From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 1-27-20
Date: Monday, January 27, 2020 8:54:25 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Jan 2020	3.53	-27.00	07:44
Corn	Dec 2020	3.54	-40.00	07:44
Milo	Jan 2020	2.92	-88.00	07:44
Milo	Dec 2020	3.09	-85.00	07:44
Soybeans	Jan 2020	7.95	-95.00	07:44
Soybeans	Dec 2020	8.23	-105.00	07:44
Wheat	Jan 2020	4.09	-70.00	07:44
Wheat	Jul 2020	4.19	-75.00	07:35

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NET: For Many Hemp Farmers, The First Year Was As 'Bad As It Can Get'

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AP: 4 Missouri River states unite to try to limit flooding

LINCOLN, Neb. — Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri are joining forces for a study that will look for ways the states can limit flooding along the Missouri River and give them information about how wetter weather patterns could require changes in the way the U.S. government manages the basins reservoirs.

The states are pooling their money to pay for half of a $400,000 study with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to measure how much water flows down the Missouri River.

The states hope to present a united front to federal officials to gain more influence over how the river is managed after devastating floods in 2011 and 2019.

“We’ve got to look at the data, but it’s certainly possible that we’re going to see more wet years,” Republican Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said at a recent media briefing. “We need to collect the data first, and then we can address with the Corps what they ought to be doing.”

Officials from the states plan to meet next month to decide how to proceed.

A lot of the data the Corps uses to manage the Missouri River is outdated and doesn’t account for the two historic floods over the last decade, said Jeff Fassett, director of the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources. The Corps did not respond to requests for an interview.

“We need to be factoring in new information as we look forward,” Fassett said. “Nobody knows whether this is the new normal. What if 2023 looks like 2019? If this happens again, we need to be better prepared.”

The effort comes as higher global temperatures are causing glaciers to melt into the oceans and producing extreme weather conditions that are more intense and destructive than ever before. The states are bracing for more frequent and severe floods, even as some of their top officials, including Ricketts, question mainstream climate science.

Fassett said the states also want to identify “pinch points” on the river that could cause a water buildup during a flood. He pointed to a crossing at Nebraska Highway 2, where the river spilled over its levees and covered Interstate 29 last year. Crews responded by raising and lengthening the bridge to let more water flow underneath.

States that work together tend to carry more sway with the federal government because don't make conflicting requests, said Tim Hall, the hydrology resources coordinator for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.
Hall said the partnership is similar to a group of upper Mississippi River states that joined forces in 1981 to mitigate flooding.
"It's a lot easier than one state trying to negotiate with the Corps," Hall said. "It can be done, but it's more challenging."
The partnership also encourages states to share data and not work against one another, Hall said.
"In the big picture, we all want to accomplish the same thing," Hall said.
The Missouri is the longest river in North America, running from western Montana through the Dakotas and touching Nebraska, Iowa and Kansas before cutting across Missouri and entering the Mississippi River at St. Louis.
The states it touches once had a coalition known as Missouri River Association of States and Tribes, but it eventually disbanded after Iowa and Nebraska withdrew amid a dispute with Montana over how to manage the river. Nebraska and Iowa wanted more water released from upstream reservoirs earlier in the year to prevent summer flooding, but Montana was concerned about effects on wildlife and recreation during drought years.
The new, four-state coalition would focus on flood mitigation.
By Grant Schulte

NCN: Governor Asks For Funds To Support Local Government's Flood Recovery

PLATTSMOUTH - Increasing flood relief funding is one of Gov. Pete Ricketts' top priorities for the 2020 fiscal year.
Ricketts discussed the 2019 March flooding and shared his proposals for restoring infrastructure with Plattsmouth residents at the city's library Jan. 22.
Ricketts: "Six people died, 84 counties were impacted, hundreds of people were left homeless and 90,000 acres of farmland was flooded as a result of the floods in 2019."
In response, Ricketts said the 84 counties have submitted requests totaling $400 million to FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) for flood relief.
Ricketts: "FEMA will pay 75 percent, but that still leaves a lot for the counties and cities to pick up. That would leave the cities with 12.5 percent of the cost and counties 12.5 percent to pay."
He said $50 million has been set aside to help with the state's part of the coverage.
Ricketts: "The overall package (for flood relief) is just short of $60 million. Several counties have low populations and low tax bases. I've asked the state to put aside another $9.2 million to help those counties. We're proposing to pick up about 18 percent of the costs. We're also asking for another 20 percent for the Governor's Relief Fund."
Plattsmouth City Administrator Erv Portis thanked the governor for the state support already received.
Portis: "The state of Nebraska is a strong supportive partner as we repair and look at our future."
Plattsmouth Mayor Paul Lambert agreed. "I think the governor and his team have been fully behind us as we still make repairs on this flood damage. People are out today to stabilize our plants."
Many communities along the river were severely damaged in 2019.
Ricketts: "There were 318 days when there was a flood warning or flood watch somewhere in Nebraska."
As for preventative measures, Ricketts said he has been meeting with governors from Iowa, Kansas, North Dakota, South Dakota and Missouri about improving communication with the United States Corps of Engineers.
Ricketts: "We're discussing how we can work to make people and property a top priority."
The discussion will continue during the National Governor's meeting in August.
Ricketts: "It's a long process."
He noted Congress passed the Flood Control act in 1945, "which worked great for a long time."
In 1966, Congress passed the Endangered Species Act and in 1979 the Corps was charged with flood control and protecting endangered species. In the aftermath, projects aiming to do both cause the river to spread out and resulted in more flooding.
Ricketts said he's asked for $250,000 to hire consultants to look at the hydrology of the river.
Ricketts: "Do we need higher levees. What can we ask of the Corps of Engineers?"
Plattsmouth resident Joyce Bowman asked how cutting Gavin's Point Dam releases to 25,000 cubic feet per second this month will help with spring flooding this year. Ricketts said lowering the water level will give crews time to repair levies and do more flood control.
The flooding, despite the damage, brought out the best in Nebraskans, Ricketts said.
Ricketts: "We saw people stepping up to help their neighbors, friends helping friends and Nebraskans helping complete strangers. Volunteers filled sandbags, people donated supplies and others gave hot meals to workers. Because

Nebraskans stepped up, 2019 will go down in history as our finest hour."
By Patti Jo Peterson

Fremont Tribune: Governor seeks $63 million in state funds for flood relief

PLATTSMOUTH – Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, during a visit to Plattsmouth on Thursday, recommended that nearly $63 million be budgeted by the state for financial relief from last year's costly floods.
He also praised as "our finest hour" the way Nebraskans helped each other in dealing with the historic flood of 2019.
"It showed what it means to be a Nebraskan," Ricketts said at a town meeting in the public library.
The governor said 84 counties have submitted over $400 million in disaster relief projects to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which would pay 75 percent of those costs, leaving the state and those counties to pay the remaining 25 percent.
Numerous entities in Cass County have submitted their own disaster relief projects. These entities include Plattsmouth and the county's Roads Department. The county's Emergency Management Department has submitted slightly more than $13,000 for sandbags and overtime.
His recommendation to the Legislature is to provide $50 million for addressing the state's share of those projects, plus another $9.2 million to aid those counties that are particularly strapped financially.
An additional $3 million would go in the Governor's Emergency Fund so that the state is prepared to address any future events.
On a related issue, Ricketts said he is working with some area governors in seeking a "united voice" for dealing with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on future Missouri River issues. This would include a policy of putting the concerns of people and property ahead of endangered wildlife.
The meeting, sponsored by the Plattsmouth Chamber of Commerce, attracted about two dozen people who came despite wintry weather that perhaps kept attendance down.
Besides flooding issues, Ricketts devoted much time to that always popular topic – taxes.
Under his administration, the state's budget has grown less than 3 percent, he said.
"You have to control spending to have sustainable tax relief," Ricketts said.
He proposed $500 million in property tax relief over the next three years, plus a 50-percent decrease in the taxes Nebraska charges on retirement benefits by veterans.
This proposal might reverse the current trend of veterans leaving the state.
Ricketts also wants to create scholarships for young people for pursuing degrees in high-demand fields. If approved by the Legislature, this plan could start this fall, he said.
"We need to make sure we can hold on to our young people," he said.
By Tim Rohwer

AP: Governor names 3 students to Nebraska college system board

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP)-- Gov. Pete Ricketts has appointed three students to serve as nonvoting members of the Nebraska State College System board of trustees.
Konery Klueber is a senior working on a degree in justice studies. He'll represent Chadron State College over the 2020-2021 school year. Tyler Harms is a junior majoring in marketing and business management, and he'll represent Peru State College. Amanda Jaixen is a junior majoring in family and consumer science education. She'll represent Wayne State College.

Norfolk DN: Battle Creek students meet with Gov. Ricketts to celebrate "Find Your Genius" placing

Students from across Nebraska met with Gov. Pete Ricketts earlier this week to celebrate their success in the December "Find Your Genius" challenge and discuss the future of the state's workforce.
The winners of the challenge, including students from Battle Creek High School, met with Ricketts at the state Capitol to talk about their accomplishments and gain insight on how young people can connect to real-world industries while still in school, according to a Find Your Genius media release.
Some students had to meet Ricketts through video conference because they couldn't attend the in-person celebration.
Find Your Genius is an online platform that gives young people the opportunity to solve real-world business problems through online challenges that engage in career discovery and personal growth.

The challenges enable young people ages 13-22 to participate in solving actual business problems in an online, game-like forum. In the December challenge, Find Your Genius partnered with Goodwill Industries of Greater Nebraska Inc. and asked students to create a business idea that solved one of two proposed issues: poverty or mental and emotional stress.

Four Battle Creek High School students received awards in the statewide competition: seniors Kylee McLean, Hannah Maslonka, Kolby Heller and Slate Kraft.

Ricketts also encouraged the students to take their ideas one step further and reach out to prospective industries in Nebraska for experience and job opportunities.

"This is really cool and innovative stuff. It gets you thinking about other connected problems and solutions and how they fit together," Ricketts said. “In the state of Nebraska, we have been trying to create that pipeline from you (the students) to companies.”

Students received prize money for their winning efforts, and several have received paid internship offers and secured positions with regional companies while others have received offers to fund their business ideas.

The next Find Your Genius challenge is set to take place in April.

OWH: Nebraska Pardons Board met only twice last year, denying people 'a fresh start,' senators told

LINCOLN — Reformed criminal offenders are being denied “a fresh start” because of a dramatic drop in meetings by a state board that grants pardons, a legislative committee was told late last week.

The State Board of Pardons — which consists of the governor, attorney general and secretary of state — held only 13 hearings over the past three fiscal years, compared with 345 hearings during the three years previous to that. The board, which used to meet six to eight times a year for multiple hearings, met only twice during 2019.

A pardon is an official act of forgiveness, not a statement of innocence. Pardons are often sought for drug crimes committed when young or for drunken driving offenses. Pardons can provide the restoration of gun and hunting rights, and can, in very rare instances, result in a release from prison for serious crimes like murder after years behind bars.

A University of Nebraska College of Law professor said the lack of ability to seek a pardon for past crimes not only denies “a fresh start” to someone who’s had a clean record since ending a criminal sentence, but also removes an incentive to remain crime-free.

“It’s a formal removal of that label, ‘criminal,’ ” said Ryan Sullivan, who heads the “Clean Slate Project,” which helps people “clean” a past conviction from their criminal record.

Obtaining a pardon is important, said Josh Waltjer, an NU law student, because it removes a stigma and can open up job opportunities and remove a barrier to renting property or obtaining insurance.

One Omaha attorney said he has had three applications for pardons on hold since October 2018. And Sullivan said the opportunity for a “new beginning” is denied if the Board of Pardons meets only twice a year, as it did last year.

Representatives of Gov. Pete Ricketts and Attorney General Doug Peterson referred questions to a letter signed by all three members of the Pardons Board in opposition to LB 968. The measure, introduced by Sen. John McCollister of Omaha, would require the board to meet at least every 90 days, or four times a year, and submit an annual report to the Legislature.

The Pardons Board members said that they had become aware of the large backlog of cases in early 2019 and have developed a plan to address it.

The letter didn’t precisely say why meetings were cut back, citing “numerous obstacles.” But it blamed the lack of recent meetings on a transition in board administration. A year ago, longtime Pardons Board administrative assistant Sonya Fauver retired, and it was quickly realized that one person was not sufficient to replace her.

Since then, the letter said, the administrative duties were transferred from the Board of Parole to the Nebraska Crime Commission.

Secretary of State Bob Evnen, who responded to a request for further comment, joined the Pardons Board after his election in 2018. He said that he did not know why the board held only two meetings during 2019 but said it had already decided to hold more meetings in 2020. The first is scheduled on Feb. 18, when 60 applications for pardons will be considered.

Evnen said he did not know how large the backlog of pardon requests had grown.

McCollister said he would continue to work with the Pardons Board to resolve his concerns. But Spike Eickholt, who represents the ACLU of Nebraska, urged the Judiciary Committee to advance the bill as a “legislative expression” that more hearings and meetings are needed.

By Paul Hammel

LJS: Bill would force Nebraska Pardons Board to meet and consider applications

The Nebraska Board of Pardons has held only seven hearings in more than 2½ years, and has granted only 21 pardons, despite the board receiving close to 500 petitions.

No hearing has taken place since July, which means no pardons granted or denied in six months.

Compare that to 2013 and 2014, when seven hearings were held each year and more than 200 pardons granted.

At its last meeting, the second of 2019, 102 applications made it to the agenda. No testimony was permitted on 79 of them. Twenty-three were applications for reprieve or commutation of license revocations or suspensions, and testimony was allowed on those.

That's why Omaha Sen. John McCollister brought a bill (LB968) this session to better regulate the meetings of the board. It had a hearing Friday in front of the Judiciary Committee.

The board can grant respites, reprieves, pardons and commutations of everything from murder convictions to driver's license suspensions.

The bill would require the board to hold hearings at least every 90 days and require a hearing on each application at the next regularly scheduled meeting.

It would also prohibit combining unrelated applications at the same hearing and require a record of all hearings and for the board to make annual reports to the Legislature outlining pardons granted and considered.

The board is made up of Gov. Pete Ricketts, Attorney General Doug Peterson and Secretary of State Bob Evnen. Ricketts and Peterson took office in 2015; Evnen joined last year.

Teela Mickles, the founder and CEO of Compassionate Action that works with confined people, said she has witnessed firsthand the lack of action by the Board of Pardons.

The first of two board meetings she attended in the past four years, she said, was a shock to her. At that meeting, the board tabled for two years all applications for sentence commutations.

One of the women in the audience was devastated, she said. Her brother, her last living sibling, had been in prison for 48 years and was elderly, and she wanted to see his sentence commuted so he could come home and they could live and die together.

The second hearing she attended allowed no testimony and applications were quickly denied.

"The room was packed," she said. "The people have expectations of this board. It's just like you're just a little puppy in the bag, and let's just drown them all. It's disgusting and it's humiliating. ... There was a motion and it was a wrap."

Ryan Sullivan, who teaches in the Nebraska College of Law clinic and supervises the Clean Slate Project, but who was not representing the University of Nebraska, said consistent hearings are important.

From 2006 to 2016, the board considered 1,600 applications, and met six to eight times a year, with testimony taken three to four times a year. Beginning in 2017, the frequency of scheduled hearings diminished greatly, he said.

The decrease in Board of Pardons' activity has a detrimental impact on the criminal justice system, he said, which relies on criminal record rehabilitation mechanisms such as pardons to help reduce recidivism, he said.

People are told at their sentencing that if they stay crime-free for a required period of time, they'll have an opportunity for a fresh start by requesting a pardon. It gives them something to strive for and incentive to stay crime-free, and a chance for a formal removal of that label of criminal.

After Sonya Fauver, Pardons Board administrative assistant for 15 years, left the board at the end of 2018, the tasks were taken over by others at the Nebraska Parole Board. Then in October, the Nebraska Crime Commission took over.

Laurie Holman, the Crime Commission's legislative liaison and policy coordinator, said the Pardons Board has a meeting scheduled for Feb. 18 and it will begin to work through the backlog of applications.

The Pardons Board opposed McCollister's bill, but at the same time understood concerns, it said in a letter to the Judiciary Committee.

At the February meeting, the board will consider 60 applications.

"The board is committed to addressing the remainder of existing applications in additional meetings over the course of 2020," the letter said.

The board said that over the past two years it has streamlined and made significant improvements for the benefit of applicants.

The board's plan renders the need for LB968 unnecessary, the three board members said.

By JoAnne Young

OWH: Capitol Digest: Bill in Nebraska Legislature providing lawyers for juveniles blocked again

Juvenile legal representation. Once again, a bill that would require that juveniles have legal representation at their first court appearance failed to advance.
Legislative Bill 231, introduced by State Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks of Lincoln, has been defeated in the past. The bill also included a $1 increase in state court fees to pay for the lawyers' work.
Pansing Brooks said that only the state's three largest counties now provide lawyers in every instance. In smaller counties, juveniles often waive representation without knowing the consequences, she said, which can harm their ability later to obtain scholarships or jobs.
Opponents, led by Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte, said the bill was unnecessary and an attorney employment measure. He and other critics said parents or guardians can decide whether a lawyer is needed.
The only way LB 231 could return to the agenda is if sponsors show that they have enough votes to advance it.
The blocking of Pansing Brooks' bill by conservatives sparked outrage from Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, who called Groene and others "dumb" and accused them of supporting "big government" only when it benefits farmers, such as when oil companies are mandated to blend corn-based ethanol into fuel.
Tax break for military pensions. A bill that grants a 50% state income tax exemption on pensions paid to military veterans advanced to final reading Friday without any discussion.
LB 153 was introduced by Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon on behalf of Gov. Pete Ricketts, who has made the bill one of his top priorities for the 2020 session.
Some veterans and others on pensions have grumbled about the bill because it grants a tax break on only one pension, received by a small percentage of overall military veterans. But many veterans have voiced support despite that, and Ricketts said it will help keep highly skilled military retirees from moving out of Nebraska.
Under legislative rules, the final vote will not be taken until lawmakers adopt the mid-biennium budget.
Compensation for those wrongly convicted. A Sheridan County woman whose conviction for shooting her drunken and abusive husband eventually resulted in a pardon asked Friday that a state law be amended so those in her situation can receive funds from the state's wrongful conviction and imprisonment fund.
Charlene Marie, formerly Charlene Oldenburg, was convicted of using a weapon to commit a felony and making terrorist threats in 1998. After she appealed her sentence, it was reduced to one year, and she was released from prison because she had served two years behind bars. Ultimately, she was granted a pardon, after she maintained that she acted in self-defense.
But last year, the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled that she couldn't receive $500,000 in compensation from the fund because she had only been pardoned from her crime. The convictions had not been "vacated," the court ruled, and Marie had not "proven" her innocence, as required in the compensation law.
Her attorney, Dan Friedman of Lincoln, told members of the Legislature's Judiciary Committee that in "common parlance," everyone recognizes that someone is innocent if they acted in self-defense. He urged passage of LB 951 to close a loophole in the compensation law, as did the bill's sponsor, Sen. Kate Bolz of Lincoln.
But the Nebraska Attorney General's Office opposed the bill. Attorney Danielle Rowley said the law was intended to compensate only those who could prove that they were innocent. If LB 951 were passed, she said, it would expand the law and allow someone who was simply found not guilty due to a lack of evidence to seek compensation.
The law was passed in 2009 in the wake of the exoneration, via DNA evidence, of six people wrongly convicted of killing a 68-year-old Beatrice woman. Several of the Beatrice Six said they were pressured into pleading guilty or providing false testimony out of fear that they would face a death sentence.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Officials say State Fair's finances, like a midway ride, are now spinning in the right direction

KEARNEY — Things were going to be different this time.
With $42 million in new, shiny facilities that someone else owned and a dependable revenue source in proceeds from the state lottery, the Nebraska State Fair was supposed to be on firm financial footing.
And for several years, that was true.
In 2010, the year the fair was first held in Grand Island, it attracted 310,000 visitors, a number that had grown to 380,000 by 2017.
For each of the first eight years the fair was held at Fonner Park, it reported a six-figure profit.
But longtime employee Joe McDermott stepped aside as director at the end of 2017 and the fair hired Lori Cox as its new executive director. With the change came a flip in the fair's fortunes.

In 2018, attendance fell to about 315,000, and the fair recorded a small loss of $25,000.
Cox blamed weather for the drop in attendance and pointed to positives that included a 16% increase in sponsorship revenue and more 4-H and FFA livestock entries.
Anticipation was high for the 2019 fair, which would be the organization's 150th.
Expecting high interest and large crowds, the fair signed 12 concert acts, up from seven in 2018. It also bundled several of those acts into "genre" ticket packages, hoping discounted prices would entice people to buy in advance and show up at the fair on multiple days.
But those plans were swamped, as heavy rains soaked the fairgrounds and left parking lots under water.
Not only did Mother Nature put a damper on attendance, she also forced the fair to spend $180,000 for shuttles to get people to and from the fairgrounds.
Attendance dropped 10%, gate revenue tumbled 12% and, combined with the huge increase in expenses, it made for a financial crisis.
The money issue came to a head in November, when then-Chief Financial Officer Patrick Kopke told the board that manages the fair that it had lost nearly $1.7 million and was on the brink of bankruptcy before shockingly submitting his resignation.
Cox and State Fair Board members insisted Kopke had exaggerated the financial problems and the fair would not go bankrupt. But it did have to make some serious cuts.
Last month, the fair laid off eight of its 17 full-time staff members, and took out a $1.1 million line of credit to help shore up its balance sheet.
As bad as those moves looked at the time, it appears they have put the fair back on solid footing.
At Friday's monthly board meeting, Cox laid out financial results from 2019.
The fair brought in about $750,000 more in revenue last year, she noted, with sponsorships up by $135,000 and commissions from midway ticket sales hitting an all-time record of $343,000.
However, Cox and her staff had planned for more revenue, so they spent a lot more money.
Wages were about $315,000 more in 2019, and Cox said 75% of that increase was for seasonal help. The fair also spent more on concerts.
So how did the fair go from turning six-figure profits to a seven-figure loss in the span of two years?
While last year's bad weather was certainly a big reason, the financial problems revealed some structural budget issues.
For example, the fair spent $2.4 million on "professional services" last year, a category Cox said includes things such as security and ambulance services. That was a $1.1 million increase over 2018, and neither Cox nor anyone else can explain why.
Board members also realized the staff had grown too large. Board member Jeremy Jensen said after last month's meeting that the fair had been spending about $130,000 monthly on payroll, which was about twice the level of fairs of similar size.
Cox also said in an email earlier this month to fair superintendents that a new accounting service the fair hired "found much waste in every department," although she did not offer specifics.
"I take full responsibility that I did not force this issue with those I work with and for, and you have my word that it is now being corrected," she said in the email.
Cox said that concerts are a "financial burden that most fairs find tough to balance," but noted they generate "buzz" among fair patrons and the media.
Cox said Friday that the entertainment budget, including concerts and other fair entertainment, has been slashed by $1.3 million for this year.
While the fair is tightening the reins on money it controls, it also is facing declining lottery proceeds.
In 2018, Cox said the fair got $5.15 million from the Nebraska Lottery. In 2019, it received a little less than $4.5 million, and she said the projection is that it will receive less than $4.1 million this year.
It was suggested at Friday's meeting that fewer large Powerball and Mega Millions jackpots have likely slowed ticket sales. According to records, sales of tickets for Nebraska-specific lottery games, including Pick 5 and scratch tickets, grew from $173.8 million in 2017 to $192.2 million last year.
The fair board has officially stood by Cox, and her contract was renewed for another year. The contract does not require the board to publicly vote on renewal, but it does require 90 days' notice if Cox is to be terminated.
Sources told the Journal Star that several board members expressed a desire to let Cox go, but they didn't have enough votes.
Jensen declined to confirm whether any board members sought to have the deal terminated.
Former fair board members say they are appalled at what's happened over the past two years and say the buck stops

with the executive director.
"It just amazes me what happened," said Jerry Fitzgerald of Gering, a former State Fair Board president.
Fitzgerald said a decline of 50,000 people attending the fair could cause a fairly significant loss, maybe a few hundred thousand dollars.
"But it's a long way from $1.7 million," he said. "Somebody really screwed up."
Tam Allan, who served on the board from 2004-2013, said the dramatic increase in fair expenses has coincided with Cox's tenure.
Allan knows that, because he filed a public-records request to get a look at the fair's budget.
"It was just really disappointing to see the levels of expenditures, especially the dramatic increase in personnel," said Allan, a Lincoln-based real estate developer.
When plans were formulated in the late 2000s to move the fair from Lincoln, it was Allan who was tasked with leading the effort, and he said the model the state came up with was one that limited expenses.
Rather than owning the buildings, the fair pays a nominal annual rent to Fonner Park to use them for two months each year.
As devised, the plan would allow the fair to employ fewer people. In addition to McDermott, the fair had a full-time staff of eight when it moved to Grand Island.
While there was some increase in the number of employees under McDermott, Allan said it's exploded under Cox, who added about a half-dozen employees.
Despite the criticism, officials are backing Cox's plans to help turn the fair around.
State Sen. Steve Halloran of Hastings, chairman of the Legislature's Agriculture Committee, was concerned enough after hearing media reports about the fair's problems that he asked for a meeting with fair board chairman Chris Kircher of Omaha.
Halloran and Kircher met for several hours Dec. 27, and though the senator declined an interview request, he did send an editorial to the Journal Star and other media outlets in which he said he was, "very confident in the financial stability of the fair and direction the board is taking the fair for the future."
He lauded what he called an "an extremely conservative budget that factors in the prospect of five days of loss due to weather and other adverse factors, but also provides the funding necessary to deliver the type of high-caliber event that Nebraskans have come to expect."
Kircher and Cox are scheduled to brief the Agriculture Committee in Lincoln on Feb. 18.
Gov. Pete Ricketts also expressed confidence in the fair.
"I am confident that the board will demonstrate the leadership needed to keep the fair healthy and growing," he said in an emailed statement.
Perhaps even more important is that the banks lending money to the fair have confidence in Cox and the board.
Kircher said the fair board met with about a half-dozen bankers Thursday in Grand Island and were able to allay any fears they had.
Jensen said he believes Cox has been unfairly criticized, and many of the problems have been beyond her control.
Jensen, a Grand Island native and the city's former mayor, said there is no chance that the fair is going to shut down.
"This thing is now pointed back in the right direction," he said.
By Matt Olberding

NP Telegraph: Jim Hawks to be chair of Nebraska Highway Commission

Outgoing North Platte City Administrator Jim Hawks was elected 2020 chairman of the Nebraska Highway Commission at the panel's monthly meeting Friday in Lincoln.
Hawks represents District 6 on the eight-member commission, which oversees the activities of the Nebraska Department of Transportation. The district covers all or parts of 14 counties.
Gov. Pete Ricketts reappointed Hawks earlier this month to a full six-year term on the Highway Commission, Hawks said Friday.
The governor first appointed him in 2017 to finish the term of former North Platte resident Ron Books, who resigned to move to Colorado.
Hawks, a former Lincoln County highway superintendent and surveyor, will retire May 1 after 16 years as North Platte city administrator.
He was in Lincoln this week for legislative confirmation hearings for new terms on the highway panel and the Nebraska Environmental Quality Council, on which he has represented city governments.

He also is a member of the State Board of Examiners for Land Surveyors, to which Ricketts recently reappointed him for another five-year term.

LJS: Don Walton: Taxes, Iowa, the Senate and impeachment

A lot of moving parts now in the Legislature's ever-changing 2020 tax story.
A new property tax relief and state school aid reform package is headed to the floor from the Revenue Committee.
A 35% property tax reduction initiative petition drive is ongoing out there across the state and it would mandate more than $1 billion in instant relief lifted from revenue used to fund state government programs and services.
And now here comes a consumption tax, Sen. Steve Erdman's surprise proposal dropped onto the Legislature's lap with a thud in the last hour of the final day for introduction of new bills in the 2020 session.
Does that signal an end to efforts to gain initiative petition signatures to place the billion-dollar property tax reduction proposal on the November ballot?
Nope, the drive goes on.
The consumption tax would eliminate sales, income and property taxes, leaving Nebraska with a new tax base. Its adoption would require a vote of the people to approve a constitutional amendment rewriting the state's tax system in a revolutionary way.
If adopted, a single-rate tax would be applied to the purchase of new goods and services, effective in 2022.
There are lots of questions yet to be answered, and Erdman immediately launched into that process. He's already convinced nine colleagues that they should co-sign the bill.
Three Omaha senators; no Lincoln senators.

* * *

Since Congress belongs to the two political parties, rather than us, it seems likely that there will be no witnesses called in the Senate impeachment trial of President Donald Trump.
Even though they might complete, or perhaps effectively dispute, the story.
Even though we have a right to hear from them to make our own judgments as citizens and voters.
But Congress is the political parties' battleground, and we are just spectators.
In coming days, the Senate will define itself not strictly by the end result, but by how did senators get there.
Of course, witnesses should be called as an integral part of a trial — but only if you want to know what happened.

* * *

Finishing up:
* Eric Hamilton, who grew up in Omaha and graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln a decade ago before earning his law degree at Stanford, is one of the White House lawyers whose names appear on the president's impeachment defense brief.
* A CNN Politics item during last week's impeachment proceedings in the Senate: "Ben Sasse peeled a clementine and ate it."
* And Fox News reported that Sen. Sasse had a pouch of Red Man chewing tobacco on his desk at one time.
* Deb Fischer, writing in a column last week: "This body (the Senate) was designed for times such as these — to cool the partisan rage and assess how our actions will affect future generations and our core institutions."
* Adrian Smith is now fourth in seniority among Republicans on the House Ways and Means Committee.
* Former state Sen. Danielle Conrad, speaking to the Legislature's executive board about her experience with the explosive task of redistricting the last time it occurred a decade ago: "It was painful; it was acrimonious; and it hurt trust" among senators.
* The Legislature's Revenue Committee sat down in executive session for an hourlong chat a day after the public hearing on its new property tax relief and school aid reform package. An opportunity to share each member's current thinking, a little venting, some questioning and challenging, a bit of group therapy.
* Can't help wondering what former senator and tax wizard Paul Schumacher would think of Erdman's consumption tax.
* A voter ID proposal may be the latest slam-dunk entry on this year's filibuster list. Big tax bills will keep it company.
* Sen. Adam Morfeld's proposal to consider a high-speed rail connection between Lincoln and Omaha sparks imagination of the economic development activity that project would spur near stops in both cities.
* Iowa Democrats speak in caucuses a week from now and the race is on. Meanwhile, down the road, the Union Leader in Manchester has endorsed Sen. Amy Klobuchar in the New Hampshire Democratic presidential primary a week later.
* Voted by mail on the Lincoln school bond issue and no Russians noticed or cared.

By Don Walton

LJS: Debate stopped on bill to ensure juveniles and parents understand right to attorney

Several state senators successfully delayed a bill Friday that would make sure juveniles and their parents know and understand they can be represented by an attorney in court.

The bill (LB231), introduced by Lincoln Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks, was filibustered by a small group of senators led by Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte. It had its three hours of debate, and then the Legislature moved on to another bill without a first-round vote, as is the practice established by Speaker Jim Scheer.

The bill can return to debate if Pansing Brooks can show she has 33 votes to force a vote on the bill. The senator said she had 32 of those votes and will be seeking one more commitment so the bill can return.

It would establish that, at the first court appearance, the court must tell the juvenile and his or her parents or guardian of the juvenile's right to continued representation by an attorney. It also creates the Juvenile Indigent Defense Fund to assist counties in fulfilling their obligation to provide for effective assistance.

Pansing Brooks said almost all judges will ask a juvenile if she or he wants to waive their right to an attorney.

"But the other duty is to ascertain that the waiver is knowingly, intelligently and voluntarily given," she said. "They have to know what they're doing."

To the opponents of the bill, she said things have changed significantly in this country since senators who are over 50 were children.

"We've got more zero-tolerance policies," she said.

The old theory that, "Oh, kids just need to buck up," she said, just no longer applies. Using the judge as a disciplinary supplement to the parental role is: No. 1 expensive, No. 2 illegal, and No. 3 not paying attention to the long-term repercussions to a child who has a good chance of being placed out of home or in detention as a result.

She has heard of kids being put into the youth rehabilitation centers for "pretty minor crimes," she said.

Kids can be subjected to solitary confinement in YRTCs and it's not always just the worst kids being placed in confinement or out-of-home detention, she added.

"Sometimes the parents are upset and don't even want to deal with the kid anymore," she said. "So should that child wander the abyss on their own 'cause the parent's mad at them?"

Groene said there are safeguards in the system that protect a person's right to an attorney, or the right not to have representation. A judge will determine if the juvenile is competent to make that decision, then can ask the parents, then decide if the judge should appoint an attorney, he said.

"This bill takes away a juvenile's right not to have counsel, period," he said.

In previous debates, he has said the bill would require many families to have to pay attorney fees when the youth and family just want to accept the consequences and move on.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Steve Lathrop of Omaha said in these cases, there are other lawyers present: the prosecutor and the judge, for starters. Everybody in the room knows the law except the juvenile who's about to face a proceeding, he said.

That first appearance where waivers and pleas take place sets the stage and opens the door to additional hearings and requirements.

This bill, he said, just levels the playing field.

Omaha Sen. Justin Wayne, an attorney whose practice includes juvenile cases, said most parents don't know the difference between an adjudication, which is civil in nature, and a conviction.

But the reality, he said, is that when a 16-year-old has been adjudicated and then applies for a job that asks if he or she has been convicted of a crime, they check the box yes.

Here's why they need an attorney, he said. If a 16-year-old is charged with stealing a candy bar, a theft charge, they cannot get a job at most McDonald's around this state. An insurance company does not want a person who has a theft conviction handling cash.

An attorney will look at the facts and negotiate with the prosecutor for a lesser or different charge that will allow the juvenile to be able to get a job in the future.

Those consequences are not explained to youths and parents when they are asked if they want to waive representation by an attorney.

That is why that advice is needed up front, Wayne said.

By JoAnne Young

OWH: Beyond flood damage, effects of region’s wettest year ranged from West Nile to cattle fertility

No wonder last year brought so much flooding and heartache to Nebraska and nearby states.
This corner of the world saw the most precipitation of anywhere on the planet in 2019 — compared to what's normal, according to a recent federal analysis of global weather data.

Rains kept coming

» In March, a catastrophic bomb cyclone triggered Nebraska's costliest flood on record and impacted eight states to the tune of $10.8 billion in damage.
» In May, Nebraska's second wettest May on record, rains washed out critical levee repairs along the Missouri River, throwing behind hurried efforts to protect exposed homes and businesses.
» In July, record-setting rains flooded Kearney, Gibbon, Odessa, Elm Creek and Lexington. Nearly 100 homes sustained major damage or were destroyed.
» In August, the state's rainiest August on record, rains flooded the Nebraska State Fair in Grand Island.
» In September, record-setting rains washed out roads in northern Nebraska, including an important bridge near Bassett.

How much precipitation?

Extreme precipitation soaked the eastern half of the U.S., according to 2019 weather records included in a report recently released by NASA and the National Centers for Environmental Information, a division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
Another way of looking at the data: 2019 was the wettest year in 125 years of record-keeping in the north-central U.S., according to the federal report.
The high ranking doesn't mean it rained or snowed here more than anywhere else, instead it's a testament to how heavy the precipitation was compared to average. And, the distinction comes with a caveat: It's based on available weather data globally — not every country has good weather records.
In Nebraska, 2019 was the state's third wettest year, behind 1993 and 1915. The region's extreme precipitation in 2019 followed a string of wet years.
Martha Shulski, Nebraska's state climatologist, said the state hasn't had a drier than normal year since 2012 — and that was the state's hottest, driest year on record. Both heavy precipitation and extreme drought are consistent with what Nebraska can expect from now on as a result of global warming, she said.
"We've seen it getting wetter over time" and warmer, she said of the state.
The heavy precipitation played out in multiple ways, many that have been well-documented: lost lives, damaged infrastructure, and the loss of livestock and crops.
But there were also less publicized effects.

West Nile cases drop

Nebraska led the nation in West Nile virus cases in 2018, so last year's steep drop-off was a welcome change. Only 28 people tested positive for West Nile in 2019, down from 250 the year before. Only one person died, compared to 13 in 2018.
The cool, rainy year probably kept the disease at bay, said Jeff Hamik, a disease epidemiologist at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Cool weather probably slowed the virus's development.
With so much standing water, mosquitoes and birds could spread out, which meant the mosquitoes most responsible for West Nile were less likely to pick it up from birds and give it to humans. (A dry spell in the summer of 2018 may have been a factor in that year's spike, because the pools of water shrank, bringing birds and mosquitoes close together.)
Also, the type of mosquito that thrives in flooding doesn’t play a big role in transmitting the virus.

Sand Hills 'weep'

People are used to seeing the Sand Hills green up in wet years. But 2019 was different. So much rain fell in the heart of cattle country, the water table rose to the point that water has been flowing out of the hills.
"This is the first time I've seen the Sand Hills weep water," said Doug Fox, director of emergency management for Region 24 in Nebraska. "Yes, it's pretty. But then I think of why that is, and I get depressed."
Some pastures and roads in the Sand Hills have been flooded since March — 10 months. The overly wet meadows and pastures of Nebraska are costing ranchers money, and repeat flooding has caused fresh damage to roads and bridges.

Grass grew too fast

Grass grew so fast and tall on rangeland that it wasn't as nutritious as normal, said Brad Schick, a beef systems educator with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.
Cows would have needed to eat more to get the same amount of nutrients, but that wasn't possible. "They're full, they physically can't eat enough," Schick said. Their nutritional deficiency has longer term consequences.

All the stress from 2019 — the bomb cyclone caused a blizzard in the Sand Hills, followed by energy-sapping, muddy conditions and then a less nutritious food source — caused cattle to be in less than optimal health. As a result, fertility rates went down.
Fewer calves being born has a domino effect on the economics of ranching because calves provide an income stream. Additionally, ranchers are spending more on feed due to the reduced nutritional value of pastureland, or the outright loss of hay to flooding.
And in some cases, they're selling off brood stock rather than purchase feed.
Wildlife thrived
Waterfowl have flocked to standing water in fields.
Stately pelicans put on a show in fields along Interstate 29 last year.
The normally elusive heron could be seen in many flooded fields.
And toads returned to the landscape, their flattened carcasses on roads a sign of their suddenly high numbers.
More recently, as flooded fields have frozen, eagles have been seen feasting on trapped fish.
What's ahead
So what does 2019 say about where Nebraska's weather patterns are headed?
Shulski, the Nebraska climatologist, said there are multiple takeaways from last year.
While natural weather patterns are a factor in floods and droughts, heavy precipitation events are on the increase, and the evidence points to global warming, scientists say.
The Earth's atmosphere is holding an estimated 7% more water than it did just decades ago, an amount that will increase as the planet gets hotter.
"We had a lot of extremes in 2019, and that's going to continue, that's a sign of climate change," she said. "That's not to say every year is going to be as bad as 2019, but it's not surprising that we're headed in that direction."
By Nancy Gaarder

AP: Nebraska jobless rate remains 3.1% for 6th straight month

LINCOLN (AP) — Nebraska's unemployment rate of 3.1% didn't change in December, marking the sixth straight month it has held steady, officials said Friday.
The preliminary December rate was three-tenths of a point higher than the adjusted December 2018 rate of 2.8%, according to a Nebraska Labor Department report.
The Nebraska rate also was below December's national preliminary rate of 3.5%, which was unchanged from November and down four-tenths of a point from the December 2018 rate of 3.9%.
"2019 was full of historically high employment," said State Labor Commissioner John Albin. "The number of workers employed in Nebraska's labor force has been above 1 million since March of 2019."
Non-farm employment dropped a tenth of a point, to 1,042,933 in December, but that figure was up by 15,649 over the year, the report said.
Private industries with the most growth year over year were leisure and hospitality, up 3,801; professional and business services, up 3,475; and education and health, up 3,176. Month to month, the largest gains were seen in leisure and hospitality, up 1,108; education and health, up 681; and trade, transportation and utilities, up 678.
The preliminary Omaha-area unemployment rate for December remained 2.7%, the same rate as November and October. The December 2018 figure was 2.8%.
Lincoln's preliminary rate fell last month to 2.4% from November's 2.6%. The figure in December 2018 was 2.4%.
Grand Island's preliminary rate rose a tenth to hit 2.9% in December. The year-ago December figure also was 2.9%, the report said.
Unemployment rates for Grand Island, Lincoln and Omaha have not been seasonally adjusted, so they cannot be directly compared with the state unemployment rate.
Here are preliminary area labor-market unemployment rates for December, followed by the November rates:
Beatrice: 3.1% 2.9%
Columbus: 2.8%, 2.6%
Fremont: 2.6%, 2.6%
Hastings: 3.1%, 2.9%
Kearney: 2.1%, 2.4%
Lexington: 2.6%, 2.6%
Norfolk: 2.4%, 2.5%

North Platte: 3.1%, 3.3%
Red Willow: 2.4%, 2.6%
Scottsbluff: 3.5%, 3.4%

OWH: Welcome to Boomtown! Omaha is building up, down, out and across the metro area at a record rate

You may have a hunch, given all those construction cranes dotting the metro area, that things are booming in Omaha.
It has been hard to miss the multitude of machines and building crews altering the landscape — from the banks of the Missouri River to the western fringes of Douglas County and surrounding suburbs.
Indeed, building is going up in the form of offices, schools and hotels. It's going down like the 1,057-space underground garage for the new Applied Underwriters complex. It's going out, like the one-story furniture store near Crossroads that's stretching up and around into a five-story apartment building.
But now comes new data reinforcing a local boom: Building permits show that the annual construction cost for Omaha projects given the green light in 2019 hit a 10-year valuation high, jumping 25% over the prior year.
Surpassing $1 billion, the ventures range from newly constructed residences to garage additions to sparkling new offices and converted hotels. That amount doesn't capture everything, either.
Road construction and cost of utility installation, for example, are not included in the building permit data that reflects cost of new and rehabbed structures. And while a permit and project cost might be recorded in one year, work might carry over into another.
Suburban areas have had eye-popping activity as well.
Take Papillion, where tech titan Google last year announced it would build a $600 million data center near an already ongoing $1 billion data center project for Facebook.
Or La Vista, where the $235 million City Centre campus of residential, commercial and entertainment venues continues its climb to become the new heartbeat of that bedroom community.
What's more is that business and real estate experts predict 2020 construction to remain brisk, though they say the pace might not be as robust as Omaha's past year. Places like Papillion had such a good run the last few years that officials said the growth pattern backed off some last year.
Some officials say certain hot areas, like apartment-building, are reaching a saturation point, and that challenges exist in finding skilled laborers to do the building and also in landing talent to fill new and old office space.
"By far the biggest hurdle Omaha has going forward is finding and hiring qualified workers," said economist Ernie Goss. "That's the No. 1 issue for expansion."
Meanwhile, say he and others, ongoing real estate development — driven in part by hungry investors capitalizing on low interest rates — has been a welcome boost vital to a community's long-term physical and economic growth.
An obvious benefit is the creation of local construction jobs that, in turn, generate tax revenue that helps support public services, says David G. Brown, chief executive and president of the Greater Omaha Chamber.
Consider, for instance, a National Association of Home Builders report from a few years ago that says for every 100 single-family houses built, a community during the first year on average gains an estimated $28.7 million in local income, $3.6 million in government tax and revenue and 394 jobs.
"New construction is just a great indicator of confidence in our community," Brown said. "Our whole philosophy is: If you're not growing, you are more than likely shrinking."
He said investment begets more investment.
A prime example is the millions of dollars of job-creating building going on at the University of Nebraska Medical Center campus. That has spawned private investment in nearby neighborhoods, including the Blackstone Business District.
Along and around the Farnam Street spine are new restaurants, bars and hundreds of new residences frequented and occupied in part by people who have filled those health care jobs.
Officials say Omaha's rising identity as a sports entertainment mecca — think four consecutive United States Olympic Swim Trials, the long-running College World Series and other NCAA events — has sparked spin-off construction including youth athletic complexes and hotels.
Developer Dan Marak of Kansas City, for example, is seeking to secure his 12th Omaha hotel project. He has stayed focused locally despite what he describes as a tough market where a shortage of skilled laborers has pushed up construction costs and slowed projects.
Given those challenges, why Omaha? "It's a stable economic environment," said Marak, whose recent hotel projects include one near UNMC and another near 72nd Street and Interstate 80. He said Omaha hasn't had the "roller coaster"

market swings like some bigger and coastal cities.
He and other developers say they're drawn to the area's solid business base, which also ushers in corporate travelers.
Many have tapped local development tools such as tax-increment financing, which offsets certain construction costs.
Companies that manage the growing amount of real estate and that broker property transactions also have prospered.
Omaha-based Investors Realty, for instance, in 2019 reached a record 6 million square feet of space under its management, said President R.J. Neary.
The growth pushed the Omaha brokerage last year to relocate to new offices, following 34 years in the same location.
Omaha building permits offer a peek at what was hot in 2019:
A huge chunk of development activity came from additions and renovations to existing commercial structures, including re-purposing old buildings into apartments. Indeed, that area accounted for about $325 million — a 50% increase over the construction value reflected in similar permits the year before.
Examples would be turning the cavernous north downtown Ashton warehouse into new digs for tech company Flywheel. The Ashton is among several old north downtown industrial structures slated for conversion into office and retail space as part of the new $300 million Millwork Commons district.
Restoration of the deteriorating downtown Logan building into a boutique hotel, office and condo space is another example.
Also a big driver of construction: new offices, banks and professional buildings. Omaha permits issued in 2019 for that type of building more than doubled the $53 million of the previous year.
Single-family home construction, meanwhile, took a different turn, as the value of permits issued for new houses in Omaha last year dipped about 10% compared with 2018. That tracks with a broader eight-county area that saw the number of new house permits through November decline about 16%.
For apartments, the number of newly constructed units went up last year in Douglas and Sarpy Counties, according to statistics compiled by the Greater Omaha Chamber.
Goss, the economist, is among those who think the local apartment market is becoming overbuilt and that developers soon will be seeing higher vacancy rates. For consumers, he said, that could be good in that rents could go down.
But ask developer Chris Erickson, who co-founded City Ventures, and he says his recently built apartment complexes in Benson and downtown Omaha still have well-performing occupancy rates above 90%.
His team continues to build apartments at the La Vista City Centre site, and he expects those to fill as well.
Generally, Erickson said, he has felt a "continued high level" of construction over the past five to seven years, and he doesn't expect a noticeable downturn any time soon.
"We'll start to see a slowdown in the next couple of years," he predicted. "Is that in 2020? I'd say not."
By Cindy Gonzalez

OWH Editorial: State Racing Commission must operate within its limited authority

It's a fundamental principle of government that regulatory bodies have limited powers. The regulations they set must operate strictly within the boundaries set by law by elected legislators. Without such respect for proper authority, regulators could claim unbounded powers.
The Nebraska Attorney General's Office has made that point repeatedly to the Nebraska Racing Commission, but the commission majority continues to reject it. The point of disagreement is the commission's approval of pari-mutuel wagering machines. The "historical horse racing terminals" allow bets on unidentified horses in previously run races from across the country.
The Nebraska Constitution makes clear that the authority for approving specific forms of gambling in Nebraska rests with the Legislature, with the governor having the option to exercise a veto, or with the people through a ballot measure. State senators have repeatedly debated the issue amid fierce debate, but thus far there is neither a state statute nor a constitutional amendment giving approval in Nebraska for this specific type of device.
That didn't stop the Racing Commission, in a 3-2 vote, from insisting that it has legal authority to give the OK to the machines.
It's true that the horse racing industry in Nebraska is under stress. But this is a matter of law. It involves principles far broader than horse racing and wagering; it's a matter involving the limits of governmental action. We've made this same point before in regard to federal regulators on other issues.
Suzanne Gage, director of communications for the Attorney General's office, correctly sums up the situation by saying "Nebraska law does not permit the commission's unilateral decision to expand gambling without action by the Legislature or the citizens of Nebraska."

The Attorney General's Office explains the legal particulars in its filing in Lancaster County District Court to block installation of the terminals, which Fonner Park in Grand Island hopes to be operational by Feb. 21.
Support for the horse racing industry is understandable. But all actions must be within the strict bounds of Nebraska law.

OWH Editorial: Blueprint Nebraska offers opportunities for progress

The next stage in the economic development initiative known as Blueprint Nebraska is about to begin, and it offers major opportunities for progress for the state. It's crucial for Nebraskans to work together to make this initiative a success. This effort will focus on key state needs, including:
» A stronger, more nimble state economy geared to meet the demands of 21st century competition.
» Coordinated efforts to boost communities' ability to retain young people and welcome newcomers of all backgrounds.
» Strategies to meet the need for affordable housing.
» A heightened focus on K-12 and higher education as a central vehicle for state progress, with stronger connections to real-world business needs.
Then-University of Nebraska President Hank Bounds launched Blueprint Nebraska in early 2018, with close support from Gov. Pete Ricketts. The aim is to bring together Nebraskans from a wide range of backgrounds to develop strategies for statewide development. In all, more than 7,000 people have contributed to the process — a remarkable demonstration of Nebraskans' commitment to strengthening the state. Leaders in business, education, nonprofits and local government served on committees coordinating the discussions.
The process has "created a statewide plan that everyone from every corner of the state can unite around to have a vision of what Nebraska can be," says Jim Smith, the Blueprint Nebraska executive director. The collaborative approach is spurring Nebraskans to "look beyond our parochial interests to what the future of Nebraska can be."
This year, Blueprint Nebraska will begin to gradually roll out strategy proposals on key needs, Smith told The World-Herald. One advisory group will present ideas for a long-term modernizing of the state tax code, geared to the needs of a 21st century economy.
Six regional teams will develop strategies to promote diversity and inclusiveness, strengthen community vitality and encourage affordable housing. Using those individual regional approaches will tailor the strategies to local needs, Smith says. As a result, "people will see that it's their own localities creating solutions on these issues."
Blueprint Nebraska aims to devote great energy toward maximizing communities' ability to attract young people ages 18 to 34, Smith says.
Strengthening educational opportunities and innovation is another goal. The initiative will roll out ideas for greater coordination among educational organizations and for customized workforce development, again using a regional approach.
"Education must be at the center of the set of solutions for Nebraska's future," Smith rightly says.
One of Blueprint Nebraska's central economic goals is encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation so that Nebraska creates more higher-value business sectors and high-skill, better-paying jobs. Research as part of this strategic initiative found that Nebraska is in the bottom 10 states when it comes to business startups, the number of STEM graduates and venture capital as a percent of economic output. The state ranks 36th in business R&D and 35th in patents per capita. Experience elsewhere in the country shows that states that succeed in nurturing high-value businesses do better in achieving robust economic growth and higher incomes for residents.
Given the demands of the 21st century economy and the ever-increasing cost of living, it's important "to move our wages upward and be competitive with neighboring states with the wages we can offer," Smith says. "We absolutely have to bring a stronger element of innovation into our core business structure."
Whether the Blueprint Nebraska goals are achieved depends in part on whether the state's elected political leaders become actively involved in providing forward-looking vision and building consensus on the best ways to move forward. A huge mass of Nebraskans and Nebraska organizations from across the state are devoting tremendous energy to this effort, after all. There's great strength in such impressive numbers.
Nebraska does best when its people come together in common cause. It's time to join together for progress through the opportunities that Blueprint Nebraska provides.

OWH Editorial: The OPS/YMCA partnership is a plus for students

The partnership between Omaha Public Schools and the YMCA for the new high school in northwest Omaha is a sound

concept that will provide important opportunities for OPS students. Use of the shared facilities, including a swimming pool, weight room and other amenities, saves money for OPS in bringing the high school, long sought by residents, into fruition.

The joint project has been an inherently complicated one from the start, and negotiations between the district and the YMCA were protracted and often challenging. It was welcome news this week that the two sides have worked out a 50-year agreement.

Thanks to this partnership, OPS and the YMCA will share the swimming pool, main gymnasium, auxiliary gym, wrestling room, weight and fitness room, dance and aerobics room, storage, laundry and outdoor fields.

This project shows how innovative thinking, cooperation and practical planning can achieve major long-term benefits.

Discussions between OPS and the YMCA dated from 2018, when the school board approved the project list for a $409.9 million bond issue that included a pool at the 156th and Ida high school. OPS officials had seen how a cooperative project between Lincoln Public Schools and the YMCA there had worked out well, and they sought a similar arrangement in planning for a pool and other facilities at the new high school.

Under the new agreement, OPS will commit $4 million of bond construction funds for the larger facilities and the swimming pool. The YMCA and private donors will cover the remaining $9.5 million.

This project is a win-win for all, showing the progress that can come within reach through out-of-the-box thinking and cooperation.

OWH Editorial: The planned North Omaha Trail will be a welcome community asset

The City of Omaha is pursuing commendable plans for an off-street trail to connect major community stops through North Omaha. The North Omaha Trail can have great public value, providing recreational opportunities and bolstering a sense of community. A variety of organizations are supporting the effort, with construction possibly starting this fall. A worthy project, indeed.

OWH Midlands Voices: Oversight is needed for Nebraska's youth offender facilities

The writer, of Omaha, is a state senator representing District 9 in the Nebraska Legislature. She is chairwoman of the Health and Human Services Committee.

In August 2019, a crisis arose at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Geneva. The Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers ("YRTCs") in Geneva (serving girls) and Kearney (serving boys) play an important role in Nebraska's juvenile justice system. The YRTCs, as their title implies, are meant to provide treatment and rehabilitation for the youth in the juvenile justice system with the highest needs. They should be a place that provides these youth with a chance to turn their lives in a different direction.

Unfortunately, this summer, a variety of factors led to a precipitous decline in the facilities and care provided to girls at the YRTC in Geneva. In a visit to YRTC-Geneva the week the crisis began, senators toured the living units and saw, among other things, major unfinished repairs, water damage, holes in the walls large enough for the girls to fit through and a broken fire safety system. Staffing was inadequate and programming nonexistent. Concerned about their safety, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) moved all the girls to the YRTC-Kearney campus. The move has provided some stability, but it remains challenging to house and segregate the girls and boys on the same campus.

The Health and Human Services Committee has spent the last six months trying to ascertain what happened at YRTC-Geneva and to develop recommendations to address the issues at the YRTCs. The culmination of these six months of work is a comprehensive report to the Nebraska Legislature, which the HHS Committee released last week.

While there have been issues for decades with the YRTCs, this report serves as the first comprehensive history and background of these facilities for youth. It also includes a documented and detailed timeline of events from July to December of 2019, and a summary of the challenges facing the YRTCs. Our report draws on information from multiple public hearings and discussions with stakeholders including youth, parents, former and current staff, attorneys and judges. The committee was in close contact with DHHS during this time both for updates on the status of the YRTCs as well as consultation as we all work toward potential solutions to this crisis.

Most importantly, the report includes the HHS Committee's unanimous recommendations to the Legislature. Among the 14 recommendations are a requirement that DHHS create a long-term plan for the YRTCs. The plan must be created with input from key stakeholders and cover areas such as adequate staffing, appropriate programming, facilities that meet the needs of the youth being served and a plan to segregate the boys and girls on separate campuses.

Other recommendations include: Creating a definition of the YRTCs in statute, because there currently is no statutory

authorization or direction for the YRTCs. Requiring DHHS to have an emergency plan, because the lack of a plan made the task of dealing with the events at YRTC-Geneva even more difficult. Ensuring continued oversight with the creation of a special committee of the Legislature. And requiring an annual facilities review by the Legislature's ombudsman. These initial steps will help clarify the role of the YRTCs for youth and ensure continued monitoring as the facilities regain stability.

Throughout this process the HHS Committee has modeled what effective oversight and fact finding looks like in the face of a crisis at a state agency and made appropriate recommendations that consider the needs of children at the YRTCs and importance of efficient use of taxpayer funds. The HHS Committee is hopeful that Nebraska can build a juvenile justice system that makes a positive impact on the lives of these youth.

If we can get this right in Nebraska, it will benefit not only the youth at the YRTCs but all of us as well.

By Sara Howard

OWH Midlands Voices: 2nd District's 'purple' character disproves gerrymander claim

The writer is chairwoman of the Douglas County Republican Party.

As the Jan. 19 Public Pulse letter from Peter Gadzinski so well illustrates, the accusation of gerrymandering has now become the de facto excuse for Democrat Party losses in the 2nd Congressional District of Nebraska, and Sarpy County scapegoats are now the evil villain in this diabolical tale. However, the accusations of the left are bereft of facts and reason.

Let us first consider what gerrymandering is. The term comes from 1812 in reaction to the redrawing of lines in Massachusetts by Gov. Elbridge Gerry. While designed to benefit one party, the district lines were so contorted that they were said to resemble a salamander. A modern definition provided by Merriam-Webster defines the term as "to divide or arrange (a territorial unit) into election districts in a way that gives one political party an unfair advantage."

Throughout the United States today, there are many places where state legislatures are guilty of gerrymandering, the State of Maryland being one such example. Nevertheless, to accuse the Unicameral of this practice with regard to the local congressional district is rather absurd. This district is extremely compact, only Sarpy county is divided and the district lines in Sarpy County largely follow along the western boundaries of Bellevue.

Moreover, the aforementioned purpose of gerrymandering is to create districts where one party has an unfair advantage. The purpose is not to create a district in which the seat is competitive, now known as a purple district. Prior to the last redistricting 10 years ago, the 2nd District was a considerably more red district, with the Republican incumbent winning by an average of 18 points over the course of a decade. Three of those victories were crowned with margins of over 20%, and only one election saw a margin of less than 5% between the winner and loser.

Since the redistricting of 2011, the 2nd District has moved from being a relatively safe Republican district to what is now a highly competitive swing district in which no margin of victory by either side has ever reached even 4%. Additionally, the single largest election victory in terms of both percentage and actual number of votes cast was achieved by a Democrat. Think about that. How can one side claim that there is a truly unfair advantage when you consider these facts? The numbers don't lie, and the lines are compact around logical communities of interest.

The accusation of gerrymandering seems to be predicated upon the notion that only Douglas County voters should "be allowed to elect their own representative" for the local congressional district and that the inclusion of Sarpy citizens is akin to electoral robbery.

It is pointed out that Douglas County is home to 567,000 residents. Unfortunately, the writer conveniently fails to acknowledge that the population of the state is comprised of 1.93 million people and that each district should roughly represent 644,802 Nebraskans.

To give only the voters of Douglas County a say in the congressional district would require that we redraw the lines in a manner that would violate the one person, one vote principle. Such an action would undermine the ruling in Wesberry v. Sanders that held that members of the House of Representatives be selected by voters in districts of equal population.

Are our friends on the left suggesting that we should toss overboard this important judicial cornerstone of equal representation for the benefit of one party — in this case their own?

In the end, the proposition put forth that gerrymandering is the cause of Democrat Party failures is a smokescreen for the fact that they simply lost an election.

By Theresa Thibodeau

OWH: Support horse racing

Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson and Gov. Pete Ricketts, once again choose to disagree with the Nebraska Thoroughbred Racing Commission, whose members are appointed by the governor to work with and for the thoroughbred racing community. The racing commission voted and approved Historical Horse Racing for the state of Nebraska. In hours of testimony during open meetings, the commission heard the facts on Historical Horse Racing. Nebraska thoroughbred racing is in need of assistance. Obviously our governor doesn't care about this industry in our state, and Attorney General Doug Peterson is taking his stance against racing too. The millions of dollars that horse racing and the related agriculture over the past years have put back into the Nebraska state tax fund means nothing to these elected officials.

Please remember these two gentlemen at election time. I have voted Republican all my life. We need some new Nebraska blood within our borders.

Wally Wollesen, Omaha

OWH: That free military airfare

In response to Jean Lillie's Jan. 23 Pulse letter ("Tax breaks for military retirees"), I would like to say that I agree that Gov. Ricketts and state senators were wrong to initiate a 50% tax break on military pensions, I believe it should be 100% non-taxable, like in so many other states.

As for "receiving so much for free after enlisting," wow. It really makes me appreciate the free lodging (30-man tent with cots), and do not forget the free airfare to and from Iraq I received.

And Idolatry of the military? Our military is respected now as they should be, not idolized. I wonder if the writer would prefer going back to the times when our soldiers were spit on in the airports when returning from Vietnam.

The other thing that strikes me as odd is that the writer lives in Iowa but has an interest in Nebraska taxes. Did she move to Iowa to escape Nebraska's high taxes?

Greg Inman, Omaha

OWH: Taxes and military retirees

I am responding to Jean Lillie's opinion in the Jan. 23 Public Pulse. She said she doesn't understand why Nebraska wants to give 50% tax relief to Nebraska retirees. I see that she lives in Iowa.

My question is, why is she worried about what is happening on our behalf? Does she not realize that Iowa has been exempting military retirement benefits from Iowa individual income tax since 2014? Your then-Gov. Terry Branstad signed Senate File 303 approving this. Maybe you should worry about your state first.

Also, what all did we receive free while serving in the military? I still had to pay taxes on what I earned while in the military, so I partially paid for my own benefits.

John Rock, Bellevue

OWH: Best incentive goals

Last year, Legislative Bill 720, the ImagiNE Act, was defeated after some rural senators objected to the legislation as part of the tax bill. State Sen. Tom Briese stated about the proposal it showed "indifference" to the plight of Nebraska's farmers and ranchers, who have seen property tax bills more than double in some cases over the past decade because of steep rises in agricultural land values.

Tax incentives began in 1987 when the current incentive program (Advantage Act) was passed in an attempt to keep ConAgra from moving from Omaha. In 2018 the Advantage Act incentive program cost Nebraska taxpayers over $200 million.

Gov. Pete Ricketts is again supporting passage of the bill. It seems like the justification for any new bill transferring taxpayer funds to companies is always that it will create jobs. In Nebraska, the problem isn't lack of jobs, it's lack of talent to fill the existing jobs. So how about an incentive bill that would incentivize labor to come to Nebraska? Something like good schools, low-cost housing, better recreation like biking and running trails and improved parks. While such legislation would still not help farmers (who are much deserving a tax break), it would at least address the purported intent of the legislation instead of being another giveaway to business.

Joseph Slattery, Omaha

OWH: Learn from Iowa on tax policy

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds has asked her lawmakers for a 1-cent sales tax increase. She also proposed an income tax and property tax cut to offset the increase to residents.
That is how it's done.
Our governor and our "Uni-do-nothing" lawmakers just keep spending and then brag about tax relief that amounts to 20 bucks. I'm very impressed by Gov. Reynolds and the opposite for our leaders.
Neil Willer, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 1/26: Schools are making cash; their athletes should be, too

Networks and athletic apparel companies are paying billions upon billions of dollars to universities to broadcast their sporting events and outfit their athletes.
But not a penny of that money can go to the actual athletes who play the game for their respective universities, lest they lose their eligibility for receiving "impermissible benefits."
That doesn't square.
Hence, a groundswell of legislation permitting athletes to profit off their name, image and likeness that began last year in California has reached Nebraska and dozens of other states. And these proposals – including Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt's LB962 – take the right path toward righting an inequity that, like the money in college sports, has multiplied in recent years.
The days of amateurism are little more than sepia-tinted nostalgia at this point, with money to be made by broadcasters, recruiting services, shoe companies and youth coaches alike. These tentacles reach deeper and deeper, yet those playing the game that produces all this money must be kept away from it.
From 2005-2018, Nebraska Athletics' revenue more than doubled, going from $55.9 million to $142.2 million, according to USA Today's annual survey of finances in college sports. In that window, rights and licensing essentially quadrupled from $21.4 million to $84.4 million.
This isn't to knock on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, one of fewer than two dozen to turn a profit while charging no student subsidy for sports, which also receives millions annually from its athletic department. Because so few athletic departments operate in the black, directly paying athletes – the model used in professional sports – is impossible at the college level.
Instead, allowing them to be remunerated for endorsements or camps – while barring the NCAA or other athletic association from punishing players who had been paid beyond their scholarships – is the correct approach.
Hence why a bipartisan coalition, nearly a quarter of the Legislature, has signed on as cosponsors to Hunt's bill.
While non-athletes are currently prevented from monetizing their skills in a free market, their peers can use their passions and talents as tutors, researchers, performers and interns to make money. No reason exists to preclude playing sports from this list.
No doubt this legislation will come with unintended consequences and challenges for compliance offices, especially if it's instituted on a state-by-state basis. But the status quo becomes less fair by the day to athletes, particularly those who came from impoverished backgrounds yet can't accept someone buying them lunch to remain eligible.
A select few may make serious money, presumably those with the greatest future opportunity to sign a lucrative pro deal. But, as the NCAA itself touts in its advertisements, most of them will be going pro in something other than sports. Accordingly, those others, in particular, should have the chance to profit from the hard work that made them a college athlete – without the fears of retribution from their sports' governing bodies.

LJS Local View: Act to ensure hate has no home in Lincoln

Lincoln was founded more than 150 years ago by immigrants of diverse faiths and backgrounds who came together to build a home on the vast prairie. This rich tradition and the diversity of identities, backgrounds and perspectives in Lincoln today form a core strength of our city.
Last week, our community's strength was tested when our Jewish friends and neighbors found themselves the target of hateful vandalism. As mayor, I condemn in the strongest possible terms that act and all acts of anti-Semitism and bigotry. We have seen these expressions of hate, violence and divisive rhetoric occur across the country, and unfortunately, Lincoln is not immune to the fear that propels them.
The reaction and support from across our community reaffirms that love is more powerful than fear and that Lincoln

stands resolute as a welcoming place for all. I am proud that our city so fully recognizes the blessings and richness that the South Street Temple and all houses of faith bestow upon our city.
In response to the act of hate perpetrated at the temple, our residents demonstrated a generous outpouring of support for our Jewish friends and neighbors. A fundraising page set up to support repairs and improved security for the temple raised more than three times its goal. Hundreds have reached out to members of our Jewish community, sharing words of support and standing side by side in prayer.
As a community, we have made clear that hate has no home in Lincoln.
While it is vital that we reaffirm our welcoming values when faced with open acts of hatred in our city, it is just as important that we do intentional work every day to create a community that is inclusive of all our residents, no matter who they are, how they worship, what language they speak or whom they love.
Each of us can and must speak out against hateful and divisive language in our community, no matter how small. We can invite into our lives others who have different traditions, experiences and backgrounds than us. We can encircle each other with love and support the way that, as Shabbat services began on a recent Friday night, members of other congregations lined the streets of the temple in song.
Together, we must resolve each day to ensure Lincoln continues to be a welcoming place for everyone to live, work, play, learn, worship and call home.
Leirion Gaylor Baird is mayor of Lincoln.

LJS: The high cost of denying a problem

We should all be pleased that Gov. Pete Ricketts has earmarked $60 million for the state's share of the federal disaster relief related to the catastrophic flooding in our state last spring -- not that he has much choice in the matter.
It is interesting how Republican officials in our part of the country (like Ricketts), who have spent decades denying the reality of climate change, are now asking us to spend millions of dollars on flood plain remediation and management to deal with the consequences of the climate change that they have previously worked so hard to deny.
It is because of climate-change skeptics like Ricketts that our society has not been able to address the issue of climate change before it was too late. Having painted himself in to this political corner, Governor Ricketts is now trying to tell us that it isn't the climate that is changing … it's the "weather." Hopefully, few Nebraskans will be confused by the governor's rhetorical gymnastics.
Marshall Lux, Lincoln

GII: Bills will help develop Nebraska's workforce

This past week Gov. Pete Ricketts highlighted priorities in his mid-biennium budget. I was pleased by his support for a new Nebraska Career Scholarship that could potentially fund over 2,000 higher education scholarships by fiscal year 2024.
Additionally, Sen. John Stinner, chair of the Appropriations Committee, introduced LB894 to appropriate $7 million to provide reimbursement to community colleges for tuition and expenses related to dual enrollment. Dual enrollment courses are college-level courses taught to high school students so they can get credit toward both college and high school degrees.
Both examples of current and future workforce development support could be beneficial as Central Community College seeks to provide educated and skilled individuals to enter the workforce or become entrepreneurs.
The Nebraska Department of Labor defines over 262 occupations in Nebraska as "H3" or high demand, high wage and/or high skill. Community colleges like Central provide proven education to students in H3 areas including registered nursing, construction and industrial production management, medical records, precision agriculture, welding, diesel and automotive mechanics, electrical and graphic design.
Community colleges also provide high quality and economically priced coursework toward transfer degrees for additional occupations requiring a bachelor's degree or higher.
The scholarship support and dual credit reimbursements would help expand the number of students learning those skills and starting their postsecondary education while still enrolled in high school.
Last fall, the CCC Board of Governors voted to reduce the property tax levy across our 25-county service area to assist in flood relief for area property owners. Additional financial support from the state to students and community colleges will be impactful in helping keep property taxes low, which also fits into the priorities of the Legislature, governor and CCC.

Dr. Matt Gotschall
Central Community College President

OWH: President Trump could be an X-factor in Don Bacon's bid to retain 2nd District House seat

Voters will see some familiar names on the ballot in the race to represent the Omaha-based 2nd Congressional District, but it won't be a rerun of 2018.

The 2020 race involves a new player, one who political observers say will be an X-factor in Nebraska's most competitive congressional race: President Donald J. Trump.

Trump's name will be on the November ballot, barring an unlikely vote to remove him in the Senate, and it's not yet clear who stands to be helped or hurt the most by his candidacy. The president could boost turnout across the political spectrum — among Republicans, Democrats and nonpartisans.

Trump supports incumbent Republican Rep. Don Bacon, who filed for reelection Wednesday. Bacon, a retired Air Force brigadier general, was the first member of Nebraska's all-Republican congressional delegation to endorse Trump's reelection bid.

The congressman's Democratic challengers say they plan to make Bacon's unflinching support for Trump, before and during the impeachment fight, an issue during the 2020 campaign. The Democratic primary is set for May 12.

The contenders once again include 2018 Democratic nominee Kara Eastman and a candidate whose last name is Ashford. But this time, it's Omaha lawyer Ann Ashford, not her husband, former Rep. Brad Ashford.

Omaha restaurant owner Gladys Harrison and communications consultant Morgann Freeman are also raising funds to run as Democrats, but they have not yet filed.

The public's reaction to the impeachment proceedings will determine how Trump affects the 2nd District race, said Paul Landow, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

"Deep down, are they siding with the Republicans and deciding this is a bunch of baloney?" he asked. "Or are they siding with Democrats and saying, 'Yeah, this is right?' "

Republicans hold a slight registration advantage in the 2nd District. Turnout also leans red in congressional races, powered by Republican-leaning voters who show up every two years in the district's suburbs, west Omaha and western Sarpy County.

But Democrats turn out in higher numbers in presidential years, and elections elsewhere have shown some Trump-backed candidates losing ground among suburban women, Landow and others said.

The 2nd District backed Trump in 2016, Mitt Romney in 2012 and Barack Obama in 2008, so it can flip, despite a clear historical tilt toward the GOP in federal races.

The Cook Political Report and other groups that rate congressional races consider the 2nd District race among the most competitive nationally.

In the region, only the race in Iowa's 3rd Congressional District, in the southwest quarter of the state, is considered closer. There, Rep. Cindy Axne, D-Iowa, faces a likely rematch with former Rep. David Young.

Bacon said Wednesday that he won't run away from the president's record on taxes, jobs and economic growth. He said, on balance, the president's approach has been good for American prosperity.

He said he disagrees with some of Trump's choices, including with some of the president's conversations about Ukraine that are at the heart of the impeachment case.

He said he wishes that Trump hadn't brought up Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden or his son, Hunter, in his phone conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

But Bacon said Democrats pushing for impeachment ignore the fact that aid to Ukraine, while delayed by the administration for what appeared to be a political purpose, was ultimately delivered within the time frame allowed under the law.

"I think there's grounds to criticize," he said. "I don't think there's grounds for impeachment."

Eastman said Bacon too often disregards or downplays the actions by the president that led to his impeachment. She points to national, state and local polls that show that the president's net approval rating has fallen since he was elected.

Ashford said Bacon is too partisan to represent a district where people still expect Democrats and Republicans to find ways to work together and get things done.

Bacon touts his work with House members on both sides of the aisle to help Nebraska recover from flooding, including funds to repair Offutt Air Force Base and the Nebraska National Guard's Camp Ashland.

He said that one of his key focuses will always be national security and that as the highest-ranking former active-duty

military member in Congress, he serves an important role.
“We have a shortage of people in Congress that know national security,” he said. “I think we need it.”
His next focus, he said, will be making sure that the University of Nebraska Medical Center and other local economic drivers, including Offutt, get the funds they need to help the Omaha area succeed.
Both Democrats say Bacon and the Republican Party haven’t done enough to help Nebraskans on issues that matter to voters, particularly health care. Bacon voted more than once to repeal the Affordable Care Act.
Bacon counters that he still intends to fight for the ACA’s popular protections for people with preexisting conditions and the elimination of caps on insurance coverage amounts.
Eastman and Ashford say Bacon and Republicans had two years with control of Congress and the presidency to do something proactive on health care, but accomplished little of note.
Bacon, for his part, repeated his criticisms of Eastman, saying her support for “Medicare for All” and other progressive policies puts her too far to the left to effectively represent a purple district.
Eastman said, “It is obvious to me that Bacon will take a playbook from the Republican Party just like he did last time and talk about a phantom candidate that he and the Republican Party made up.”
There is history among the candidates: Bacon knocked Brad Ashford out of Congress in 2016. Eastman upset Brad Ashford’s comeback bid in the 2018 Democratic primary. Then Bacon defeated Eastman by 2 percentage points, or about 5,000 votes.
Before either Ann Ashford or Eastman can take on Bacon, one of the two must win the Democratic primary. And the 2020 primary debate sounds a lot like Brad Ashford’s fight with Eastman.
Eastman said she came close to defeating Bacon in 2018 because her views excited Omaha-area Democrats who sometimes sit out campaigns involving more moderate Democrats.
Ashford contrasted Eastman’s 2018 loss with Democratic victories elsewhere that year. She said the only Democrat to win the 2nd District seat in 24 years was her husband, a moderate.
“If (Kara) was ever going to win, last time was it,” Ashford said.
By Aaron Sanderford

OWH: Washington Digest: Long days, no cellphones and 'the most momentous decision a senator can make'

WASHINGTON — Ahead of President Donald Trump’s impeachment trial, former Sens. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., and Russ Feingold, D-Wisc., penned a memo offering guidance to current members.
“A vote on presidential impeachment is perhaps the most momentous decision a senator can make,” they wrote. “In the weeks ahead, we urge you to take your constitutional responsibilities with the greatest seriousness. Simply put, that means respecting the constitutional process, keeping an open mind, hearing all the evidence before making a decision, and not prejudging the effort based on policy or political preferences.”
As Trump’s trial began in earnest last week, all 100 senators found themselves bound to the chamber — and deprived of their cellphones — as House Democrats presented the case against the president.
The long hours and late nights have taken a toll on some members. The 86-year-old Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, for example, is typically in bed by 9 p.m. and up by 4 a.m.
Grassley told the Wall Street Journal that he coped with the extended schedule by pushing off his morning wake-up — all the way to 7:20 a.m.
Drinks other than milk or water are prohibited on the Senate floor, so senators have been ducking into their cloakrooms to down mediocre coffee, Red Bull and even 5-Hour Energy capsules.
Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., was spotted tucking tobacco into his mouth at one point, a habit that attracted the attention of the authorities.
“After Congressman Schiff kept talking until 2 a.m. on Tuesday, Ben accidentally left some of his tobacco with his notes on his desk,” spokesman James Wegmann said. “The sergeant-at-arms asked him to keep the pouch inside his desk during the next round of (Rep. Adam) Schiff’s clown show. The rules don’t prohibit tobacco, unlike the contraband Nebraska beef jerky he has in his desk.”
Sasse has declined interview requests about the impeachment trial, and Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., told The World-Herald that she wouldn’t comment until the proceedings were finished.
Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, has been vocal, however, in blasting House Democrats for what she described as hypocrisy on the issue of military assistance to Ukraine.
“They keep going back to ‘thousands of Ukrainians have lost their lives,’ ” Ernst said. “No joke — because the Obama

administration and some of them wouldn't allow lethal aid to go to Ukraine."
How senators up for reelection handle the impeachment trial could affect their campaigns, including Sasse and Ernst. Impeachment duties kept the four Nebraska and Iowa senators from joining this year's March For Life on Friday, but they hosted morning receptions for constituents who traveled out for the event.

Celebrating trade

In his role as the Senate president pro tem, Grassley hosted a signing ceremony for the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement last week.
Fischer and Ernst joined him at the ceremony as they touted the trade pact's potential for economic growth, job creation and increased farm exports.
Such events often involve the signer distributing souvenir pens to the lawmakers afterward, but Grassley simply handed the one he had used to Ernst.
"Look at that, just a regular old pen," Ernst told him. "You hang on to that. I know how thrifty you are."

Not your father's impeachment

Hagel and former Sen. Bob Kerrey, D-Neb., last week criticized Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's approach to Trump's trial and contrasted it with the unanimous support for the organizing resolution in the Clinton impeachment.
But that's hardly the only difference between the two trials. For one thing, the Trump proceedings have thus far featured less titillating subject matter than those Clinton proceedings.
In his book "While America Sleeps," Feingold recounted talking to Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., and Kerrey during the Clinton trial when the mild-mannered Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., walked up.
"Carl approached us and, as he lifted his ubiquitous 'readers' from his face, said, 'Listen, I am a little embarrassed to ask you guys this, but what's a thong?' "
Feingold writes that he doubled over with laughter at the absurdity of the situation.
"As Wellstone and I staggered away, Bob Kerrey collegially placed his arm around a red-faced Carl Levin and calmly explained to him this key feature of modern attire."
By Joseph Morton

OWH: Many Nebraskans, Iowans in the crowd as Trump becomes 1st president to speak at March for Life

WASHINGTON — Groups of Nebraskans and Iowans joined other abortion opponents from across the country at the 47th national March For Life on Friday, excited to see Donald Trump become the first sitting president to address the gathering in person.
"Unborn children have never had a stronger defender in the White House," Trump told the crowd. "And as the Bible tells us, each person is wonderfully made."
The annual event started one year after the Supreme Court's landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which established a woman's legal right to abortion.
Seth Nelson, 18, was one of the dozens of students and chaperones from Remsen St. Mary's High School in Remsen, Iowa, who attended this year's march.
It was his first time there, but Nelson said he's hopeful that the court will soon overturn Roe.
"I want to end abortion," he said. "Our religion teacher always says, 'We're the generation to end abortion.' "
Trump fired up the crowd by talking about policy changes his administration has made to push back on abortion access and the conservative judges he's placed on the federal bench.
Critics accuse Trump of using the march to try to distract from his impeachment trial in the Senate.
Ilyse Hogue, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America, called it "an act of desperation, plain and simple." Alexis McGill Johnson, acting president of the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, accused Trump of carrying out "a full-out assault on our health and our rights."
According to Pew Research Center polling in 2019, roughly 6 in 10 Americans believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.
Over time, though, both the Democratic and Republican parties have moved further to the left and right, respectively, on abortion rights.
Views of abortion have remained relatively stable over two decades of polling, and it's a minority of Americans who believe that abortion should be legal or illegal in all cases. But polling does suggest a widening partisan gap on the question of support for abortion rights in all or most cases, along with some movement on both sides of the aisle toward total support or total opposition to abortion rights.
Midlands senators could not participate in the march because they had to be in their seats for the ongoing

impeachment trial, but they hosted morning receptions for constituents in town for the event.
Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, talked up this year's theme of "pro-life, pro-woman" and said the movement is making progress even if Roe isn't going to be overturned immediately.
"We're headed that way," she said. "I don't know that we see that breakthrough ruling right now. But I think there's greater awareness in the public of what life really is and how meaningful it is, and as we start to see that more and more of our younger people are committing themselves to life and as we see that, I do think we're getting closer."
Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., told visiting Nebraskans to "stay strong, stay courageous, stay vocal," while Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., said more advanced sonogram images are prompting people to change their attitudes about abortion.
"It turns out teens and 20-somethings are becoming more pro-life, because when you see what's happening in utero, you realize that a baby is a baby," he said.
Among several University of Nebraska-Lincoln students who stopped by the Fischer and Sasse reception were 19-year-old twins Joshua and Katie Harris.
"The work that we're doing out here — I truly think that what we're doing is making a difference," Josh said.
Katie Harris said she feels a special responsibility to express her views as a woman in the movement. She said she's glad to see some states passing new abortion restrictions and the possibility of court rulings favorable to the cause.
"And hopefully we won't have to keep coming to these marches if Roe v. Wade gets overturned," she said.
By Joseph Morton

LJS: Smith says Trump has earned Nebraska's support

Pointing to increasing trade opportunities and "a pro-growth tax policy," Rep. Adrian Smith says President Donald Trump has been good for Nebraska and deserves to be reelected this year.
Smith, the 3rd District Republican congressman, voted against the articles of impeachment of the president approved by the House, arguing that Democrats "just want to get rid of him and reverse the will of the people" who elected Trump four years ago.
"Hillary (Clinton) won the popular vote" in 2016, he said, and "Democrats are mad."
"I wouldn't do everything the way the president has," Smith said during an interview in Lincoln, but Trump has done nothing that "rises to the level of an impeachable offense."
Smith's 3rd District encompasses all of western and central Nebraska, along with the northeastern and southeastern corners of the state. It has been solid Republican territory for more than half a century.
Trade prospects for Nebraska agriculture are beginning to increase now under Trump, the seven-term congressman said.
"Ag producers are very excited about the future," he said.
Nebraska agriculture took an estimated $2 billion hit over a two-year period during the trade wars ignited by Trump's tariffs, which followed his withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement and subsequent renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement.
"Agriculture knew something needed to be done," Smith said, and the end result is going to benefit Nebraska.
The new U.S.-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) agreement that was negotiated to succeed NAFTA will be "good for Nebraska agriculture," he said, and so are new agreements that are being negotiated with Japan and China.
"Trade writ large is so important for Nebraska," Smith said. "And the fact that more people are talking about trade is a silver lining for all of us."
Nebraska will also benefit from Trump's elimination of a number of environmental protection rules that have hindered agriculture, Smith said.
Meanwhile, he said, "we all benefit from a growing economy" that has developed during the Trump administration, thanks in part to "a pro-growth tax policy."
As a senior member of the House Ways and Means Committee, Smith plays a role in determining tax policy.
"I want to continue to keep an eye on positive changes in our tax code," he said.
By Don Walton

AP: Trump administration approves Keystone pipeline on US land

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Trump administration on Wednesday approved a right-of-way allowing the Keystone XL oil sands pipeline to be built across U.S. land, federal officials told The Associated Press, pushing the controversial $8 billion project closer to construction though court challenges still loom.

The approval signed by Interior Secretary David Bernhardt covers 46 miles (74 kilometers) of the line's route across land in Montana controlled by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said Casey Hammond, assistant secretary of the Interior Department.

The 1,200-mile (1,930-kilometer) pipeline would transport up to 830,000 barrels (35 million gallons) of crude oil daily from western Canada to terminals on the Gulf Coast. Project sponsor TC Energy said in a court filing that it wants to begin construction in the next several months, but that's sure to face more legal challenges.

First proposed in 2008, the pipeline has become emblematic of the struggle between economic development and curbing the fossil fuel emissions that are causing climate change. The Obama administration rejected it, but President Donald Trump revived it and has been a strong supporter.

The stretch approved Wednesday includes all federal land crossed by the line, Hammond said. Much of the rest of the route is across private land, for which TC Energy has been trying to get permissions to build on.

Opponents worry burning the tar sands oil will make climate change worse, and that the pipeline could break and spill oil into waterways like Montana's Missouri River. They have filed numerous lawsuits.

Hammond said Interior officials and other agencies have done a thorough review of the line's potential effects on the environment. He said TC Energy had provided detailed plans to respond to any spill from the line.

"We're comfortable with the analysis that's been done," Hammond said.

Another oil pipeline in TC Energy's Keystone network in October spilled an estimated 383,000 gallons (1.4 million liters) of oil in eastern North Dakota. The company's critics say a damaging spill from Keystone XL is inevitable given the the length of the line and the many rivers and other bodies of water it would cross beneath.

An attorney for environmental groups that have sued to overturn Trump's permit for the line said they will ask the judge in the case to issue an order blocking the new approval.

"We know President Trump's permit was unconstitutional, and we have every confidence that the federal courts will set aside these approvals," said Steve Volker, who represents the Indigenous Environmental Network.

U.S. Rep. Greg Gianforte of Montana praised the administration's move.

"Trump and his administration are delivering on their promise to get this critical infrastructure project moving after years of unnecessary delays," the Republican lawmaker said in a statement.

U.S. District Judge Brian Morris in Montana initially denied a request from environmentalists to block construction in December because no work was immediately planned. But he also has ruled against the project, including a 2018 decision that stalled the line and prompted Trump to issue a new presidential permit for Keystone XL to cross the U.S.-Canada border.

In Nebraska, the state Supreme Court removed the last major obstacle for the project in August when it ruled in favor of state regulators who had approved a route for the pipeline in 2017. Opponents had argued that regulators didn't follow all the procedures required by state law.

TC Energy intends next month to begin mobilizing construction machinery to areas designated for worker camps and pipeline storage yards in Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska, according to its court filings. It also plans to start toppling trees along the route in areas of South Dakota.

In April, the company plans to start building a 1.2-mile (2-kilometer) segment of the pipeline across the U.S.-Canada border. Construction of pumping stations for the line would begin in June.

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