race, sexual orientation or economic status.
"As we go forward, diversity and inclusion is not an option, it's not something nice — it's fundamental to the economic development of our state," said Bryan Slone, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
But traditionally white and conservative Nebraska faces some challenges if it's going to figuratively throw its arms wide open to workers everywhere. Nebraska at times comes up short when it comes to embracing people who are different.
Nebraska is among 25 states that have declined to enact state laws protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender workers from workforce discrimination, seen by some young workers as a touchstone on whether a state's commitment to diversity is real. Nebraska Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts is strongly opposed to such a law, which neighboring Iowa passed 13 years ago.
People of color in Nebraska disproportionately face economic, educational and job challenges. The state's racial disparities in educational achievement are among the highest in the nation.
While Nebraska has a 150-year history as a landing spot for immigrants and refugees from around the world, refugee settlement and immigration aren't universally welcomed.
Nebraska is no leader in reducing the historical pay gap for women, either.
For the state to prosper in the future, such things must change, said David Brown, CEO of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce. He says Nebraska can enjoy a competitive advantage if it creates a state where workers from all backgrounds thrive.
"We need to recognize we have a golden opportunity staring us in the face," he said.
Business leaders and economic development consultants also say issues of diversity and inclusion are critical to competing for the tech-savvy, creative millennials whose talents are fueling much of the job creation and job growth around the country today.
"The younger population that is graduating from our universities cares deeply about diversity and inclusion," said Lance Fritz, CEO of Union Pacific Railroad. "And they wonder when they look at our state whether we care about

that as deeply as they do."
To meet such challenges, the Omaha chamber has embraced diversity and inclusion in its current five-year economic development campaign. As part of that plan, the chamber in the past year launched a program encouraging Omaha businesses to adopt inclusive hiring practices.
The Omaha chamber is not the only business organization pushing more diversity in the workplace.
Diversity and inclusion have also been top of mind in the workforce initiatives being pushed by the nonprofit Aksarben Foundation. An Aksarben working group that's tackling the state's shortage of high-tech workers has been developing strategies designed to get more women, minorities and military veterans into tech jobs.
And the "Blueprint Nebraska" state economic development strategy developed by a panel of Nebraska business leaders last summer stressed the importance of diversity and inclusion. Putting it in broad and simple terms, Blueprint set a goal of making Nebraska "the most welcoming state in the Midwest."
The roots of the diversity push are both practical and strategic.
It recognizes the changing face of Nebraska, where more than one in five residents are members of minority groups — almost triple the rate from three decades earlier. Filling Nebraska's jobs of tomorrow will inevitably require tapping that ever-more-diverse population.
The inclusiveness push recognizes the rapid pace of cultural change when it comes to issues of gender, sexual orientation and sexual identity. For the latest example, look no further than last weekend's Super Bowl, where an assistant coach for the San Francisco 49ers became the first woman and first openly gay person to coach in pro football's championship game.
But the diversity push could at times run into political opposition in a historically red state like Nebraska. Issues like gay rights, immigration and refugee resettlement often lie along the fault line of the nation's political divide. Just last week, workplace protections for gay workers became a flashpoint when the Nebraska chamber for the first time endorsed such a law, prompting protests from Ricketts and some religious groups.
Nebraska also voted strongly in 2016 for Republican Donald Trump, who since taking office has slashed legal immigration and refugee resettlement, fought court decisions extending workforce protections to gay workers, and moved to strike the previous administration's protections from deportation for "Dreamers" — the undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children who are now filling thousands of jobs in Nebraska and nationally.
But Nebraska's traditionally conservative leanings make business leaders' diversity and inclusion push all the more remarkable. It underlies concerns that without changes in employment practices, state policies and public attitudes, Nebraska could be economically left behind in the national battle for talent.
As an example of the perceived urgency, during a business summit on the state's workforce challenges a year ago, leaders of some of Omaha's fastest-growing startup companies were outspoken in arguing that Nebraska's lack of legal job protections for gay workers was undercutting their firms' efforts to attract talent.
"They were saying, 'We have got to figure this out, because it's killing us,' " said Hank Robinson, a University of Nebraska at Omaha researcher who has worked on Aksarben's workforce initiatives. "We cannot recruit people to Omaha if we're not truly welcoming of all based on race, color, creed or sexual orientation."

The challenges

As recently as 1990, Nebraska's population was nearly 93% white. Women's move into the labor force had yet to peak. And most gay people were not open about their sexual orientation, with a Gallup poll just two years earlier showing most Americans still believed same-sex relationships among consenting adults should be illegal.
The past three decades have brought dramatic change on all those fronts.
Now not only are 1 in 5 Nebraskans members of minority groups, UNO's Center for Public Affairs Research projects the figure will be nearly 1 in 3 by 2040. Similarly, by 2045, the United States is projected to become a "majority-minority" nation.
The racial shifts both here and nationally have largely been the result of a wave of Hispanic immigration from Mexico and Central America and the resettlement of refugees from strife-torn countries including Somalia, Sudan and Myanmar. The new arrivals, both the undocumented and those arriving legally, have often filled low-skill labor jobs that otherwise may have gone wanting.
Those immigrants have also played an outsized role in Nebraska's population growth in that time. Now the second and third generations of that immigrant wave are being counted on to help fill Nebraska's skilled jobs of today and

tomorrow.
“We’re going to see a significant change in demographics in this market,” Brown said. “If we are going to be able to use that as a competitive advantage, both as employers and the community itself, we need to be more inclusive.”
But there are challenges to preparing the state’s increasingly diverse population for those jobs. People of color are far more likely to grow up in poverty, a major barrier to educational success.
Through privately funded scholarships and other programs targeting at-risk youths, Nebraska in recent years has markedly increased school success for people of color. The Omaha metro area’s black population now has a higher rate of college degree attainment than the national black average, a sharp reversal of the trend from a decade ago.
Still, in 2018 only 14 states had a wider gap than Nebraska between the percentage of its white population with college degrees and the college-educated percentage of its minority population. For young adults with associate degrees or more, the state’s minority/white disparity is the nation’s third-largest. Nebraska’s gap in per-capita income between whites and minorities is also above the national average.
When it comes to gender diversity, women have continued to play ever-bigger roles in the nation’s workforce. While men still outnumber women when farmers and the self-employed are counted, women in December surpassed men within the nation’s payroll workforce. And women long ago overtook men on the nation’s college campuses, with 57% of all U.S. college graduates now women.
Those trends make quality child care, paid family leave and the gender pay gap front-line issues for states and employers looking to attract talent.
A report last month found that Nebraska is $450 million short of the funding needed to make quality child care widely available. Census data also shows Nebraska ranks in the middle among the states in the gap between its average pay for men and women.
Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers are also now a force that can’t be ignored.
Gallup polling has indicated 4.5% of Americans now identify as LGBT. That translates into roughly 8.1 million workers nationwide and about 41,000 in Nebraska. Among the millennial generation, the numbers may be even higher, with 7% of that generation identifying as LGBT in a 2017 study.
Employers are certainly taking notice. During gay pride month last June, Conagra Brands flew 34 rainbow flags along its main campus drive in Omaha. Conagra and Omaha-based TD Ameritrade also both recently received 100% scores for LGBT-friendly workplace policies and practices from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, an LGBT civil rights organization.
With backing from business, city leaders in Omaha and Lincoln nearly a decade ago passed ordinances giving LGBT workers the same protection against job discrimination that’s provided under state law for people based on race, color, religion, sex, disability, marital status and national origin. However, the Nebraska Legislature has repeatedly rejected applying LGBT legal protections statewide, most recently last year.
Union Pacific’s Fritz, who co-chaired Blueprint Nebraska, has been an outspoken advocate of passing such a law. He said the railroad has seen in its recruiting the importance of inclusion when potential employees choose whether to make Nebraska home.
“If you are looking for the best of the best, it makes no sense to ignore any segment of the population,” Fritz said. “They have to feel they can bring their best self to Union Pacific, Omaha and Nebraska.”
Andrew Prystai, the 27-year-old co-founder of an Omaha startup called Event Vesta that launched a web app connecting people to community events, said he knows such laws can create concerns about new regulations for business. But he said for many young workers, the issue is an important barometer of whether a state’s commitment to inclusion goes beyond just words.

The role of millennials

When Fritz and other business leaders talk about issues of inclusion, they often mention the critical role of millennials like Prystai, and for good reason.
Millennials — born between 1981 and 1996 — are now the largest generation in the U.S. workforce, surpassing the baby boomers, who are fast moving into retirement, and Generation X. Five years from now, millennials are projected to make up 75% of the global workforce.
Notably for Nebraska, most millennials fall within the 18-35 age demographic that the state often struggles to

attract or keep rooted here.
Additionally, employers are fast finding that millennials are very different from the generations of workers that preceded them.
The members of this new generation grew up in an interconnected world and are more likely to have friends who are not the same color they are or are openly gay. Not only are millennials more attuned to issues of inclusion, they often seek out diverse settings — including in the workplace.
A study two years ago by the Institute for Public Relations found that 47% of millennials consider the diversity and inclusiveness of a workplace as important criteria in their job search. That compared with 37% for boomers and 33% for Gen Xers.
"That generation, in a very positive sense, has an intention of living and working in a diverse environment," the state chamber's Slone said. "And that means diversity in its broadest sense — diversity in gender, age and race, but also diversity in experience, cultures and nationality."
The good news for employers is that not only can embracing diversity and inclusion help attract workers, it can make them more successful, too. A 2015 study by global business consultant McKinsey & Co. found that companies with higher gender and race diversity tended to be more profitable.
The data did not indicate why that was so, but the study's authors theorized that diversity helped the companies better understand their potential customers, offered them a wider range of ideas, enhanced the companies' public image and helped them win the talent war.
Prystai said it's no surprise to him that diverse companies are more successful. He recently observed his mother trying to operate a phone app that required her to swipe upward on the screen, something she found wasn't easy because of her long fingernails. It was obvious to Prystai the apps' developers didn't include any women, who could have pointed out the shortcoming.

Diversity at work

Kirk Kellner, an Omahan who heads Wells Fargo's Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri region, said he regularly sees the benefits that come from a diverse staff. Sometimes it's in obvious ways, such as when a Latino worker is able to speak in Spanish to a customer. But other times it's in the form of wider perspectives and ideas that challenge norms.
The bank's downtown Omaha branch serves a particularly diverse client base, and it has a melting pot staff to match. The 11 employees include natives of Sudan, Mexico, Dubai, Morocco and the Philippines, and the branch manager is a Latino native of South Omaha. Employees' name tags let customers know if they speak another language besides English.
On one recent day at the bank, personal banker James Lodu sat at his computer giving an online banking tutorial to one customer, an older white man who's one of Lodu's regulars. But as a former Sudanese refugee, the University of South Dakota graduate has also helped the bank attract a sizable base of customers from within Omaha's Sudanese and Somali communities.
Kellner said Wells Fargo wants a workforce that mirrors the community it serves, and he said it's found a simple way to achieve that: If you cast a wide net for job candidates and show them they will feel comfortable and welcome within your organization, you will attract a diverse pool. And if you hire the best of those candidates, diversity will follow.
To aid in employee retention, the bank also sponsors resource groups that allow diverse collections of employees to network, including groups for blacks, Latinos, women, LGBT and military veterans.
"We see differences as an asset," Kellner said.
Now state business leaders are seeking to get more businesses to see things that way.
The push began in 2017, when the Omaha chamber launched planning for its 20-year economic development goals. In engaging with the millennial generation that will make up the vast majority of that future workforce, diversity and inclusion became a frequent topic.
The chamber's resulting economic plan called for embracing Omaha's increasing diversity as "a community treasure." The chamber also established a new program that seeks to educate Omaha employers on the importance of diversity, setting a goal of helping 100 local firms adopt "best-in-the-nation" inclusive hiring and promotion practices.
Under the chamber's CODE initiative, short for Commitment to Opportunity, Diversity and Equity, companies are

encouraged to implement a comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategy and to measure their success. The chamber offers resources to assist them, including opportunities for their diverse employees to network with citywide resource groups. In CODE's first year, some 40 local companies have signed the pledge.
"This isn't just going to happen," Brown said. "We have to be intentional about it."
Tom Chapman, an Omaha-based tech consultant who has advised Aksarben's tech workforce initiative, recently said that if Nebraska is realistically going to attract enough skilled workers, it will need to welcome more international migration. That often means opening the door to more people who are nonwhite or don't speak English.
"We aren't very friendly to those people right now, and we need to do better," Chapman said last fall during a presentation before tech business leaders, drawing applause.
Then came this summer's Blueprint Nebraska report. Despite its sweeping sentiment for making Nebraska the region's most welcoming state, the report was short on detailed plans for increasing diversity and inclusion.
Still, Jim Smith, a former state senator who serves as Blueprint's executive director, considers it both remarkable and notable that out of the report's 15 signature recommendations from a panel of business leaders from across the state, one would call for broadly embracing diversity and inclusion — something no one would have predicted a decade ago. As the organization in coming years seeks to implement its vision, it will hammer out more concrete proposals, he said.
Wells Fargo's Kellner agreed there are many signs that attitudes in the state are changing. Initiatives like Blueprint and the ongoing philanthropic efforts to support school success for children in poverty make him optimistic about the future.
"If we can give an equal opportunity to everyone in our community, we will see a diverse workforce," he said. "I do feel the community is understanding the power of diversity and inclusion."
By Henry J. Cordes

OWH: LGBT advocates hope growing business support will push Nebraska to pass job discrimination ban

LINCOLN — Supporters of banning job discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity are hopeful that growing support from business leaders will finally push the measure to passage in Nebraska.
"This issue often gets tied up in partisan politics, but it really is a nonpartisan issue when you make the business case," said Abbi Swatsworth of OutNebraska, a gay rights advocacy group based in Lincoln. "It's about the perception of the state as a welcoming place."
Omaha and Lincoln business leaders have long been in favor of banning job discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and a key statewide business group joined them last month. It was the latest sign of concern among state business leaders that Nebraska's lack of an anti-discrimination law is harming efforts to retain and attract workers in a tight national labor market.
But such a law has been repeatedly voted down in the Legislature. It's firmly opposed by Gov. Pete Ricketts and some religious groups. And it's such a touchy political issue that a blue-ribbon panel of Nebraska leaders last summer danced around the topic when they recommended changes for moving the state's economy forward.
Ricketts and other opponents maintain that Nebraska can be open to all workers without passing a law they say could trample on the religious convictions of business owners.
"Policies like (this) discriminate against people of faith and divide our communities," the Nebraska Catholic Conference said.
Nationwide, 25 states and Washington, D.C., have adopted laws barring workforce discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, enacted either by their state legislatures or the state agencies that arbitrate such discrimination cases. Iowa has had its law since 2007. In all, more than half the nation's population now resides within states that have put such workplace protections in place.
Additionally, federal courts with jurisdiction over ten other states — covering an additional one-fifth of the nation's population — have ruled that the federal Civil Rights Act's bar on discrimination based on sex also covers sexual orientation and gender identity.
The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments on that federal issue last fall. Nebraska, through Attorney General Doug

Peterson, urged the high court to take up the case of a Michigan funeral home that fired a transgender employee. Peterson argued that the lower court was wrong to extend the federal sex discrimination law to include lesbian, gay or transgender employees, saying such a change should come from Congress, not the courts.

Four times in the past five years, the Legislature has voted down passing a discrimination measure on the state level. It's not yet clear whether lawmakers will seek to revive the latest bill — Legislative Bill 627 — in the current session.

The Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a leading voice for business in the state, in previous years had taken no position on such a law. That changed last month when the chamber's board unanimously supported it as part of a package of policies intended to advance the state economically.

State chamber President Bryan Slone said the move was consistent with a report this summer from a blue-ribbon panel of Nebraska business leaders that laid out a 20-year strategy for growth in the state. Ricketts disputed that, noting that the Blueprint Nebraska report did not reference such a law.

"Blueprint was designed to unify Nebraskans around initiatives that can move our state forward, not to pit people against each other on hot button issues," said Taylor Gage, a spokesman for Ricketts.

But Slone said the board decided that the law was supportive of Blueprint's call for Nebraska to promote diversity and inclusion as a way to retain and attract workers, as well as Blueprint's goal of making Nebraska "the most welcoming state in the Midwest."

Gage, in a statement, specifically noted that the law was not included in Blueprint's "final report." That raises questions about the process by which Blueprint reached its final recommendations and whether Ricketts had a hand in them. He was a co-founder of Blueprint and served on its advisory board.

Blueprint leaders say the report's section on diversity and inclusion started with the work of a subgroup that focused on the issue.

Carmen Tapio, the CEO of a North Omaha telemarketing firm who headed that working group, would not specifically say whether its recommendations included endorsing such a law.

"Our committee looked specifically at addressing the issue of equity in our state, on multiple fronts," she said.

Regardless, the job of putting the work of all 16 Blueprint subgroups into a final consensus report fell to Blueprint's staff and its 21-member steering committee, made up of business and industry representatives from across the state.

"I can tell you there was a vigorous debate on whether to include the diversity section," said Tanya Storer, a Whitman, Nebraska, rancher who served on the steering committee.

In the end, she said, the committee worked for a compromise that reflected differences of opinion.

Tim Burke, CEO of the Omaha Public Power District and a steering committee member who backs the job discrimination law, said the group decided to keep its recommendations to a more general endorsement of diversity and inclusion, leaving the "how" for Blueprint's implementation phase.

The report's final wording seemed to reflect that dance. Even a general list of types of diversity that included both gender and sexuality was struck late in the process. What was left was the report's broad, nonspecific embrace of diversity and inclusion.

"We are trying to find a common path forward," said Jim Smith, executive director of Blueprint.

In the end, Smith said all steering committee and advisory committee members had a chance to offer input on the report's final draft, including Ricketts. Gage said the governor did offer input on language in the report's diversity section "to align it with the views and priorities of the steering committee."

Burke, who is the Omaha chamber's chairman this year, said he remains hopeful that Blueprint can serve as a catalyst for change on the discrimination issue, something Swatsworth of OutNebraska said would be welcomed.

She said the issue affects lives well beyond the workplace. She knows of gay people in rural Nebraska who quietly live in fear of being outed, knowing it could cost them their jobs. And she said many millennials who grew up with gay friends want to see them legally protected.

"For (millennials), it seems like it should be a nonissue," she said. "There's a sense everyone should be treated on the merits of their work, and someone's private life shouldn't influence their ability to do their job."

By Henry J. Cordes

Omaha Reader: Blueprint Nebraska promises new jobs, people and income

For years, Nebraska has lagged in terms of retaining and attracting young talent. Recently, the problem's become more pronounced as thousands of residents are leaving every year for jobs and opportunities in other states.
In April 2018, a group of private and public partners, called Blueprint Nebraska, gathered to find out why and piece together a plan that could make Nebraska's economy nationally competitive for years to come.
After 15 months of research, the group, started by then-president of the University of Nebraska Hank Bounds and Governor Pete Ricketts, released its plan last summer. The result, which included input from about 7,000 people either online or in-person at 60 different statewide events and oversight by 320 advisors, set goals for drastic change by 2030.
Over the next 10 years, leaders of Blueprint Nebraska aim to attract 43,000 young adults, add 25,000 more jobs and increase per-capita annual income by $15,000.
Former State Senator Jim Smith of Papillion heads the group as executive director. The organization also includes a 21-member steering committee co-chaired by Union Pacific Chairman Lance Fritz, of Omaha, and 21st Century Holdings President and CEO Owen Palm, of Scottsbluff.
Among high-priority steps to achieve that: realigning Nebraska's tax strategy, promoting diversity and inclusion, upgrading transit, expanding internet access and rejuvenating community centers from the Main Streets of small towns to cultural hubs in major cities.
The details of that plan are contained in a 100-page report released on Blueprint Nebraska's website, blueprint-nebraska.org. A 10-page summary is also available.There is no estimated cost in the report or explanation of how these initiatives could be paid for.
In forecasting Nebraska's economy and building a long-term roadmap, researchers looked to make changes in four categories: people, places, government and industry.
People
Developing workforce and improving quality of life for minority populations are the two pillars of the "people" category.
Included in workforce development is the growing issue of thousands of jobs going unfilled due to workers having mismatched skills.
The report estimates that employment gap costs $11 billion in would-be wages and $824 million in tax revenues.
Blueprint Nebraska's solution is to have the most internships and apprenticeships per capita of any state in the Midwest to build skills and advance career paths.
Blueprint Nebraska also proposes to increase state funding for early childhood education and improve academic standards for students from kindergarten through college.
Aside from workforce development, the plan also focuses heavily on how to bring people to the state and make it more welcoming to minority communities.
Blueprint Nebraska cites studies from U.S. News & World Report, Move.org and Wallet Hub that rank Nebraska 48th in citizen equality, 40th in income gap by gender, 43rd in education gap by race, 48th in employment gap for disabled people, 37th in racial and ethnic diversity and 28th in inclusivity for LGBTQ+ families.
Solutions for the "people" category include establishing mentor programs, encouraging companies to make diversity a priority and improving programs for disadvantaged people — enhancing services for mental health, child care and homelessness being a few.
On the back of that, Blueprint Nebraska also wants to start a "Choose Nebraska" campaign that would work in tandem with other state advertising to attract and retain 18- to 34-year-olds.
Places
For the "places" category, Blueprint Nebraska calls for a big investment in arts, entertainment and recreation across the state but specifically in rural towns, pointing to the success of Broken Bow's multimillion-dollar revitalization as a model. The report also mentions increasing internet connectivity as well as building 30,000 to 50,000 new affordable homes. Less than half of people in extreme poverty have access to affordable housing, the report says.
It also notes transportation as a key issue. The report lists thousands of bridges that are either deficient or poor in quality while also stating the need for Omaha and Lincoln to have more modernized transit systems that include all-electric, bus-based rapid transit with dedicated lanes, driverless shuttles and shared electric car fleets. It also

calls for an increase in in-state air travel as well as national service to tech cities such as Boston and Austin.
Government
For a report replete with big-picture goals, its aim for government is no exception —make it simpler, more efficient and more effective. The report proposes a comprehensive review of all taxes and how to optimize them for growth.
In addition, the report calls on government to tighten up on incentive programs to both increase efficiency of business tax breaks and pass savings along to the state.
Sectors
Among the goals of the report's last category is to take advantage of existing industries that already have strengths in Nebraska as well as cultivate new ones where there's weakness.
Though agriculture is Nebraska's greatest economic asset, adoption and innovation of ag tech has trailed. The report's plan includes marketing, infrastructure development and increased research and development to make ag tech a priority in the state.
In an effort to grow the state's tech industry, Blueprint Nebraska also imagines creating tech clusters that will promote local entrepreneurship.
In 2020, Blueprint will enter its next phase — delivering concrete strategies based on proposals in its report. Six regional teams will devise these strategies and work in communities to bring even more volunteers and partners into the fold to develop concrete solutions to their goals. On Feb. 14, project leaders will meet with community members in Kearney to share information about their initiatives and seek guidance in prioritizing action.
To get involved or educate yourself on the plan, visit blueprint-nebraska.org.
By Chris Bowling

OWH: Cherry County commissioner to challenge Sen. Brewer representing Sand Hills

LINCOLN — Cherry County Board member Tanya Storer of Whitman has announced her candidacy to challenge incumbent State Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon to serve District 43 in the Nebraska Legislature.
That sets up a heavyweight fight over who will represent Nebraska's Sand Hills.
Storer is endorsed by former Gov. Kay Orr, and Brewer has been financially supported in the past by Gov. Pete Ricketts.
Storer, who has served six years on the County Board, said reducing the property tax burden on farmers, ranchers, businesses and families, and developing economic opportunities for her rural area, are her top priorities.
"My husband and I have built our life here, raised our family here and served our communities here. We know there is no better place to live, work and raise a family," she said in a press release.
Storer and her husband ranch and have three grown children.
By Paul Hammel

Norfolk DN: Candidates file for primary as deadline approaches

At least one city council seat in Norfolk will be challenged this coming election.
Christopher L. Moore has filed to run for a seat on the city council to represent the First Ward, which covers northeast Norfolk.
The seat is held by Dick Pfeil, who had not filed for reelection as of Friday. The deadline for incumbents to file is Tuesday, Feb. 18, and the deadline for nonincumbents is March 2.
One incumbent has already filed: Thad Murren, who represents Ward Four. No candidate, incumbent or otherwise, has filed for the other two seats up for reelection in Wards Two and Three, held by Jim Lange and Gary L. Jackson, respectively.
Norfolk Mayor Josh Moenning announced in January that he would be running for reelection but had not filed as of early February. No challenger has filed, either. Moenning ran unopposed in 2016.
The only candidate who has filed for the Norfolk Public Schools board of education is incumbent Arnie Robinson.
Five incumbents on the Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District board of directors have filed for reelection: Aaron Zimmerman of Pierce, Mark Hall of Norfolk, Robert Huntley of Norfolk, Jerry Allemann of Wayne and Gary

Loftis of Craig.
Six incumbents have filed for reelection on to the Northeast Community College board of governors: Donovan Ellis of Pierce, Nicole Sedlacek of O'Neill, Arlan Kuehn of South Sioux City, Gene Willers of Pilger, Dirk Petersen of Norfolk and Jeff Scherer of Beemer.
Only one candidate has filed for Madison County commissioner: Zak Hookstra of Norfolk, as a Libertarian. Incumbent Christian Ohl announced that he would not seek another term.
At least one competitive race appears to be emerging in area legislative districts. In District 15, which covers Dodge County, incumbent Lynne Walz of Fremont has filed for reelection and will face a challenge from David Rogers of Fremont.
Walz, a Democrat, is on the education and health and human services committees. She was picked as the running mate of Bob Krist in 2018 to challenge Gov. Pete Ricketts and Lt. Gov. Mike Foley. Rogers, according to the Fremont Tribune, is an entrepreneur and registered Republican.
In District 17, which covers Wayne, Dakota and Thurston counties, incumbent Joni Albrecht of Thurston has filed for a second term. Albrecht is a Republican who serves on the natural resources and transportation and telecommunications committees. No challenger has filed as of Jan. 31.
Jim Scheer of Norfolk — who represents District 19, which makes up Madison County and a small portion of Stanton County — cannot run again because of term limits. The only candidate to file for the open seat is businessman Mike Flood of Norfolk, who formerly represented the district from 2005 to 2013.
As of late January, no candidate has filed for District 41, which covers Boone, Antelope and Pierce counties. The office is held by Tom Briese of Albion, who is in his first term and could choose to run for reelection.
Tom Brewer of Gordon has filed for reelection in District 43, geographically the largest district in the state, which includes Cherry, Brown and Keya Paha counties.
All three congressional representatives in Nebraska are up for reelection, as well as the U.S. Senate seat held by Republican Ben Sasse of Fremont, who has already filed to run again. No other Republican had filed to challenge Sasse as of late January, and if that holds until March, Sasse would advance to the general election unopposed.
Four Democratic candidates have filed to run for Senate: Dennis F. Macek of Lincoln, Chris Janicek of Omaha, Angie Philips of Omaha and Larry Marvin of Fremont.
Although Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Lincoln is expected to run for another term for Nebraska's First Congressional District, which encompasses most of Northeast Nebraska, he has not yet filed. Libertarian Dennis P. Grace of Fremont and Democrat Babs Ramsey of Bellevue have filed for the seat and would both advance to the general election if no one else from their party challenges them.
Rep. Adrian Smith of Gering, whose Third Congressional District encompasses western, central and portions of North Central Nebraska, has filed for reelection and will face Republican challenger Larry Bolinger of Alliance in the May primary.
By Nick Gebhart

Kearney Hub: Use water resources wisely, says retiring natural resources director

HOLDREGE — Department of Natural Resources Director Jeff Fassett believes Nebraska is in "a really good place" for water resources.
He also knows that Mother Nature provided wet weather the past few years — overdoing it in 2019 — which helped supply water for crops, fill reservoirs and keep Nebraska in compliance with compacts and other interstate agreements.
Fassett said flooding has dominated the dialogue the past year, but DNR will "not get distracted by a couple of wet years because drought will be back."
He's seen weather variability since he came to Nebraska in August 2015.
"When I got here I was told, 'Jeff, the Harlan County Reservoir will never ever fill again,'" Fassett said with a smile. "And here we are."
It was a big test in 2019 for a project built for flood control after the 1935 Republican River flood.
Gov. Pete Ricketts announced last month that Fassett, who previously was the Wyoming state engineer, will retire Feb. 28. DNR Assistant Director Jesse Bradley will be interim director.

Republican Basin

Although Fassett discussed several water issues Thursday at the South Central Water Conference in Holdrege, he spent the most time reviewing milestones in Nebraska's efforts to comply with the 1943 Republican River Compact with Colorado and Kansas.

For years, Kansas claiming Nebraska's noncompliance kept attorneys for both states busy fighting lawsuits.

"The ability for Nebraska to comply is secure now," Fassett said, as a result of changes in water management that include streamflow augmentation projects, integrated (groundwater-surface water) management plans, irrigation water conservation and better communication.

He meets almost every month with his Kansas and Colorado counterparts to discuss basin issues. "We are not talking through lawyers anymore," Fassett said.

Critical steps

Another change in water management across Nebraska came in 2004 with passage of LB962 by the Legislature, he said, because it legally recognized interconnections between surface water and groundwater.

Fassett was introduced Thursday to former state Sen. Ed Schrock of Elm Creek, who championed LB962 through the Unicameral.

"I think we're on a path forward because of that law," Fassett said, and it's "bothersome" to see some interest groups trying to make changes now.

"We have the buy-in of water users," he added.

The key component ensuring future Republican River Compact compliance is the N-CORPE — Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement — project that repurposed groundwater on a southern Lincoln County farm from irrigation to additional streamflow when needed.

"That project is critical to protect an enormous amount of agricultural production in our state in the Republican Basin," Fassett said, as an alternative to shutting down irrigation use in dry years.

He added that N-CORPE wells have not be pumped since 2017 because additional water for the river wasn't needed for compliance the past two years.

By Lori Potter

Daily Record: Nebraska Hosts People Under Quarantine for Coronavirus

Nebraska is hosting a group of Americans under quarantine after possible exposure to the novel coronavirus outbreak in China at a National Guard facility at the edge of the metropolitan area.

Evacuees from China flew into Eppley Airfield and were taken to Camp Ashland, which sits about 30 miles southwest of the airport.

The approximately 70 passengers were not going to go inside the terminal at Eppley, officials announced Thursday morning. The patients are expected to range from children to adults.

Camp Ashland is prepared to house those under quarantine in three buildings with 85 hotel-style rooms at the camp. Guard officials have said the evacuees won't interact with guardsmen or employees while staying there.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center and its clinical partner Nebraska Medicine will partner with the federal government to monitor the evacuees.

"We have the opportunity to step up at a national level to help these rescued Americans and their families," Gov. Pete Ricketts said Thursday morning. "We have the expertise right here at UNMC."

Nebraska Medicine and UNMC handled the treatment of three patients with Ebola in 2014. They recently opened U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Training, Simulation & Quarantine Center, providing a centralized location for quarantine efforts and adding to the med center's accomplished Nebraska Biocontainment Unit. The CDC said everyone arriving in Omaha is not sick. Anyone at Camp Ashland who develops symptoms would be moved to the Biocontainment Unit or otherwise placed into care at UNMC.

Planes from China also were being sent to military bases in California and Texas, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced last week.

All passengers from China are being screened by federal personnel for symptoms. Americans returning from China's Hubei province, the center of the outbreak, are subject to 14 days of mandatory quarantine. For more information on the outbreak, visit cdc.gov/ncov or dhhs.ne.gov/coronavirus. UNMC Global Center for Health

Security has more information available at unmc.edu/healthsecurity. Watch a video of Thursday's news conference at omahadailyrecord.com.
By Scott Stewart

OWH: 'People fear the unknown,' but officials say Nebraska is equipped to handle coronavirus quarantine

ASHLAND, Neb. — Camp Ashland's new role as a quarantine site is the topic of the day on Silver Street, the main drag through downtown Ashland.
Beginning Friday evening, federal officials planned to quarantine 57 Americans returning from China's Wuhan area, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak.
Local residents said Friday they're proud Nebraska had been selected as an observation site because of its history of successfully handling deadly diseases, but some also expressed worry. Public officials and a hotline have fielded numerous calls.
Jen Haschenburger, owner of Breadeaux Pizza, said she trusts public health experts but has mixed feelings about the decision to bring in people who might get sick.
"I know they're experienced and trained in handling those communicable diseases," she said from the counter of her shop. "But it's so close to home."
Cheri O'Kelly, owner of nearby ice cream and coffee shop Cheri O's, said several of her customers have expressed concerns, and local Facebook pages are "wild with rumors."
"People are nervous," she said, then added she's sure people will be safe.
State Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte captured the unease on Thursday during a legislative hearing on proposed state funding for the University of Nebraska Medical Center's hoped-for $2.6 billion expansion project, which would include dealing with large-scale emergencies.
Groene said he's glad he lives in North Platte, 281 miles from Omaha, where a bunch of "infected" people were coming. Federal officials have said that none of the arriving Americans have shown signs of having the virus. But they are considered at increased risk of exposure because of where they were in China.
The returning Americans will be quarantined for 14 days at the Nebraska National Guard's Camp Ashland. The camp is 30 miles southwest of downtown Omaha.
Groene said Friday his constituents are worried and want answers.
"This is not simple," he said.
UNMC Chancellor Dr. Jeffrey Gold said during the hearing that none of the evacuees are symptomatic, but they are at risk of becoming so. That's why they're being quarantined, he said, and why so many precautions are being taken.
Taylor Wilson, a spokesman for Nebraska Medicine, said the experts involved take their responsibility seriously. UNMC and Nebraska Medicine have received, on balance, more positive than negative feedback, and many people have expressed community pride.
"Because of the medical expertise and facilities we have here, there are few places in the world better equipped to handle this," he said.
Medical experts say it is better and safer to try to contain people who might contract a disease before it spreads.
Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert's hotline received five calls from people questioning the decision to quarantine the patients in Nebraska, officials said. Gov. Pete Ricketts' office receives a handful of calls each day.
"People fear the unknown," said Dr. Anne O'Keefe, senior epidemiologist at the Douglas County Health Department. "The word 'quarantine' ratchets it up a notch because it's scary."
She said the coronavirus information line received about 20 calls on Thursday and more calls than that on Friday from people asking questions. (The phone number is 402-444-3400.)
She said that's fewer calls than the department received when UNMC was treating patients during the Ebola outbreak in 2014.
Ricketts encouraged Nebraskans to rely on trusted sources for news and information on the coronavirus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is updating a website with the latest information. So is the World Health Organization.

That hasn't stopped a run on supplies. At least one Omaha pharmacy Friday was struggling to find more of the sought-after highly filtered face masks, called N95s.
This could be bad news for professionals who rely on the masks, including doctors, nurses and home health care workers, said Todd Davison, purchasing manager for Kubat Pharmacy.
The Ashland Pharmacy also was out of masks Friday, said Staci Hubert, the business owner.
But Hubert said the masks were already difficult to find because of a tough flu season, before suppliers started running low over the past couple of weeks because of coronavirus.
Terra Uhing, executive director of Three Rivers Public Health Department, which includes Saunders County, home to Camp Ashland, said people don't need to run out and buy supplies. Health officials have said the masks are not needed for the average person.
Uhing stressed that local professionals have trained for this.
"What we're trying to do is push out factual and the most updated information," she said.
By Aaron Sanderford

Bloomberg Tax: State of the States: Tax Relief Leads Governors' 2020 Agendas

Both Democratic and Republican governors are calling for tax relief this year.
And as they mull ways to pay for their tax cuts, which could involve shifting tax burdens in some cases, they're careful to avoid any talk of raising taxes as they approach the 2020 elections.
A year ago, governors across the country were pushing to tax online marketplaces, streaming services, marijuana, and sports betting. New laws brought a bundle of new taxes and a $25.1 billion uptick in revenue collected across states in the first six months of fiscal year 2020, according to data from the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center.
Now, governors in states like Iowa and Colorado are pursuing larger tax cuts as the fruit of that bounty, while the rest of the country's lawmakers are zeroing in on targeted relief.
"It's not surprising to see some of those public investments on the agenda this year for governors since state revenues continue to be in a pretty stable place," said Erica Williams, senior director of state policy initiatives at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, alluding to last year's broad push to tax new industries.
Consider Iowa, where Gov. Kim Reynolds (R), in her state-of-the-state address, outlined a plan to cut income tax rates for most Iowans by broadening the base of taxpayers who pay the highest rate. She also proposed increasing the state sales tax by one percentage point, to 7%, which she said would allow an average 10% cut in income taxes.
Iowa has already enlarged its tax base, particularly with respect to corporations, said Tom Sands, president and CEO of the Iowa Taxpayers Association, which advocates on behalf of businesses in the state. That helped the state to increase revenue substantially over the past few years, he said.

In Colorado, Gov. Jared Polis (D) has expressed interest in that approach, calling for the creation of a bipartisan group to examine how cuts could be paid for with an expansion of the state's tax base. Colorado also began taxing marketplace facilitators such as Amazon and Etsy in 2019 and passed legislation to legalize and tax sports gambling. And the state, the first to legalize marijuana back in 2014, last year collected more than $300 million in cannabis tax revenue
Only one governor, New Jersey's Phil Murphy (D), braved the subject of higher income taxes in his state-of-the-state speech, saying he won't be "giving up the fight" to increase rates by nearly 20% on those making more than $1 million a year.
"You do see governors who are seeing good revenue reports, but are also wary of the instability out there—national politics, the threat of a recession, and a host of other issues,"said Richard Auxier, a researcher at the Tax Policy Center. "They're probably more excited to put money in the rainy day fund and look at targeted tax relief, whether that's through property taxes or the earned-income tax credit, which is slightly less ambitious but politically exciting."
Targeted Relief
Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D-N.Y.) said he wants to cut the income tax rate in half for New York's small businesses. In his state of the state speech he also proposed light income tax cuts for the middle class—as well as raising the age

for children covered by the poverty credit to include more low-income families with infants and newborns.
California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) also proposed expanding credits—like the earned income tax credit, which gives tax breaks to low-income Americans.
While the trend is the same nationwide, the local details vary considerably. In West Virginia, Gov. Jim Justice (R) announced in his state-of-the-state speech that he was calling for an amendment to the state constitution to eliminate property tax on business inventory. He said the state's current tax makes it an unattractive place for investment.
Of the five states that border West Virginia, only Kentucky and handful of localities in Maryland impose similar taxes on inventory.
Property-tax relief is picking up steam in the Midwest, as governors look to deliver targeted measures. Since many constituents pay some sort of property tax on their real estate, lowering it for one targeted group or another can be more politically feasible than pursuing overarching cuts.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts (R) has made property tax relief for homeowners a priority since 2015, when he took office. In his state-of-the-state speech he unveiled a proposal that would expand the state's property tax credit and lower the ceiling on local rates.
The average effective property tax rate in Nebraska is 1.8%, which ranks among the 10 most burdensome in the country, and well above the national average of about 1.1%, according to smartasset.com.
Ricketts called it the "number one priority Nebraskans want," noting that property taxes make up about 40% of taxes the state collects.
Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly (D) is also seeking funds to cut property taxes, with a budget that calls for pumping $54 million of federal funds into a relief program. She also proposed allocating $53 million to expand the state's credit for the sales taxes low-income families pay on food. She called for making the credits refundable, meaning that if the credit exceeds income taxes families owe—they can still reap monetary relief.
How does she plan to pay for the increase in spending?
Although more than 30 states have passed marketplace-facilitator laws, since the landmark South Dakota v. Wayfair ruling, Kansas has yet to do so. She says "requiring marketplace facilitators to start collecting sales taxes" would offer a way to offset new spending.
By Sam McQuillan

GII: Five state senators, Lt. Gov. Mike Foley discuss pro-life legislation at event Saturday

Central Nebraskans were able to learn more about pro-life legislation currently in the Nebraska Legislature at an event Saturday morning.
The Diocese of Grand Island, Nebraska Catholic Alliance, Nebraska Right to Life, South Central Nebraska Right to Life, Grand Island Right to Life and Nebraska Family Alliance hosted the "Pro-Life Legislation in Nebraska" event at Riverside Golf Club.
State Senators Curt Friesen, Suzanne Geist, Steve Halloran, John Lowe, Dave Murman, and Dan Quick all spoke at the event. Lt. Gov. Mike Foley was also present.
A large portion of Saturday's discussion centered around LB814, a bill introduced by Geist, of Lincoln, that, if passed, would end the intact dilation and extraction abortion procedure, also referred to as dismemberment abortion. Geist said her bill would prohibit dismemberment abortion between 12 and 24 weeks — the second trimester.
According to a flier distributed at the event, dismemberment abortion is a procedure in which a baby's limbs are torn apart limb by limb. The flier said this procedure typically occurs 13 to 24 weeks into a pregnancy. It adds that at 13 weeks, a baby has fully developed arms and legs.
"Being a pro-life person all of my life, I didn't know this was legal," Geist said. "I guess I didn't know all the details of abortion like I thought I did. I knew that was done in the first trimester, but I didn't know that it is OK to do that in the second trimester."
Geist said in the Sydney Loofe murder case, her killers were given an additional charge of dismembering a dead body. She questioned why this doesn't apply to a living human being.
One of the criticisms of her bill, Geist said, is that it would deny access to women, specifically low-income women,

to receive a second-trimester abortion. She said this is not the case.
“The fact is, in the state of Nebraska, it is not the most common procedure,” Geist said. “There are two others that are done more commonly, therefore it is hard for them to argue we are denying access.”
Geist said her bill does not penalize women for getting a dismemberment abortion. Instead, it would penalize the physician performing the procedure.
A member of the audience later asked Geist why her bill has to go to the judiciary committee prior to going before the floor of the legislature. She said its goes before that committee because it sets a criminal penalty for those who perform a dismemberment abortion. The judiciary committee listens to bills that involve criminal penalties.
The other state senators also discussed bills they have introduced in the legislature. Murman, of Glenville, said he introduced LB994 — the Organ Transplant Act — that would prohibit discrimination against disabled people in organ transplants.
He said that the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Children’s Hospital, both in Omaha, are the only places in Nebraska that do organ transplants.
Murman said that while he does not believe either institution discriminates against disabled individuals when it comes to organ donations, there have been lawsuits concerning this in other parts of the country and wants to be proactive on the issue.
Quick, of Grand Island, said he believes pro-life extends beyond abortion to areas such as prenatal care, child welfare, foster care, disabled individuals and elder care. He said he is currently working on issues concerning child welfare and juvenile justice.
“I sit on a juvenile alternative initiatives (committee) to find out how we can better serve some of these kids who end up in our detention centers and even end up in corrections,” Quick said. “I also sit on a juvenile interstate compact which looks into issues where kids who are trafficked to other states and how we can get them back to our state.”
He said he prioritized a bill to support victims of human trafficking. This past summer, Quick said he and Lowe each had an interim study to look at issues with the state’s Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTCs). Quick said he supports LB814.
Friesen, of Henderson, said that while he has never introduced pro-life legislation, he has always supported it.
“Every one of us must, in some meaningful way, engage in the stand for life,” Foley said. “If we do not get this one right, nothing else is going to matter.”
Lowe said he does not have any hesitation about passing pro-life legislation and that pro-life individuals should not be worried about how he will vote, but rather how senators “in the middle” will vote on a pro-life bill.
“They are the ones not led by morals,” he said. “They go which way the wind blows and by who talked to them last. We need to focus on them.”
Halloran, of Hastings, said that debating pro-life issues on the floor of the Legislature is tough, but that it shouldn’t be. He applauded Geist for introducing LB814 and told her that he and other senators “have her back.”
“I am not anti-choice,” Halloran said. “We have three choices: abstinence, adoption or parenthood. So in that regard, I am pro-choice, you just have to make the right choice. The choice of killing your child is not a choice.”
Nate Grasz, policy director for Nebraska Family Alliance, asked the state senators about what gives them hope and encouragement in the Legislature in continuing to fight for the right to life.
Geist said a group of high school juniors and seniors interested in politics came together at the state capital and, despite their differing views on abortion, agreed that her bill was the most important bill currently before the Legislature and should be passed.
Lowe said, when he first ran for the Legislature in 2016, he was invited to the University of Nebraska at Kearney by then-student Marilyn Synek to speak on pro-life issues. He said this gave him hope that college students are pro-life.
By Austin Koeller

LJS: Court to hear case regarding historical horse racing on Tuesday

A hearing has been scheduled in Lancaster County District Court for Tuesday to consider the future of historical horse racing machines in the state of Nebraska.

In January, the Nebraska Attorney General's Office asked a judge to nullify the State Racing Commission's decision to allow historical horse racing at Fonner Park in Grand Island.
The suit didn't come as a surprise, given that the office sent a letter to the racing commission in November 2018 advising members they didn't have legal authority to approve wagering on previously run races using historical horse racing machines.
Suzanne Gage, director of communications for the Attorney General's office, has said they are asking the court to declare the commission's action unlawful and to stop the use of the machines "as Nebraska law does not permit the commission's unilateral decision to expand gambling without action by the Legislature or the citizens of Nebraska."
It's the second lawsuit to be filed in Lancaster County District Court seeking court review of the commission's final order in December approving the new, controversial form of wagering and machines for Fonner Park.
Also in January, two Hall County residents — Duane Fuller of Grand Island and Jeffery Hayman of Doniphan — sued to block the order from going into effect, alleging it was unconstitutional.
Historical horse racing terminals allow a bettor to make wagers on unidentified horses in previously run races from across the U.S., officials with AmTote International said.
The terminals, which look like slot machines and operate in Kentucky, Wyoming, Oregon and Alabama, are seen by proponents as a way to draw more people to the tracks and keep the struggling horse racing industry viable after decades of decline in Nebraska.
Fonner Park has said it plans to install the terminals so they're operational Feb. 21, when the track opens its annual live racing meet.

OWH: Native American advocacy group says new social studies standards are 'profound' step forward

Leaders of a Native American advocacy group are praising Nebraska's new social studies standards as a historic step forward.
The standards open the door for a more accurate depiction of the history and cultural contributions of Native Americans, they say.
The changes, which emphasize the perspectives of marginalized groups, are "profound," according to leaders of the Nebraska Indian Education Association.
Particularly notable, they say, is the inclusion of pre-Columbian history, the centuries when indigenous people thrived in the Americas before the arrival of Christopher Columbus.
"Students and staff in Nebraska will also learn about our native people's contributions to the United States, and our history with the U.S. government from a different perspective," said Marian Holstein, the association's executive director.
Last year, Holstein, a member of the Winnebago Public Schools board, found little to like in an early draft, giving the drafters a C for effort.
After examining the new standards line by line, Holstein has upped the grade to a B+.
Written by a group of Nebraska educators and adopted by the Nebraska State Board of Education in November, the standards describe what K-12 students should know about and be able to do in history, government, civics, geography and economics.
School districts must adopt the standards or their own of equal or greater rigor within a year. The state does not dictate curriculum — the courses, materials and lessons for teaching the standards. That is developed by local districts.
While the former standards, adopted in 2012, encouraged examining history from different perspectives, the importance of understanding different points of view is weaved throughout the new standards, with examples to emphasize the point.
Native American advocates note that the prior standards made no mention of pre-Columbian history.
That addition, by itself, is enough to give the standards a higher mark, Holstein said.
In the new standards, fifth graders will examine pre-Columbian events, people and cultures.
Teaching about the people and cultures that preceded European colonization is crucial for the success of Native

American students, Holstein said.
When they learn accurate history about North America's first peoples, it builds their pride and self-esteem, she said.
This leads to greater academic success, she said.
Derek LaPointe, executive officer of the Santee Sioux Nation tribal council and one of the association organizers, said Native Americans frequently suffer from an identity crisis, even in adulthood, because their history and culture is portrayed inaccurately or ignored altogether.
They find themselves asking, "Who am I and where do I come from?" he said.
In addition, he said, young Nebraskans who learn about Native American history will be better prepared to teach Native American kids, he said.
He noted that the standards even mention the American Indian Movement, a group whose aggressive pursuit of Native American causes has made it controversial. LaPointe said the group deserves a place in the standards because of its role in securing Native American rights.
Holstein said if Native American history is not taught, there's a risk of losing it.
Teaching about multiple peoples and cultures, meanwhile, will give students a more global perspective and help them understand the effects of colonization globally, she said.
Holstein said the standards, by her count, contain more than 130 examples and guidance to expand the knowledge and understanding of Native American history and cultures.
The association succeeded in pushing for changes that put the focus on Nebraska tribes, not just the significant events nationally. To that end, the writers included the history of their forced removal and relocation from other states to Nebraska.
The standards mention the Ponca Trail of Tears, the Santee Exile and Winnebago Removal, and Native American boarding schools.
The Ponca Trail of Tears is mentioned in the old standards, but the Santee Exile and Winnebago Removal are new, as is the mention of boarding schools.
Holstein and LaPointe said they recognize that the standards are a first step and that it's important to develop curriculum materials such as videos and podcasts for teachers.
They hope to work with Nebraska tribes to develop materials and make them available to teachers.
Officials at the Nebraska Department of Education said they're encouraged by the association's efforts and are eager to see what materials they develop.
Like with the old standards, department officials said they intend to create and identify an inventory of instructional materials that can be used by local districts to teach the standards.
By Joe Dejka

OWH: Staffers assaulted at Kearney youth center; three hospitalized, senator says

LINCOLN — State officials confirmed that several staff members were assaulted early Friday at the troubled Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center-Kearney.
The incident occurred in one of the male dorms about 1:30 a.m., according to a joint statement from the Nebraska State Patrol and Department of Health and Human Services, which runs the center.
The staff members received injuries that were not life-threatening and the situation was resolved by law enforcement about 1:55 a.m., the statement said. It did not provide any other details.
Khalilah LeGrand, an HHS spokeswoman, said that the matter is still being investigated but that everyone was safe.
"The teams in our YRTC System serve some of our most challenging youth," she said. "We continue to support our team and provide them with the tools they need to help manage behaviors, facilitate treatment and ensure safety and security of staff and the youth we serve."
State Sen. Sara Howard of Omaha, chair of the Health and Human Services Committee, said she got information that four boys were involved and they used pieces taken from their beds as weapons. She reported that three staff members were taken to the hospital.
Since August, the Kearney center has housed both male and female juvenile offenders. Most of the teenage boys are in barracks-style housing, where multiple boys share living space.

The girls were moved out of a similar center in Geneva after staff shortages, inadequate programming and deteriorating buildings combined to create a crisis. State lawmakers have since undertaken an investigation of what led to and followed the crisis and are pursuing several pieces of legislation.
The assaults follow an incident last week in which two boys escaped from the center and allegedly stole two vehicles, assaulted a driver and racked up multiple potential charges in three counties.
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Nebraska Supreme Court: Auto insurance must pay policyholders the same as others

LINCOLN — The Nebraska Supreme Court ruled Friday that an injured policyholder should get as much coverage from his auto insurance policy as any other person.
The decision was a vindication for Larry Freudenburg, an Alma, Nebraska, man who was severely injured in a 2016 crash in Kansas.
"I'm sure he'll be very excited to hear the news," said Jack Lafleur, one of Freudenburg's attorneys. "He felt very strongly about that."
The ruling was based on the intent of Nebraska lawmakers in 2013, when they changed state law to prevent auto insurers from paying out less when the injured person is the policyholder or a member of the policyholder's household.
The case at issue began with a crash in Sedgwick County, Kansas, that killed Freudenburg's wife, Sherry, who had been driving. The crash left Freudenburg with medical expenses topping $100,000 and a long road to recovery.
He suffered another hit when he filed a claim with Shelter Mutual Insurance Co., which wrote the policy covering the couple's vehicle. The policy had a $100,000 maximum on bodily injury coverage.
But Shelter paid only $25,000, the minimum level of coverage required under Nebraska law. The company cited a "partial household exemption" clause in the policy, which allowed for reduced coverage of injuries to the policyholder, a relative or any member of the policyholder's household.
Freudenburg turned to the State Department of Insurance for help. Insurance Director Bruce Ramge sent Shelter a letter that said the company's clause violated the 2013 state law.
Shelter responded by asking the Lancaster County District Court for an order upholding the clause. That court decided in Shelter's favor, ruling that the 2013 law change only prohibited insurance companies from reducing coverage below the state minimum level.
The state high court disagreed, based on the language of the law and its legislative history.
"The 2013 amendment was introduced with the specific intent to render invalid both partial household exclusions and total household exclusions," the opinion said.
Theresa Koller, an attorney representing Shelter, declined to comment on the decision.
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Regents add GPA as another way students can gain admission to NU

High schoolers have a new option for gaining admission to three campuses of the University of Nebraska system. First-year applicants can now get in by submitting a GPA of 3.0 or higher.
Under the former rules, applicants to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Nebraska at Omaha or the University of Nebraska at Kearney had to either:

- Score 20 or higher on the ACT or 1030 or higher on the SAT Critical Reading and Math sections.
- Rank in the top half of their high school graduating class.

The University of Nebraska Board of Regents unanimously approved adding the third option Friday.
Applicants now have two options for gaining assured admission without test scores. It takes effect immediately, according to UNL spokeswoman Leslie Reed. Regardless of which of the three options applicants choose, they must also have taken certain core courses in high school.
The change was prompted in part by some school districts in Nebraska and across the country eliminating class rank, according to Abby Freeman, UNL's director of admissions.
Under the former rules, the only option for a student to gain assured admission without a rank would be to submit

test scores.
“As we are seeing more and more high schools move away from a class ranking system, that really narrowed down, on that performance requirement, to only a test score,” Freeman said. “And we felt that that was, perhaps, limiting some really talented scholars from gaining assured admission to one of our institutions.”
The change comes amid a national debate about the reliance on test scores for admission.
While the creators of the ACT and SAT maintain that their tests are reliable predictors of college success, critics contend the opposite. Many colleges and universities have made test scores optional on grounds that judging students on test scores discriminates on the basis of a student’s race or their parents’ income or education level.
Education watchers have their eyes on the giant University of California system, which is examining whether to continue using test scores in admissions.
This week, a faculty task force that studied UC’s admissions recommended continued use. The task force concluded that test scores are reliable predictors of success, and they expressed concern over how to fairly evaluate a student who submitted test scores relative to one who did not.
Freeman said admissions officers at the three Nebraska schools are comfortable about adding the GPA option.
“That 3.0 was really the GPA where we felt we were bringing students to the institution who were going to succeed and graduate from our institutions,” she said.
She said she doesn’t consider the university system to be “test optional” because it still asks students to submit test scores for scholarships and other aid.
Dusty Newton, UNK’s director of admissions, said he doesn’t expect the change to result in a surge of applicants. But he said the change was necessary in light of school districts such as Millard eliminating class rank.
“So we really needed to get this GPA into our admission requirements because there are lots of schools out there that don’t rank,” Newton said.
By Joe Dejka

LJS: Carter previews 5-year priorities for NU

University of Nebraska President Ted Carter announced Friday, during his first meeting leading the university system, he is officially a Nebraskan.
"I have a driver's license, I have plates on my car, I've paid some taxes and I've already voted," said Carter, who started at NU on Jan. 1 after emerging last October as the sole finalist to replace Hank Bounds.
The former superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy told the NU Board of Regents he had spent his first month on the job diving into the data about the system, with an eye on developing a five-year strategic plan by April 17.
The themes underlying that plan, which will be unveiled in conjunction with Carter's installation, are growth, retention and culture, he said, that will be stitched into the strategic plans of the individual campuses.
"I think you're going to see some bold ideas about how we can grow our impact on our students, our state and the world," Carter said.
The new president lauded NU and its partners in state government for keeping tuition costs in check and student debt below the national average, but said the university "can and will do better."
New investments by the university, the state and private donors like in UNL's College of Engineering are capable of drawing new students and bolstering enrollment, Carter said.
But NU's campuses in Lincoln, Omaha and Kearney will also need to do more to keep students between their freshman and sophomore years, the period most students drop out.
According to the data, UNL's approximately 83% retention rate is below its peer average of 87%, while UNO (77%) and UNK (79%) exceed comparable institutions.
Carter said as part of the Commit to Complete initiative, which challenges students to work toward a college degree in four years, helping them enter the workforce faster and graduate with less student debt, NU should strive for retention rates between 85% and 90% at its three undergraduate campuses.
"We must ensure students are prepared to enter their first year in college, sometimes referred to as grade 13, that they have the support and resources to progress through a four-year program and know a job awaits them upon graduation," he said.
Only about half of NU students graduate in four years, however.

"Four years might not be the best path for everyone, but I'm convinced we can do more to help educate our students on the benefits of timely graduation versus the costs of staying in school longer," he said.
Expanding online education opportunities might play into that plan, Carter said, while it is also important to recruit and retain top faculty and staff, who are paid less than their peers at other institutions.
"Remaining 4.5% to 3% behind our peers at UNL and UNMC, respectively, is like putting up a 'for sale' sign for our talent in the university's front yard," he said. "I promise, we're going to make this a priority to fix."
Carter said he'll also emphasize improving diversity among the student bodies and faculty. He noted that while 52% of NU's students are women, only 38% of its faculty are.
His strategic planning document will also focus on improving nonresident enrollment at NU; engaging the research enterprise to solve local, state, national and global problems; building community partnerships, and pursuing sustainability and energy efficiency efforts.
By Chris Dunker

LJS: Husker volleyball fans may get parking garage near Devaney

The University of Nebraska Board of Regents approved paying $5 million more for a new track and field complex north of the Devaney Sports Center.
Construction on the $16.5 million facility is slated to start next month, and Husker track and field athletes are expected to move from Ed Weir Stadium to their new home for the 2021 outdoor season.
The additional funds, which will enhance amenities for athletes and competition areas so that the new complex can host major meets, will be paid for through private donations.
But as work on the new track is ramping up this summer and fall, Regent Howard Hawks pointed out a loss of parking for fans attending events at Devaney.
"Volleyball is one of our most important sports ... where we have high-level competitive capabilities," Hawks said. "I would urge, if we approve this, that we expect as a board a follow-up at our next meeting or two on what are we really going to do about volleyball parking."
Chancellor Ronnie Green said the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is finalizing plans to shift parking directly to the east of Devaney, which is now a vacant lot on Nebraska Innovation Campus.
In the future, Green added, parking on the site, which is also used for fans attending Lincoln Stars hockey games, could become permanent.
"We think there is a high probability that would be converted to garage parking," Green said.
Early plans for Innovation Campus showed multiple parking structures throughout the 250-acre site on the former State Fairgrounds, but surface parking is the only option now available.
The board approved expanding the budget for the new track on a 6-2 vote.
Regent Paul Kinney of Amherst said he was concerned about adding $5 million more to the project without the final plans in place. Regent Jim Pillen of Columbus also voted against increasing the scope of the project.
The Athletic Department is moving the track and field complex from northeast of Memorial Stadium to make way for a $155 million athletic facility, which will house the Nebraska football team, among other things.
In other business:
* Pillen succeeded Tim Clare of Lincoln as chairman of the board for 2020. Kinney, who was elected vice chairman, will serve as chairman next year.
* Speaker of the Legislature Jim Scheer, in his final annual address to regents, said he believes the relationship between NU and the Legislature is "better than I have ever seen it."
"The university, I'm going to be honest with you, is not just on the verge, you are on a pinnacle where, literally, the sky is the limit," Scheer said.
He also indicated there is broad support among lawmakers for a $2.6 billion public-private partnership for facilities at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.
* Nebraska Hall on the UNL campus will become home to a new data center and institutional research division.
The $5.1 million renovation of the second and third floors of Nebraska Hall East, which will open in December, will be paid for through deferred maintenance funds provided through a state appropriation.
By Chris Dunker

OWH: The federal portion of massive UNMC project is a big ask — and Nebraska's not the only one asking

WASHINGTON — The NExT Project represents a towering, ambitious vision for the future of the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

That vision also comes with a towering, ambitious price tag of $2.6 billion.

Backers of the proposed all-hazard response facility are seeking to line up hundreds of millions in state dollars to be matched by private donations and local contributions, but the project would rely on the federal government for about half its construction cost, and landing such a sum from Uncle Sam is no simple task.

However, Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., says the state's congressional delegation has experience working in a bipartisan fashion to support such big endeavors.

Consider the millions in federal money secured for UNMC facilities and training related to Ebola and other highly infectious diseases. Or the groundbreaking public-private partnership, blessed by Congress, that is responsible for an expansion of Omaha's VA Medical Center. A new U.S. Strategic Command headquarters just opened at Offutt Air Force Base.

"Same play, same play," Fortenberry said of the NExT Project. "We're going to run the same play. It's very predictable."

Fortenberry holds a key seat on the House Appropriations Committee, which controls the federal purse strings. Meanwhile, Rep. Don Bacon and Sen. Deb Fischer, both Nebraska Republicans, serve on the House and Senate Armed Services Committees.

Those panels are responsible for writing the annual National Defense Authorization Act.

The NExT Project is rooted in a section of the most recent NDAA, language that establishes a pilot project to explore public-private solutions to what UNMC Chancellor Jeffrey Gold says is a top priority both for the federal government and the American people.

Gold said studies show the country has inadequate "surge capacity" for responding to natural disasters, power plant meltdowns, chemical spills and other large-scale hazards. Imagine waves of wounded or sick that would come from nuclear fallout or a fast-moving epidemic. Recent headlines about the ongoing coronavirus outbreak underscore the potential for a sudden influx of patients.

"We are literally one airplane flight away from the spread of some highly communicable disease," Gold said.

That's why he's pitching the new response facility that would sit on the medical center campus and include about 1,200 beds. To meet the needs of the community, traditional hospital patients would use much of that bed space, but a large portion would be available in the event of a large emergency involving serious burns, chemical injuries or radiation exposure.

"There's no burn unit in the country currently that could deal with 600 patients, but we would have to have the staff and the supplies in order to handle that," Gold said.

In addition to fulfilling national and local health needs, the project would bring a massive economic boost. And Gold says Omaha has a strong argument for being the site selected for such a facility.

There's the proximity of Offutt and StratCom, which works closely with the university on a host of priorities, and the local history of successful public-private partnerships.

The construction cost wasn't plucked out of the air, Gold stressed. Architectural and engineering firms have worked through estimates and the resulting numbers are on par with other similar large-scale university hospital projects around the country, he said.

Gold and other top UNMC officials have been traveling to Washington regularly in recent months for meetings with Capitol Hill lawmakers, as well as officials at the Pentagon and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Nebraska lawmakers have been cautiously upbeat about the project's prospects.

"Our goal is to make this the hub of the Midwest for biodefense," Bacon said.

Several years ago, UNMC was awarded $19.8 million in federal money to develop a new training, simulation and quarantine center after its partner, the Nebraska Medical Center, was one of a small number of U.S. hospitals to care for Ebola patients during the 2014-2015 outbreak.

And the $86 million expansion of the VA Medical Center includes $56 million in federal money, with Heritage

Services responsible for raising the remaining $30 million.
While the NExT project is orders of magnitude larger than those projects, the need is also much greater, Fortenberry said.
Still, no one should be looking for bulldozers to start rolling anytime soon.
“This is just in the realm of possibility at the moment, so I don’t want to create an unrealistic expectation,” Fortenberry said, then leaned over to speak closely and directly into a reporter’s digital recorder. “I don’t want to create an unrealistic expectation.”
Fischer noted that while she believes Nebraska is the best location for the project, other states will be pursuing it as well.
“This is a really big lift, and obviously it’s going to be very competitive,” Fischer said. “We’re going to work hard as a delegation to sell the good things we have in the state of Nebraska.”
By Joseph Morton

LJS: After 80 years in Washington, J. Sterling Morton will come home — all 5,500 pounds of him

Willa Cather’s headed to Washington, and her new role there will send J. Sterling Morton packing.
But the 9-foot, 5,500-pound bronze statue of the Nebraska politician and Arbor Day founder — on display in the U.S Capitol for more than 80 years — won’t be homeless.
He’s headed back to the only place that asked for him, his adopted hometown of Nebraska City.
“It was natural,” said Ron Hull, chair of the Willa Cather National Statuary Hall Selection Committee. “All along, it seemed to me that Nebraska City was the appropriate place. Everything about him is there.”
Two years ago, state senators voted to replace Morton and William Jennings Bryan as Nebraska’s longtime representatives at the Capitol’s National Statuary Hall. The Standing Bear Selection Committee handled the Ponca chief’s move to Washington, which sent Bryan to the National Guard Museum in Seward.
Hull’s committee was tasked with funding and commissioning a statue of Cather — and finding a home for Morton. It raised more than $200,000, most of it donated by Senior U.S. District Court Judge Laurie Smith Camp, and hired a Creighton University artist to create a 7-foot sculpture of the Red Cloud writer.
And in October, it issued a request for proposals looking for potential homes for Morton.
It received just one. Bryan, by comparison, was at the center of lobbying efforts by Lincoln and Seward.
“I was a little surprised,” Hull said. “But, on the other hand, I think most Nebraskans think of J. Sterling Morton and think of Nebraska City.”
The Illinois native moved to Nebraska City in 1854 and became a farmer, editor and member of the territorial legislature. He served as territorial secretary and, later, secretary of agriculture for President Grover Cleveland.
But he became a household name — at least in Nebraska — for launching Arbor Day in 1872. Nebraskans planted an estimated 1 million trees that first year.
His statue belongs in the town where he planted his roots, said Doug Friedli, a member of the Nebraska City committee that formed to try to bring him home.
“We think it makes total sense. He and his wife lived here for their whole married life, raised their sons here, and he started his campaign to plant trees here in Nebraska City.”
They found a downtown home for him on the east side of the Otoe County Courthouse, the state’s oldest public building, built a decade after Morton landed in Nebraska City. Otoe County plans to build a new entry with a half-circle drive, and adjusted its plans to accommodate the statue, Friedli said.
It’s also close to raising the estimated $5,000 to carry Morton home in the same truck that will move Cather to Washington.
But it’s unclear when that will happen.
The Cather statue should be done this summer, and Hull would like an autumn dedication, like Standing Bear’s. It’s an election year, though, and congressional schedulers might have other priorities, he said.
So it could be next year before Cather sends Morton home.
By Peter Salter

AP: All 27 Nebraska bridges damaged by 2019 flooding now open

HADAR, Neb. (AP) — All the bridges damaged during last spring's massive flooding in Nebraska have now been reopened.
The Nebraska Department of Transportation said the Nebraska 13 bridge near Hadar in northeast Nebraska reopened Friday. The bridge about four miles north of Norfolk was the final one of 27 bridges damaged during last spring's flooding to reopen.
The flooding last March caused the closure of 3,300 miles of highway in Nebraska. All of the highways affected by the flooding have been reopened.
The Transportation Department says it spent $2.8 million to replace the Hadar bridge.

OWH: Highway 275 reopens after Elkhorn River flooding closed it down

U.S. Highway 275 in Dodge County is back open to traffic after floodwaters closed a portion of the highway Friday.
On Saturday, the Nebraska Department of Transportation announced in a tweet that the highway reopened between West Point and the Nebraska Highway 91 junction, near Scribner.
The department advised that flaggers are present and drivers should use caution.
Highway 275 has reopened between 92 & 275 jct and West Point! Flaggers are present and travelers should proceed with caution. Keep up to date by checking https://t.co/KD6t82hKgL! pic.twitter.com/un5LcAwsoI
— Nebraska DOT (@NebraskaDOT) February 8, 2020
At 10 a.m. Friday, the department announced that a 9-mile stretch of the highway was closed because of flooding from ice jams on the Elkhorn River. The National Weather Service had issued a flood warning for Dodge County until 10:30 a.m. Saturday.
By Jeffrey Rob

OWH Editorial: Encouraging diversity is a crucial step for a stronger Nebraska future

Encouraging a culture of respect and welcome is crucial to Nebraska's future. The more that Nebraska embraces inclusion in regard to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, the greater the opportunities for individual Nebraskans and the state as a whole.
Nurturing such a climate makes moral sense, by respecting the worth of all residents, as well as economic sense, by maximizing Nebraska's economic potential.
An observation on this score from Jim Smith, executive director of the Blueprint Nebraska economic development initiative, is encouraging. During his visits to communities across the state, local business, civic and educational leaders regularly emphasized the importance of inclusion for their communities' long-term health and prosperity. Time and again, those leaders stated that "we have to be a welcoming community and embrace inclusiveness," he told The World-Herald.
Indeed, Nebraska is becoming increasing diverse in communities of all sizes. By 2040, nearly one in three Nebraskans will be a member of a minority group, up from one in five currently, World-Herald staff writer Henry Cordes reports.
School districts as well as higher-education institutions across the state are commendably working to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse Nebraska. To boost its minority graduation rate, the University of Nebraska system has adopted a "Commit to Complete" initiative. This year, minorities account for about 18% of the freshman class at University of Nebraska-Lincoln and 36% at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
Creighton University, with students of color making up 26% of its freshmen class, has various programs to support minority students, including through its Intercultural Center.
A growing number of Nebraska business leaders call for greater action to promote inclusiveness. Bryan Slone, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry, summed it up well when he stated, "As we go forward, diversity and inclusion is not an option, it's not something nice — it's fundamental to the economic development of our state."
In addition to recruitment and hiring practices by business, educational institutions can help boost academic opportunities for adult workers. Nebraska has one of the biggest gaps of any state when the percentage of white

residents with at least a two-year degree beyond high school is compared with that for minority residents.
A needed step Nebraska should take this year is passage of Legislative Bill 627, now before the Legislature. The measure would give lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers the same protection against job discrimination that current law provides for people based on race, color, religion and gender.
Omaha several years ago passed a similar measure through a local ordinance, and Iowa adopted such a state law 13 years ago.
A letter in the Sunday Public Pulse from a young Nebraskan underscored how passage of LB 627 would send a needed message to young people. “I am one of many young Nebraskans mulling whether to return after graduation,” Chris Russert wrote from Mankato, Minn. “Denying these protections sends a message that if you do not fit in a narrowly defined box of what our state leaders define as acceptable, they will not have your back.” It’s important for Nebraska, he wrote, to “grow by embracing a more diverse and accepting future.”
In business, education and community life, Nebraska has vital opportunities to nurture welcoming, dynamic communities. Together, let’s take these steps forward now.

OWH Editorial: OPS strategic plan identifies sound approaches to meet key needs

The new five-year strategic plan developed by Omaha Public Schools shows impressive, professional-minded foresight by Nebraska’s largest school district.
The plan identifies sensible goals for improved academic performance and professional development and outlines sound approaches to reach them. It describes practical options to boost efficiency. It insists on fiscal discipline. It encourages innovation. It explains the growing importance of educational technology as an instructional tool.
And it impressively emphasizes that over time, status quo thinking won’t do — conditions will change, and in response OPS must be ready to adjust its policies and operational culture to meet future challenges. Such thinking guided OPS in developing this new plan: The district used original analysis and planning rather than merely extending its previous five-year plan.
Indeed, one of the principles OPS Superintendent Cheryl Logan emphasizes for the district is to regularly scrutinize individual policies and programs to check if they still have relevance and value. If not, they should be jettisoned. In other words: No more “this is the way we’ve always done it” thinking. That’s sound, flexible thinking to be welcomed by any well-functioning institution.
The district, with 54,000 students and 62 schools, can point to current achievements but also to challenges. No planning roadmap will magically solve every need in short order. But the new plan usefully explains key challenges and points the way toward coordinated policies to address them.
The plan’s strong focus on improved strategies for reading is welcome, for example. The district will hire reading specialists and add Reading Recovery, a program that gives one-on-one assistance to young students who are struggling with reading and writing.
As Logan observes, “When people come to the Omaha Public Schools and trust us with their children, we should be able to deliver on making sure that every child can read by the end of third grade.”
Encouraging, too, is the plan’s push to reduce student absences — identified as a key long-term factor determining a student’s academic success or failure. The plan cites specific goals for addressing absenteeism. In the same vein, OPS has set “ethic of care” goals to strengthen relations with families, as measured in school climate surveys.
Under Logan’s management, OPS has achieved impressive fiscal stewardship. OPS had budgeted $617 million for the past school year, but the district wound up spending $570 million. A national consultant, expert in school finance, conducted a wide-ranging analysis of the district’s finances and budgetary approach.
The new strategic plan promotes sound budget management in multiple ways. By June 2021, for example, the district will require audits of existing systems and technology contracts “to increase fiscal responsibility, eliminate redundancy in technology purchasing and create a schedule for procurement of technology” needs through 2030.
These approaches in the new plan — encompassing instruction, staff development, school/family relations and budget management — offer encouraging promise for the future of OPS and our community.

OWH Editorial: Business incentives bill is a plus for urban and rural Nebraska

The support by State Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte for the business incentive proposal before the Legislature is one more indicator of how Legislative Bill 720 is a plus for urban and rural Nebraska. Groene is a stalwart proponent of Nebraska rural interests, and his support for the amended bill shows how soundly crafted incentives can benefit all parts of the state.

OWH Editorial: Prison director's visit to North Omaha was commendable outreach

It was encouraging to see that Scott Frakes, the head of Nebraska's state prison system, met recently with North Omaha residents to answer questions and receive feedback. Such outreach promotes needed communication and accountability.

Frakes has an immensely challenging job. At the same time, the difficulties of his work don't remove his obligation, as the prison system CEO, to encourage prison operations that meet the full standard of proper treatment.

The session in North Omaha featured appropriate questions for him on issues including overcrowding, treatment options, solitary confinement and the blocking of some volunteer prison visitors and community organizations. It was good to see a Nebraska public official interacting with the public and responding to questions about complex issues.

Dialogue doesn't automatically solve problems, but it does encourage improved understanding and gives public officials a better sense of Nebraskans' concerns and priorities.

North Omaha is a majority-black part of our city. The most recent data indicate that black inmates made up 28.4% of Nebraska's prison population in 2017; overall that year, African Americans accounted for 4.4% of the state's population. Prison demographics will never exactly match a state's overall makeup, but the figures highlight why Nebraska prison policy has particular significance among black Omahans.

Credit in helping arrange the North Omaha meeting goes to community advocate Preston Love Jr., and Jasmine Harris, director of advocacy and policy for RISE, a local organization that helps people exit prison and reenter regular life. Love and Harris recently met with Gov. Pete Ricketts, and plans for Frakes' visit grew from their discussions. Another public meeting with Frakes is scheduled for March 14 at Omaha North High School.

Such public access is productive and valuable in facilitating community understanding and government accountability. All involved in this effort deserve a salute.

OWH Editorial: OPPD and Sarpy County need to communicate, resolve their concerns

A commendable partnership among Sarpy County governments is pursuing a vital goal: extending sewer service to the southern portion of the county. That initiative will be vital in facilitating new economic development in Sarpy County.

A complication has arisen, however: Plans by the Omaha Public Power District to build large-scale solar arrays — involving up to 3,000 acres — could convert a large chunk of Sarpy territory to non-taxable status, depriving the sewer initiative of needed revenues.

The situation clearly calls for close communication and coordination. Both of these projects are eminently worthy, serving the long-term public interest. The two sides have an obligation to seek a workable solution so that both projects can move forward to reach their full potential.

OWH Midlands Voices: Together, let's nurture climate-smart agriculture in Nebraska

The writer is a retired professor with the department of agronomy and horticulture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, writing for the Nebraska Elder Climate Legacy Initiative, founded by Nebraska natural resources specialists.

It is time for Nebraska and neighboring states to embrace a new vision and direction for agriculture!

It has been a hard year for our region's agricultural producers. Recent extreme weather challenges came when farmers had experienced multi-year drops in incomes due to ongoing trade wars and commodity surpluses. Simultaneously, high input costs — including property taxes — had already contributed to thin profit margins.

While today's agriculture is highly productive and efficient, leading to low food costs, market prices often fail to

provide a livable income for producers. Furthermore, our specialization in a few crops or a single livestock enterprise leads to even greater economic instability.

Today, America's urban society is largely disconnected from its basic food source, with little understanding of agriculture. That leads to misunderstandings as well as a lack of appreciation for ag producers, their challenges and the vital roles they play. Producers' practices that seem to be necessary to feed the population are increasingly seen by the urban population as detrimental to the environment.

Producers are on an economic and public relations treadmill, with high-dollar stakes, increasing risk, mounting uncertainty and public scrutiny. Extreme weather events brought on by our changing climate only add to the economic and environmental vulnerability.

Business as usual is not sustainable — we need a new vision. This new approach not only must result in production of abundant, nourishing and safe food supplies. It must also sustain our natural resources and protect both rural and urban environments.

We are not suggesting a return to an earlier era of farming structure, practices or technologies. Nor are we advocating for extreme dietary shifts or government regulations. No, we see a new vision building on the strengths of our current food production processes. Our producers are already using precision technology, and many are applying sound water and land management practices. But, there are additional possible refinements in farming practices, and new opportunities exist.

Nebraska is a top five food-producing state with the natural resources, human capital and ingenuity to lead this transformation. Farming principles and practices that seek to rehabilitate and enhance the entire ecosystem are being tested. If refined and adopted, they may also increase land productivity and profitability, and build greater resilience to weather extremes.

A key component is protecting and improving soil health.

Nationwide, there has been a decline in soil health, with productivity maintained using synthetic fertilizers. Nebraska's farmers lead the nation in the percentage of harvested cropland under no-till practices (53%), which favor soil health. Other important soil health practices — e.g., more diverse crop rotations, cover crops and holistic management systems — are used sparingly. Of note: The Nebraska Legislature last year created a Healthy Soils Task Force to further enhance this state's current efforts to improve our soils.

"Climate-Smart" agriculture provides a host of valuable "ecosystem services" — benefits — for all of us. These include reduced erosion and downstream flooding, enhanced water quality, reduced irrigation needs, restored wildlife and pollinator habitat, reduced greenhouse gas emissions and, perhaps significant, atmospheric reductions of CO2 via permanent carbon sequestration.

These benefits show that agriculture is part of the solution in mitigating a changing climate and protecting and enhancing the environment. We need to recognize and appreciate our farmers' and ranchers' vital roles as primary stewards of the state's land and water resources.

But ag can't make that transition alone. We all must share the stewardship responsibility and costs. We must support and appropriately pay farmers and ranchers for these eco-system services rendered — something our current systems largely fail to do.

These thoughts merely scratch the surface of a new vision for Nebraska's agricultural future. It will take the wisdom and will of both rural and urban Nebraskans to embrace the potential and then build and invest in a 21st century production agricultural system that leads the nation.

So, let's begin.

By Tom Hoegemeyer

OWH Midlands Voices: Let's bolster public health preparation against the coronavirus threat

The writer is dean of the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Our nation, once again, finds itself at the worst possible time to prepare for a public health threat: in the midst of a public health emergency of international concern.

Worries about the novel coronavirus have the public, and public servants, asking the predictable questions. They inquire about the nature and prevention of the disease, about the existence of an ample supply of face masks and protective gear, and about the outlook for the development and deployment of a drug or vaccine.

We have seen this before — and recently. Many will remember the swine flu, or H1N1, that in 2009 sent more than a quarter-million Americans to the hospital and claimed more than 12,000 lives in the U.S.
Regardless of whether the novel coronavirus will become a U.S. epidemic, the situation shines the light on barriers to preparedness across the country. This includes preparedness for outbreaks of the likes of this coronavirus as well as for a particularly dangerous new flu strain. It also includes preparedness for a heinous act of bioterrorism.
Make no mistake, much has been done to improve readiness. Over the past two decades, lessons learned from the 9/11 attacks, from Hurricane Katrina and from H1N1 have spurred remarkable public health upgrades at the national, state and local levels. International collaboration has improved, too. Our nation is dramatically better prepared to detect and address emergencies.
Still, in key areas, progress is insufficient. The discussion in this area inevitably turns to the funding of state, territorial, local and tribal health agencies, which all too often is the subject of political arguments rather than practical needs.
Local health agencies are operating with approximately 50,000 fewer personnel, compared with 2008. They also have seen steady declines in preparedness funding. However, health care preparedness is the critical gap in national preparedness.
Funding aside, not enough has been done to leverage the array of partners who extend the public face of public health. Retail clinics and community pharmacists come to mind quickly. Progress has been made in expanding pharmacists' vaccination authority and allowing them to screen and even help to treat an array of illnesses. However, many states lag behind, despite strong public desire for increased access to pharmacist-provided services.
A study published in 2018 in the Journal of the American Pharmacists Association found that approximately 6 million Americans per year who did not previously get the flu shot now do as a result of public policy changes that have expanded pharmacists' authority to vaccinate. A key public health message for this epidemic is for individuals to be vaccinated against flu and pneumonia.
Much upside potential exists if needless state barriers are eliminated. Overcoming these barriers includes expanding consumers' access and coverage to recommended vaccines in community care settings, and establishing emergency standing orders that allow for needed medications to be furnished to a patient.
In any case, the optimum time to commit to public health preparedness is before a crisis is upon us. While time will tell if this coronavirus will be a serious threat in the United States, now is the right time to take action for this potential crisis, and for the next ones.
While the nation has come a long way, more strides are needed. Until then, public health partners such as pharmacists will do whatever they can to answer the call. Let us not take them for granted, nor leave them underutilized.
By Ali S. Khan, M.D.

OWH Midlands Voices: Americans didn't get the full story about Trump's actions

The writer is a former U.S. representative for Nebraska's 2nd District.
Every Nebraskan expects and deserves better representation in the United States Senate than we have received from Ben Sasse in the impeachment trial of President Donald John Trump.
Sen. Sasse explained his reasons for voting for acquittal of President Trump in a World-Herald open letter on Feb. 5. After noting that he does not agree with President Trump's long-held view that "foreign aid is almost always a bad deal for America" and Trump's view of the "CrowdStrike theory of 2016," Sasse explains that he does share President Trump's view that "it is dangerous if they (the American people) worry Russia picked the American president."
Sasse argues these three "facts" formed the basis for Trump's actions in Ukraine and that Trump "seems to have believed he was doing something that was simultaneously good for America and good for himself politically — namely reinforcing the legitimacy of his 2016 victory."
For Sen. Sasse, this forms the basis for his justification of President Trump's withholding of military assistance from Ukraine until the president of Ukraine publicly announced criminal investigations of the Bidens and CrowdStrike, allegations which formed the basis for the congressional charge of abuse of power. This appears to be an

acceptance of the Alan Dershowitz radical legal theory that so long as the president believes his actions are good for the nation, he can do anything that also benefits himself politically and not suffer impeachment.
Sen. Sasse goes on to defend the failure of the Senate to seek additional testimony or contemporaneous records of executive branch participants in the Ukraine matter denied to the House by order of President Trump.
Sasse states: “There is no need to hear from any 18th impeachment witness … to confirm facts we already know.”
“The aid delay was wrong,” Sasse concludes.
But Sasse and the Senate Republicans have denied themselves as well as the American people a complete historical record of how the president and his senior executive branch officials performed during this critical period. Instead, Sasse simply substitutes his own unfounded conclusion: “But in the end, the president wasn’t seduced by the most malign voices; his honest advisers made sure Ukraine got the aid the law required.”
There was nothing in the record of the Senate proceedings to support Sen. Sasse’s conclusion. The Senate and the American people do not know how the acting chief of staff and OMB Director Mick Mulvaney actually performed. We do not know what Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Secretary of Energy Rick Perry or even John Bolton did to counter what Sen. Sasse describes as the “malign,” “off-the-books foreign policy-making” of Rudy Giuliani. We do not know how or when or by whom the Ukraine aid was restored or why.
We do know President Trump was directing the withholding of military assistance, not taking direction from others as Sen. Sasse maintains. The president still maintains he never withheld aid to force investigations but has not allowed testimony or records to support this claim.
Sen. Sasse was not among those celebrating in the White House Thursday with President Trump as he again proclaimed he did “nothing wrong” and vowed revenge on those who say his actions in Ukraine were wrong or even “inappropriate.” But, Sen. Sasse has also not stood up for the principles he proclaims, and we have not received the truth we deserve from our public servants.
No one should be happy with this outcome. We all deserve better.
By John Cavanaugh

OWH: Nebraska, embrace tolerance

Many opponents of Legislative Bill 627, which adds sexual orientation and gender identity to Nebraska’s anti-discrimination laws, are making the misleading claim this would place an unnecessary burden on businesses. However, this bill would not function any differently than existing laws that protect classes like race or sex. It is actually likely to do the opposite of what critics claim, attracting workers and businesses by showing our state government’s commitment to social tolerance.
Others claim it threatens religious freedom. Yet, this bill does not interfere with churches’ right to practice or individuals’ rights to believe anything regarding marriage or sexuality. It is also hard to see how, even with a conservative understanding of those issues, the teachings of Jesus can be used to justify workplace discrimination against anyone.
I am one of many young Nebraskans mulling whether to return after gradation. Denying these protections sends a message that if you do not fit in a narrowly defined box of what our state leaders define as acceptable, they will not have your back. It is time for our Legislature and Gov. Ricketts to stop lecturing to young Nebraskans and start listening, so we can break out of that box and grow by embracing a more diverse and accepting future.
Chris Russert, Mankato, Minn.

LJS Editorial, 2/9: Nebraska must ensure workers avoid falling off 'benefits cliff'

Lower-income families need a hand up much more than they need a handcuff.
The problem is that current structures for federal assistance programs sometimes trap beneficiaries in a no-win scenario: Earn more money at work and risk losing benefits, or turn down the extra money to retain access to help for food or child care.
It's called the “benefits cliff.” It's very real and an unintended consequence of many welfare programs, forcing recipients to either jump without a safety net or remain stuck where they are. Nebraska legislators can make the

jump a little safer with this bill, which increases income eligibility levels, putting folks in a more secure spot financially before losing benefits.

“In systems like scholarship programs or grants for the arts, people are rewarded for their hard work and merit,” said Lincoln Sen. Kate Bolz, who introduced LB1049. “In systems like child care and food assistance, they are punished for getting ahead.”

She’s spot on. And, rather than directing these programs to provide a temporary boost -- as they're intended -- until people earn enough to leave them, they can become a trap that prevents families from rising above their circumstances.

That's why the changes before the Nebraska Legislature represent such a big step forward despite appearing like rather inconsequential math adjustments.

Bolz’s bill increases the qualifying family income for child care assistance from 125% to 150% of the federal poverty level beginning in 2021-22 by using excess federal funds. That extra cushion makes the leap off assistance more manageable.

Separate legislation from Omaha Sen. John McCollister, LB255, advanced out of committee last year and awaits floor debate. His bill seeks to raise SNAP eligibility level from 130% to 140% of the federal poverty level, which he said would allow families to continue to be food-secure and be able to afford child care.

The bills are estimated to cost just $150,000 -- combined -- to implement.

And the benefits of such changes, which aid in the transition for government assistance to self-sufficiency, far exceed the state's investment.

Employers, too, see the plus sides of removing this insecurity and uncertainty from workers' lives, hence why these bills earned the support of business groups. The Lincoln, Omaha and statewide chambers of commerce backed this legislation, with representatives testifying about the very real possibility of more work moving employees "two steps forward and three steps back."

Nebraskans shouldn't be forced to chain themselves to untenable situations to provide for their families. Senators must take advantage of the opportunity this year to smooth out an important transition on these benefits for eligible workers.

Norfolk DN Editorial: Aksarben Foundation provides funds to get Growing Together initiative going

When it comes to reversing a 50-year pattern of people between the ages of 20 and 34 leaving Northeast Nebraska, there’s new reason for hope.

The Growing Together initiative that some might have considered a dream at one time for Northeast Nebraska is getting some financial clout.

The Aksarben Foundation announced that recently that it would provide $360,000 to fund 15 scholarships for Wayne State College students chosen for the first year of the program. The funds will cover scholarships for 15 students who will be recruited for fall 2020.

The senior year includes full tuition and support for housing in Norfolk. The recent announcement, which included regional media attention, has helped to increase interest in the idea, which is being looked at across the state.

The number of students in the Northeast Nebraska initiative is expected to continue to increase each year from 15 to 45 and then finally 75 students per year.

As Norfolk businessmen Mike Flood and Norfolk Mayor Josh Moenning have pointed out, if people are still around at age 25, they are likely to remain in the county.

Part of the reason, they have determined, is if people are married and have kids, they are likely to stay in their home counties because they appreciate the schools and the communities for raising families.

We applaud the efforts of the Growing Together committee and the Aksarben Foundation to address this problem. They have a goal for Norfolk and the region to reverse the outward migration of young people.

The hope is to transform Norfolk and Northeast Nebraska into a vibrant community where young people in their 20s and early 30s work in high-tech and other well-paying careers. Ideally, many of these young people will be from the area and have earned cooperative scholarships from Wayne State College. Then when living and working with other young people, hopes are that they will meet spouses and want to raise families in the region.

We know it sounds like a simple solution, but sometimes common sense is what is needed most. Given all the

downtown Norfolk revitalization that has taken place already, with more in the works, there is a reason for young people to stay.
And given all the other investments that have improved quality of life in the Norfolk including the expanded Norfolk Family YMCA, Norfolk Public Library, health care facilities with Faith Regional Health Services and Fountain Point, we think Norfolk is on the right path.
We know Gov. Pete Ricketts, who was in town for the recent Aksarben announcement, and others are eager to help. Perhaps there might be legislative solutions to enhance entrepreneurship and small business investment to bring in more jobs for young people.

OWH: Morgann Freeman drops out of race for 2nd District seat challenging Don Bacon

The youngest person running in Nebraska's most competitive congressional district left the race Friday, saying she could no longer meet her personal and professional goals.
Morgann Freeman, 29, a communications consultant and community organizer, announced the decision on social media.
She was a Democratic candidate competing in a crowded primary to decide who will face Republican Rep. Don Bacon in November.
"I talked with my supporters, my family and friends," she said. "It was just the right time."
I chose to run for office because I didn't see a better option.

Today I'm leaving the race, but I'm not leaving this fight.

Thank you all my friends & supporters. I am so incredibly grateful to have walked this amazing path with you. https://t.co/iKaxQPzMQA
— Morgann Freeman (@morgann_freeman) February 7, 2020
Freeman struggled to raise money in a race that includes another progressive, 2018 Democratic nominee Kara Eastman, who also supports "Medicare for All" and legalizing recreational marijuana.
Freeman raised $284 in the fourth quarter of 2019. Her election fundraising paperwork showed more than $3,000 in campaign debts and obligations and about $1,000 in cash on hand.
Eastman raised $203,000 over the same time span.
Still competing for the Democratic nomination are lawyer Ann Ashford and restaurateur Gladys Harrison, who owns Big Mama's Kitchen. The Democratic primary is May 12.
Freeman said that she would endorse the 2nd District's Democratic nominee but that she did not hear enough during last weekend's candidate forum to make an endorsement now.
"I put everything that I had in this," she said. "All of my savings, everything that I earned … and my time that I would have otherwise spent on my wedding or spending time with my family and friends."
By Aaron Sanderford

Scottsbluff SH: Smith, Sasse set to press forward after hectic days

After what has been a trying period for Congress, Nebraska lawmakers are ready to get back to business.
The Senate acquitted President Donald Trump on impeachment charges Wednesday after months of testimony and partisan bickering that resulted in a guilty verdict from the House.
With impeachment now off the table, Sen. Ben Sasse told the Star-Herald it's time to turn the country's focus.
"The biggest national security challenge of the 21st century is China's fight to become the world's only superpower," Sasse said. "The United States needs to get serious about this threat."
U.S. Rep. Adrian Smith said there is plenty on the table that needs to be addressed.
"While our economy is benefiting from regulatory relief and tax reform, we still have a lot to do," Smith told the Star-Herald. "I am looking forward to working with the administration on a bipartisan basis to reduce health care costs, and to ensure trade negotiations with the UK, EU, China, Japan, and Kenya treat high-quality U.S. agricultural products fairly."

Sasse said he was pleased to hear the President talk about issues that impact Nebraska during his State of the Union address this week, including the United States-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) trade agreement that replaces the North American Free Trade Agreement.

“At Tuesday’s State of the Union address, the President talked about some big Nebraska priorities: promoting trade, securing the border, and defending life,” Sasse said. “The USMCA is great news for Nebraska’s farmers and ranchers and it’s an achievement worth celebrating tonight. Border security is national security: We’ve got to combat the drug cartels that are terrorizing our southern border — this is something Congress ought to get serious about. Last, but certainly not least, we’ve got to promote a culture of life with a compassionate agenda that’s pro-baby, pro-woman, and pro-science.”

Smith said the president presented an optimistic agenda for the U.S. economy.

“He has worked hard to fulfill his promises to update NAFTA, hold China accountable, reduce burdensome regulations, reform the tax code, and make our nation and the world safer,” Smith said. “I agree there is much more work to be done, and I look forward to building on our accomplishments.”

When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) tore her copy of the president’s speech following the State of the Union address, Smith said it set a disappointing standard.

“Speaker Pelosi’s behavior set a terrible precedent,” Smith said. “I hope future speakers, as past speakers have done, do not follow her example. Regardless of who is in the White House, it is important for Congress, and our country, to hear directly from the president, and to respect the office the president serves in.”

By Mark McCarthy

AP: Factory farms provide abundant food, but environment suffers

AKRON, Iowa — In recent years, Fred Zenk built two barns housing about 2,400 hogs between them — long, white, concrete-and-metal structures that are ubiquitous in the Midwestern countryside.

The Iowa farmer didn't follow state requirements to get construction approval and file a manure disposal plan. But Zenk's operation initially flew under the radar of regulators, as have many others across the United States because of loopholes and spotty enforcement of laws intended to keep the nation's air and water clean.

Beef, chicken and pork have become more affordable staples in the American diet thanks to industry consolidation and the rise of farms with tens of thousands of animals. Yet federal and state environmental agencies often lack basic information such as where they're located, how many animals they're raising and how they deal with manure.

The animals and their waste have fouled waters. The enclosures spew air pollutants that promote climate change and are implicated in illnesses such as asthma. The stench of manure — stored in pits beneath barns or open-air lagoons and eventually spread on croplands as fertilizer — can make life miserable for people nearby.

For most of the nation's history, meat and dairy products came from independent farms that raised animals in barnyards, pastures and rangeland. But the system now is controlled by giant companies that contract with farmers to produce livestock with the efficiency of auto assembly lines inside warehouse-like barns and sprawling feedlots.

The spread of corporate animal farms is turning neighbor against neighbor in town halls and courtrooms. Iowa, the top U.S. producer of swine and egg-laying chickens, has been a major battleground.

"It's a fight for survival," said Chris Petersen, who still raises pigs in outdoor pens.

Michele Merkel, a former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency attorney who quit over the agency's reluctance to punish polluting mega-farms and is co-director of the advocacy group Food & Water Justice, said the industry "has avoided any effective regulation and accountability for a long time."

Industry groups say there are plenty of regulations and livestock agriculture is simply adapting to improved technology, equipment and methods.

"We're responding to what the market is giving us," said Brady Reicks, whose company runs numerous large hog structures in northeastern Iowa. "We're doing it responsibly; we're passionate about doing it. It increases growth in rural Iowa and it helps feed the world."

The EPA began to count the nation's factory farms during the Obama administration but retreated when industry groups sued. Instead, the agency uses state data to produce annual statistics about only the biggest operations.

As of 2018, the nationwide EPA tally was about 20,300 — a roughly five-fold increase over nearly four decades. Yet it's a tiny fraction of all confined-animal operations. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates there are more than 450,000, most too small for inclusion in the EPA count.

Iowa has 80 million farm animals and 3 million people. Yet in 2017, regulators didn't know how many livestock farms were in the state. Under federal pressure, the Department of Natural Resources pored over aerial photos, discovering 4,200 previously unknown facilities.

Zenk's Plymouth County farm was among them.

"We knew nothing about his operation," said Sheila Kenny, an environmental specialist with the state agency.

Zenk acknowledged breaking the rules but said no harm was done. He paid a $4,500 fine.

"You think you can get by with something once in a while and you can't," he said, strolling among his barns, tractor and feed bins.

To state regulators, such discoveries mean the system works. Critics say the Iowa experience shows how easily livestock operations can escape detection.

Putting thousands of animals in one enclosure produces huge amounts of manure. Unlike human sewage, which is treated and released into waterways, animal waste is stored, then spread on croplands as fertilizer.

Farmers insist they're careful.

"We take soil tests, we decide how much manure it needs and that's how much we apply," Reicks said.

Environmental groups say fields often can't handle the volumes of manure produced, leading to runoff. Such pollution is exempt from regulation under the 1972 Clean Water Act, even though agriculture is the biggest contaminator of rivers and streams, according to the EPA.

In Emmett County, Iowa, small farmer Gordon Garrison sued a nearby operation with 4,400 hogs, contending manure from its croplands fouls a creek that runs through his property and feeds the Des Moines River.

"They're using me for a waste disposal site," Garrison said.

Livestock farms generate about 70% of the nation's ammonia emissions, plus gases that cause global warming, particularly methane.

Yet they aren't required to get permits under the Clean Air Act. The government hasn't decided how to measure emissions from barns, feedlots, storage lagoons and croplands.

And under President Donald Trump, the EPA has exempted livestock operations from requirements under other laws that industries report significant releases of air pollutants, including ammonia and hydrogen sulfide.

Critics say yesteryear's barnyard whiffs were nothing like the overpowering stench from today's supersized operations.

"You don't want to be anywhere near them," said Brad Trom, a crop producer in Minnesota's Dodge County, who lives within three miles of 11 structures housing 30,000 swine. He says he's been staggered by powerful odors barreling across his fields.

Farmers say they're trying to reduce the smells but contend they're a normal part of country life.

"I've never lived on a farm that didn't have nature's fragrances on it," said Gary Sovereign, a swine producer in Iowa's Howard County.

Research has linked proximity to factory farms to various health risks. But scientists acknowledge it's nearly impossible to pin someone's illness on a certain polluter.

Jeff and Gail Schwartzkopf say after a hog mega-barn was built a quarter-mile from their home in northern Iowa, they developed burning and itching eyes, throat soreness and body rashes. They fear the manure odors are making them sick and ruining their home.

"Nobody's going to want to buy it. We're stuck," Jeff Schwartzkopf said.

By John Flesher

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