From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 3-12-20
Date: Thursday, March 12, 2020 11:19:44 AM
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Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Mar 2020	3.42	-23.00	11:07
Corn	Dec 2020	3.30	-40.00	11:07
Milo	Mar 2020	2.80	-85.00	11:07
Milo	Dec 2020	2.85	-85.00	11:07
Soybeans	Mar 2020	7.59	-95.00	11:07
Soybeans	Dec 2020	7.61	-105.00	11:07
Wheat	Mar 2020	3.57	-70.00	11:07
Wheat	Jul 2020	3.69	-65.00	11:07

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OWH: Nebraska lawmakers shoot down proposed $52 million work-release facility in Omaha

LINCOLN — A proposal to build a $52 million work-release facility in Omaha was shot down Wednesday by state lawmakers amid questions about whether Corrections Department officials would actually use the money and build a prison.

State Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha said the Legislature needs to address the state's prison overcrowding "crisis" because it's not being seriously addressed right now.

"This is something we've been kicking down the road for probably 15 years," Lathrop said. "I think we should include it in the budget."

The Legislature's Appropriations Committee had declined to include in their proposed budget Lathrop's plan to build a 300-bed community corrections facility in Omaha, a plan that was opposed by the administration of Gov. Pete Ricketts.

State Corrections Director Scott Frakes said he didn't need a low-risk work-release facility. Just last month, he announced a "request for information" for a 1,600-bed higher security prison that would be built by a private firm and then leased back to the state.

Lathrop, however, said that such an information request wasn't really "a plan" and that it would take four to five years before such a prison could be built and opened. With the inmate population projected to grow by 200 a year, action needs to be swifter, Lathrop said.

"The question is, are we going to try and build our way out of this, or do something smarter?" he said.

Gering Sen. John Stinner, who heads the Appropriations Committee, told lawmakers that leasing a prison would most likely cost $50 million to $70 million a year, an expense that needs to be weighed against other budget priorities like property tax relief and workforce development.

Both he and Lathrop said that Nebraska needs to not only build a new prison, but also adopt sentencing reforms that will slow the influx of new inmates.

Several conservative states, Lathrop said, have reduced sentences on nonviolent crimes to avoid building expensive prisons. He blamed the war on crime in the 1990s, which saw sentences increased for many crimes, for the prison overcrowding.

"That was a great way to get elected. Now we're seeing the cost," he said.

Last fall, Frakes said state prisons were within 150 inmates of full capacity. With recent additions of inmates, that number is about 120, Lathrop said. Nebraska and Alabama have the most crowded prison systems in the country. Alabama is under federal court order to address its overcrowding.

State prisons house about 2,000 more inmates than they were designed to hold, which has spawned a federal lawsuit that holds the possibility that a federal judge will order the release of hundreds of inmates.
Several senators, however, questioned whether the Corrections Department would use the money since it opposed Lathrop's plan. Others said that approving a $52 million expenditure required more debate.
In the end, lawmakers voted 14-13 on Lathrop's amendment, which was far short of the 25 votes needed. The nine members of the Appropriations Committee did not vote on the amendment, which is the practice of that committee on matters that they did not include in their proposed budget.
Lathrop said he'll now focus on sentencing reforms to address overcrowding.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Nebraska state senator creates website urging GOP to restore its values

Sen. John McCollister of Omaha has launched a website urging the Republican Party to recover and restore its past values and apply them to the issues of today such as climate change, immigration reform, criminal justice reform and "reasonable gun legislation."
The new website presence was heralded by a series of tweets from McCollister, a Republican member of the nonpartisan Legislature, who said he is seeking a return to "a more rational and responsive Republican Party" rather than the GOP of today.
"Republicans didn't always hate public schools," he wrote.
"Republicans didn't always try to bludgeon unions. Republicans didn't always ignore scientists. Republicans used to fight corruption, not promote it. Republicans used to follow the Constitution."
McCollister, the son of a former Republican congressman — John Y. McCollister, who represented metropolitan Omaha's House district in the 1970s — wrote: "I am a Republican, but do NOT fit in with most Republicans today.
"The party I remember is the party of Eisenhower. I grew up idolizing Lincoln. I do not belong to the Republican Party of Donald Trump."
Creation of the new johnmccollister.com website comes seven months after McCollister called out his party on Twitter for "enabling white supremacy in our country" by accepting the remarks of "a Republican president who continually stokes racist fears in his base."
His series of tweets on @SenMcCollister went viral, quickly accumulating more than 130,000 likes. His number of Twitter followers jumped from 650 to more than 53,000.
The new website presence is accompanied by an invitation for viewers to make a small donation.
"I've never once asked for donations ever, but I realize this message is pretty important right now," McCollister tweeted. Donations would be used to "help me amplify this message," he wrote.
What's driving this?
"I have three kids and two grandsons and we're leaving the world in sad shape for them," McCollister said during an interview in his office at the state Capitol.
That's it, not any future political ambition after he completes his tenure in the Legislature at the end of 2022 when he would be 75 and term-limited out of office.
"I don't know, perhaps a seat on a utility board or county board or city council," he said, but not a step up to a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.
"I've been asked," he said, but it's not something he wants to do or would do.
McCollister said he has found the reach and influence that he has been able to muster on social media to be "an amazing ride" that has allowed him to reach people and amplify his message to rebuild and restore the Republican Party that he once knew.
"But a few Republicans take issue on a regular basis," he acknowledged.
Meanwhile, McCollister said, he'll continue to work on issues important to his constituents in the Legislature, including additional property tax relief this year.
McCollister handily won reelection in 2018 despite his independent legislative voting record that included disagreement with Gov. Pete Ricketts and the majority of his Republican colleagues on a number of issues.
He has voted to repeal the death penalty and expand Medicaid, opposed voter ID laws, selected a measure to grant Nebraska driver's licenses to undocumented young immigrants who are in the country under protected

status as his designated legislative priority bill, introduced legislation to end partisan gerrymandering of congressional and legislative districts and promoted development of wind energy.
McCollister represents an economically and politically diverse legislative district that stretches from 72nd Street to 144th Street in central Omaha.
By Don Walton

AP: Oglala Sioux Tribe approves medical, recreational marijuana on Pine Ridge Reservation

PIERRE, S.D. — Members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe passed a referendum to legalize medical and recreational marijuana on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, according to preliminary results from the tribe's election commission.
A proposal to allow alcohol in the tribe's casino failed.
The results of Tuesday's vote will be certified in the next week. In the tally from all precincts announced on Wednesday morning, both medical and recreational marijuana passed by wide margins, with 82% of voters approving medical marijuana and 74% approving recreational pot. The alcohol proposal failed by 12 percentage points.
Nebraska State Sen. Adam Morfeld of Lincoln, a co-chair of an effort to put a medical marijuana initiative on the November ballot, said he's looking forward to the same wide margin of victory for the issue in Nebraska.
Morfeld said that his group's polling "indicates it will be."
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, who says that medical marijuana's benefits are unproven, said earlier this week that voters will reject it once they become more educated.
The Oglala Sioux will become the only Native American tribe to set up a cannabis market in a state where it's otherwise illegal. The tribal council is next supposed to enact laws for how marijuana will be legalized and regulated. According to initial plans, the tribe will not take ownership of cannabis production or retail, but license individuals and put a retail tax on pot. The tribal council will take up the issue on March 30.
Tribal leaders who pushed the initiative said it has the potential to bring in millions of dollars of business to a community that is one of the most impoverished in the country.
But the legalization of marijuana also sets up a potential conflict with federal and state authorities. The Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe in the eastern part of the state attempted to grow and sell marijuana in 2015, but ended up burning its cannabis plants after conflicts with federal and state governments.
Tribal leaders have said they want to cooperate with authorities in setting up a marijuana market. South Dakota voters will also decide on medical and recreational marijuana legalization in a referendum on ballots in November.
If voters decide to legalize marijuana in the state, it could mean a boom for the tribe's marijuana market. The tribe would have a head start, and its members would be the only pot retailers in the state for a period.
Trent Hancock, a marijuana producer from Oregon who has helped the tribe formulate its pot plans, hoped that tribal members could sell $100 million of the product in a year under that scenario.
If South Dakota does not legalize marijuana, tribal leaders are planning to set up a pot resort at the tribe's casino. They would attempt to keep people from taking marijuana off tribal lands through limiting the amount people could purchase and tracking their purchases.

OWH: Basketball games without fans, doubling of cases: Coronavirus hits Nebraska hard

Basketball games without most fans. A doubling in the number of Nebraska cases.
The coronavirus hit Nebraska hard Wednesday, with stunning developments that show the societal reach of the outbreak.
The NCAA announced that its upcoming championship events, including first- and second-round men's games scheduled March 20 and 22 at the CHI Health Center in Omaha, will be limited to staff and family members.
Similarly, organizers of this weekend's high school boys state tournament in Lincoln announced that its games will not be open to the public, only to family members.
On the same day, the World Health Organization declared the global coronavirus outbreak a pandemic, meaning that the virus is causing sustained outbreaks in multiple regions of the world. On Wednesday evening, President

Donald Trump announced that he's suspending most travel from Europe to the U.S. for 30 days beginning Friday.
The NBA announced that it was suspending its season indefinitely.
Nebraska health officials late Wednesday announced five more cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, bringing the total number of cases in the state to 10. It was just Friday that Nebraska's first case was announced.
Wednesday's basketball announcements show how quickly plans involving the coronavirus can change: At a morning press conference, Omaha officials said they expected the NCAA tournament games to go forward as planned, though they remained in contact with the NCAA. By midafternoon, the NCAA had decided to curtail attendance.
"Certainly it will be unlike anything we've done before," said Kristyna Engdahl, a spokeswoman for the Metropolitan Entertainment and Convention Authority, which manages the CHI Health Center.
Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert said in a statement Wednesday evening that the NCAA made "the tough decision to play without fans in the arenas."
She said the city looks forward to welcoming the players, coaches and families of the athletes who will play in Omaha.
The March Madness decision is sure to send a major economic ripple through Omaha, which was counting on thousands of people to attend the games, stay in hotels and eat in restaurants.
The change will affect concession revenue, and MECA will adjust its concession staffing for the games, Engdahl said. The organization will still receive a rental fee related to the games.
Schools on Wednesday also responded to the coronavirus. All three of Iowa's major public universities announced that they will move to online classes beginning March 23, as will Drake University, a private college in Des Moines.
The spread of the coronavirus has prompted questions about other large-scale events, such as Berkshire Hathaway's annual meeting, which brings thousands of people from across the world to Omaha. The event is scheduled for May 2.
Stothert said at the press conference that she recently spoke with Berkshire chief Warren Buffett, who told her that he plans to wait until early April to evaluate the meeting's future.
And while some communities across the nation have called for cancellations of events larger than 1,000 people, that hasn't happened yet in Nebraska. In Lincoln on Wednesday night the hip-hop star DaBaby performed, and in Omaha two major concerts are still scheduled this week.
State statutes give Gov. Pete Ricketts and local health officials the authority to cancel events or order closings. Omaha city codes about disaster preparedness and health and sanitation give Stothert the authority to act in "limited and extreme" circumstances, she said.
Elsewhere in Nebraska, several schools canceled classes after it was announced Tuesday evening that a 16-year-old Crofton High School student had tested positive for the virus.
The teen attended the girls state basketball tournament in Lincoln last week; he was listed in serious condition Wednesday in the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit on the University of Nebraska Medical Center campus.
The boys high school tournament action begins at 9 a.m. Thursday in nearly empty venues.
"We do realize that this is the best thing to do," NSAA Executive Director Jay Bellar said.
By Reece Ristau

OWH: 'We will prepare': Omaha, Douglas County officials share plans for handling coronavirus threat

City of Omaha and Douglas County officials have implemented modest measures so far to try to slow the local spread of coronavirus, but have contingency plans for more drastic steps if the situation warrants, they said Wednesday.
The officials spoke in a morning press conference in Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert's office. As a sign of how fluid the coronavirus matter is, when they spoke Wednesday morning they were expecting NCAA men's basketball tournament games to go forward in Omaha as scheduled, and were discussing plans for infection control at the CHI Health Center.
But by afternoon, the NCAA had announced that the games would be played without fans, and with only players' families and staff.

Stothert said city and county officials are working with health care providers “to lower the risk and reduce the impact on our community. This is a rapidly changing situation, which requires action, flexibility, and thorough, accurate information.”

UNIFIED COMMAND

City and county officials have formed a Unified Command to coordinate coronavirus response. It is chaired by Douglas County Health Department Director Adi Pour. It could have the power to order general quarantines, but there has been no need to do so yet, the officials said.

Per state statute, Gov. Pete Ricketts and local health officials have the authority to cancel events or order closings. City codes about disaster preparedness and health and sanitation give Stothert the authority to act in “limited and extreme” circumstances, she said.

Nearly 300 people in metropolitan Omaha on Wednesday were under self-quarantine in their homes, said Carol Allensworth, chief of epidemiology and preparedness in the county health department. Forty-four others were being monitored and asked to provide a daily update on their symptoms.

Allensworth stressed that people who believe they have COVID-19 or have been exposed to it should call a health care provider before showing up at a medical facility to minimize the spread of disease.

“Emergency departments are for those with serious health conditions only, not just a minor case of the sniffles,” she said.

Douglas County officials have tested about 30 people in the course of their investigations, Allensworth said. Many more tests have been done across the city. The county has not had trouble getting individual tests when needed, she said.

Stothert said she is in consistent contact with University of Nebraska Medical Center Chancellor Dr. Jeffrey Gold. Last week, UNMC was testing about 100 people a day, Stothert said. By the end of the week, they could have the capacity to test “thousands” a day, she said.

POLICE

Omaha Police Chief Todd Schmaderer said police are currently responding to calls for service as normal, but if a coronavirus outbreak affects the department, it may have to change how it responds to lower-priority calls like minor traffic accidents.

Effective Wednesday, the Police Department temporarily suspended all travel and outside training, Schmaderer said. The department’s volunteer program also was suspended because many participants are over 70 and more susceptible to illnesses, he said.

FIRE

Emergency calls to Douglas County 911 are being screened to determine the level of protective equipment that should be worn by emergency responders, Fire Chief Dan Olsen said. Gloves, goggles and masks will be used when handling low-risk patients. Gowns will be worn in addition to those items for high-risk people, Olsen said.

If a firefighter exhibits symptoms of COVID-19 and has been in contact with someone who has the disease, he or she will be examined by the department’s medical director, who in turn will communicate with the Nebraska Bicontainment Unit at UNMC.

PUBLIC BUILDINGS

City and county buildings frequently visited by the public, such as Omaha City Hall and the Douglas County Courthouse, will be disinfected each week, in addition to regular office cleaning, as long as is necessary, Stothert said.

Officials have suspended visitation to the Douglas County Health Center until further notice, said Clare Duda, chairman of the Douglas County Board. Visitor screenings are underway at the Douglas County Youth Center and the county’s community mental health center.

“We recognize the hardship this may cause residents and their families, but it’s a necessary step to protect our long-term care and hospice residents who are considered high-risk,” Duda said.

CITY AND COUNTY SERVICES

Stothert and Duda said leaders of departments were updating contingency plans in order to protect workers and continue providing essential services in the event of widespread illness. They said they have the technology to allow employees to work from home if that becomes necessary.

Officials also stressed the importance of basic preventative measures: Cover your cough. Stay home if you’re sick.

Disinfect frequently. And wash your hands for a minimum of 20 seconds.
“We will prepare, we will act responsible, but we will not panic,” Stothert said.
By Christopher Burbach and Reece Ristau

LJS: Father says Crofton student who tested positive for COVID-19 'doing pretty good'; more cases confirmed in Omaha

The parents of a Crofton High School student hospitalized for a presumptive case of coronavirus believe their son may have contracted the virus last week at Nebraska's girls state basketball tournament in Lincoln.
School and health officials confirmed that the student attended the Hartington Cedar Catholic vs. Weeping Water game at Lincoln Southwest High School and the Crofton vs. BRLD game at Lincoln North Star High School, both on Thursday.
The boy was transferred to the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit on the University of Nebraska Medical Center campus in Omaha early Wednesday and is undergoing further testing.
"It sounds like he's doing pretty good," the boy's father told the Sioux City (Iowa) Journal. "So far, everything looks OK."
State health officials said the high school student has underlying medical conditions but have not said anything about how the student may have contracted the disease.
Meanwhile, the Douglas County Health Department reported five additional confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday evening, pushing the total in Nebraska to 10.
The newest cases, which have not required hospitalization, are close family members of an Omaha woman in her 40s who tested positive Tuesday.
The health department said anyone who visited the Advanced Auto Parts store at 17140 Evans Plaza on Monday, Tuesday or Thursday may have been exposed and should monitor themselves for symptoms. The Omaha woman had recently traveled to California and Nevada, health officials said.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services notified school officials of the Crofton student's positive test Tuesday night, and Crofton Community Schools closed both its high school and elementary school Wednesday. A message from the school district said fourth, fifth and sixth graders attending Crofton and staff may have been exposed to the high school student.
The schools will remain closed through Friday, as will St. Rose of Lima Catholic School in Crofton.
Schools in Hartington and Newcastle also were closed Wednesday. Schools in Bancroft and Lyons closed at noon.
The Northeast Nebraska Public Health Department on Wednesday asked students in schools in Hartington, Newcastle and Wynot to self-quarantine until the department can determine the risk level for students in each school.
The health department said on its Facebook page that the student started exhibiting symptoms Thursday, the day of the state tournament games.
People who sat in the Cedar Catholic and Crofton fan sections at those games may have been exposed to him, officials said.
He stayed with relatives in Lincoln, according to a news release from Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird's office.
They are under self-quarantine and have not exhibited any symptoms of the disease.
The student did not stay at a hotel or eat in any restaurants while in Lincoln, Gaylor Baird said.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Nebraska coronavirus cases rise to 10; Crofton student in serious condition

Five more cases of the coronavirus disease were reported in Nebraska Wednesday evening, bringing to 10 the total number in the state.
Of those 10 cases, one is a teenager. The 16-year-old boy is from Crofton, Nebraska, and authorities aren’t certain how he contracted COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.
The five new cases are close family members of a Douglas County woman who was found to have the disease on Tuesday. The woman, who is in her 40s, recently traveled to California and Nevada. The five live in Douglas County, and family members are self-isolating at home, according to state officials.

“These cases stem from family contact and are not considered community spread,” said Dr. Gary Anthone, chief medical officer and director of Public Health for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
So far, health officials have not determined that community spread is occurring in Nebraska.
They have launched a search to determine how the Crofton High School student contracted the illness and find the people who may have had contact with him.
The student hadn’t traveled recently
and isn’t believed to have visited the Fremont YMCA where an Omaha woman with the coronavirus disease played in a Special Olympics tournament on Feb. 29, according to Roger Wiese, the executive director of the North Central District Health Department.
But the boy did attend two games at the girls state basketball tournament in Lincoln last week before his diagnosis was known.
That prompted the preemptive closure of several schools whose teams played in those games and influenced the decision to block all but players, coaches and family members from attending the boys state basketball tournament that starts Thursday.
The teen was in serious condition Wednesday in the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit on the University of Nebraska Medical Center campus.
The student is believed to have attended two games during the high school girls state basketball tournament on March 5, according to a letter posted on the Crofton Community Schools website.
The games were the Hartington Cedar Catholic vs. Weeping Water game at 9 a.m. at Lincoln Southwest High and the Crofton vs. Bancroft-Rosalie/Lyons-Decatur Northeast game at 7 p.m. hosted at Lincoln North Star High.
Community members and onlookers may have been exposed to the virus in the Hartington Cedar Catholic and Crofton fan sections. The student is also believed to have stepped onto the basketball court after the 9 a.m. game to hug family members.
The school district said possible exposure may have also occurred at Crofton Elementary School, among fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students and staff who attended school on March 10, and St. Rose of Lima middle schoolers.
The two Lincoln high schools where the games were held did not hold classes on March 5, and all Lincoln public schools are on spring break this week.
Crofton Community Schools closed for the rest of the week as a result. More closures soon followed: St. Rose of Lima in Crofton, Hartington-Newcastle Public Schools, Hartington Cedar Catholic School, West Catholic Elementary, East Catholic Elementary and Holy Trinity Catholic School in Hartington all canceled classes.
Bancroft-Rosalie Community Schools dismissed students at noon Wednesday and said school would be closed for the rest of the week. Students were sent home with iPads and computers so they could finish homework.
Spring break starts Thursday for Lyons-Decatur Northeast schools, while the Weeping Water school district said classes would continue without a concrete recommendation to close from the local health department.
The Nebraska School Activities Association announced Wednesday that the general public will not be allowed to attend the boys state basketball tournament. Only family members will be permitted to cheer for their players in person.
Public health officials are gathering more information about the Crofton case and who may have been exposed to the coronavirus. The decision on whether to keep schools closed or reopen will be reviewed on Friday, the school district said.
Anyone who came into close contact will be asked to self-quarantine and be monitored twice a day for fever and respiratory symptoms.
The boy, who has a history of health problems, began experiencing symptoms — a fever, cough and headache — on March 5, Wiese said.
The North Central District Health Department is reaching out to roughly 40 people who may have had direct contact with the student and may be at greater risk of exposure than those who were simply in attendance at the same basketball game.
The Lincoln relatives the student stayed with during the girls basketball tournament are currently self-quarantined and show no symptoms of the disease. The student arrived in Lincoln on March 4 and left the morning of March 6. He did not patronize any local restaurants.
Wiese continued to preach the power of precaution and good hygiene: Vigorously wash hands, stay home if you’re

feeling ill and call your primary care provider first if you think you're experiencing any possible coronavirus symptoms — let them prepare before showing up unannounced at the doctor's office or emergency room.
"If you're feeling the least bit ill you need to stay home and isolate yourself from others," Wiese said.
In tracing the path of one of Douglas County's cases, health officials said Wednesday that members of the public may be at low risk of exposure if they visited the Advance Auto Parts store at 17140 Evans Plaza on March 2 from noon to 9 p.m., March 3 from 1 to 9 p.m. or March 5 from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m.
Anyone who may have been at the auto store then is asked to watch for a fever, cough or trouble breathing for a 14-day period following their visit.
The first three confirmed cases in Nebraska of COVID-19 are a 36-year-old Omaha woman who had traveled to England, her father and her brother. The woman remains in critical condition in the biocontainment unit.
The state's coronavirus numbers don't include people brought back from a stricken cruise ship. Seven remain in Omaha.
An American from the Diamond Princess cruise ship who had been in treatment in the biocontainment unit was transferred Tuesday evening to the hotel-like National Quarantine Unit.
The six other Americans from the cruise ship and a local health care worker are still under observation in the quarantine unit.
Iowa health officials on Wednesday reported an additional case of COVID-19, bringing that state's total to 14, most of whom were on the same Egyptian cruise. A Council Bluffs woman was confirmed as Pottawattamie County's first case Monday. She had traveled to California.
By Erin Duffy

KNEB: NDVA Launching 'Virtual Visits' to Keep Veterans' Home Members and Families Connected

MARCH 11 (NEB.) — The Nebraska Department of Veterans' Affairs (NDVA) is launching a virtual visitor system to keep veterans' home members and their families connected while the facilities are limiting entry. Access to the four state veterans' homes is currently limited to NDVA teammates and medical professionals only as a precaution against coronavirus (COVID-19) exposure.
"Protecting our members' health and safety is our top priority," said NDVA Director John Hilgert. "However, we also want to protect the bond they have with their loved ones and ensure they can remain connected. Through our virtual visitor system, we're striking a balance between the two."
Members will have access to computers, tablets, and other devices loaded with video messaging software, such as Skype and FaceTime. Teammates will be available to assist members and their families in connecting.
There have not been any cases of COVID-19 at the state veterans' homes. The agency has a task force in place that is monitoring the situation, following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, and coordinating prevention efforts throughout the agency's facilities.

OWH: Empty stands, hotel rooms, restaurants: the economic toll of coronavirus in Nebraska

The empty stands for the boys state high school basketball tournament means fans won't be spending some $3 million in Lincoln hotels, restaurants, bars and stores.
Similarly, another estimated $5 million in tourism business will be lost in Omaha the next weekend when the NCAA's March Madness basketball games are held in a cavernous, empty arena.
Wednesday's decision to keep fans out of both events offered proof that the long-feared economic impacts of the new coronavirus disease are now being felt in Omaha and across the country. And by all appearances, this may only be the beginning.
"It's a wakeup call to our lodging and hospitality partners," said Jeff Maul of the Lincoln Convention and Visitors Bureau. "There's no doubt in my mind that this will be the first of many events that have the potential to be canceled in Omaha and Lincoln and communities across our state."
Indeed, just minutes after Maul spoke those words in reference to the Nebraska high school tournament decision, the NCAA made its March Madness announcement.
Yet to be decided are several high-profile events that would pack a huge economic impact for Omaha: the

Berkshire Hathaway annual meeting in May and the U.S. Olympic Swim Trials and College World Series in June. Past economic studies have put the impact of the CWS and swim trials each at about $75 million.

Overall, economists say it's too early to tell how deep the COVID-19 toll will be on the broader U.S. and local economies. Right now, no one knows where this is headed.

So far, the entertainment and travel industries have seen the most direct and immediate impact. But if spread of the disease leads to widespread office closures and business suspension across major industries, there's clearly potential for a recession, Creighton University economist Ernie Goss said Wednesday.

"It looks like (coronavirus) is still on the upsurge in the United States," Goss said. "Everyone is grappling and searching for some kind of indication of just how large this is."

Initial economic impacts have been relatively small — but meaningful for those directly affected.

Thursday through Saturday, Lincoln's Haymarket and downtown figured to be buzzing with basketball fans in town for the high school tournament.

But not this year. The Nebraska School Activities Association on Wednesday accepted the recommendation of health officials and decided to play this year's tournament without fans in the stands. That came after it was learned that a boy from Crofton, Nebraska, who attended the girls tournament last weekend has now tested positive for COVID-19.

A University of Nebraska-Lincoln study in 2010 found the boys' state tournament attracted $2.5 million in spending to Lincoln and generated $3.2 million in total economic impact. Adjusted for inflation, those figures today would be nearly $3 million in spending and $3.8 million total economic punch.

Not all of that impact will be lost, as the players and coaches, their family members and other essential staff will still be coming to Lincoln, and the NSAA will still spend money putting on the games, said UNL economist Eric Thompson, who authored the 2010 study. But fan spending accounts for the lion's share of the event's impact, he found.

Not only do fans from across the state who come in for the tournament spend money at Lincoln hotels, restaurants and bars, they also venture to malls and retail stores not available in their small towns.

"Of course, this will have economic impact," said Wendy Birdsall, president of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, said of the decision to limit attendance. "But it's the right thing to do. It's the only thing to do. Keeping the public safe and healthy has far greater importance than the bottom line you can put on these events."

She, too, said this could be only the beginning of the disruptions business and the public will see from COVID-19.

"We think that's probably the start of things to come," she said. "What a crazy time we are living in."

The NCAA tournament's opening weekend games scheduled in Omaha for March 19-22 will be the fifth time since 2008 that Omaha has hosted games in college basketball's "Big Dance."

But NCAA President Mark Emmert announced Wednesday that all men's and women's tournament games will now be played without fans.

"While I understand how disappointing this is for fans of our sports, my decision is based on the current understanding of how COVID-19 is progressing in the United States," Emmert said. "This decision is in the best interest of public health, including that of coaches, administrators, fans and most importantly, our student-athletes."

The best estimate of the Omaha Convention and Visitors Bureau is that Wednesday's decision represents a $5 million hit for the Omaha economy, said Deb Ward, the bureau's vice president for marketing and communications.

The last time Omaha hosted tournament games, 81% of hotel rooms in the city were filled. "That is certainly not going to be the case now," she said.

While the number of out-of-town visitors typically depends on which teams get assigned to the Omaha tournament site, most projections have had the No. 1-ranked Kansas Jayhawks coming right up Interstate 29 to Omaha.

"Kansas fans travel," Ward said.

The only bright side, she said, is that there will still be an estimated 1,500 people coming to Omaha for the games, including the teams and their family members, NCAA officials and the media members covering the games.

Creighton athletic director Bruce Rasmussen said as soon as he heard the news, he began thinking about all the Omahans behind the scenes who've devoted time to preparing for this event and those who would have relied on

revenue generated from fans.
That said, he's certain the NCAA's leadership, relying on advice from its panel of doctors and infectious disease experts, did its due diligence.
"I have a lot of trust in the panel that the NCAA put together, and I trust that they made the decision with the right perspective," Rasmussen said. "But you think about all the people this impacts — about ticket-takers, ushers, security, airlines, hotels, restaurants."
The Omaha and Lincoln basketball tournaments are among the most high-profile events that are being called off in Nebraska due to COVID-19. Quietly, though, other meetings and events here in Omaha have been canceled, too.
Ward said she knows of at least seven other meeting groups that have either canceled or postponed plans to come to Omaha. They amounted to about $100,000 in hotel business. There likely have been others, she said.
However, she said, most of those making advanced bookings have maintained their plans. A group of 1,300 people is meeting in Omaha right now, she said. And hotel bookings are still coming in for the swim trials.
At this point, decisions on those trials, as well as the CWS and the Berkshire meeting haven't come yet. Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert said Wednesday that Warren Buffett told her that Berkshire would make a final decision about a month before the May 2 meeting.
"We remain hopeful," Ward said.
Goss said the travel and hospitality industries, in particular cruise lines and airlines, are clearly on the vanguard of U.S. economic impacts of COVID-19.
"We are talking about the tourism industry being hammered by the potential for coronavirus expansion," he said.
Goss himself was scheduled to be at an international trade conference in Omaha on Thursday that's been canceled.
On the broader economy, Goss conducts a monthly survey of manufacturing supply managers in nine Midwest states, looking at their purchasing activity as an economic indicator. At this point, few have reported severe enough disruptions in their supply chains to produce real negative economic impact on their operations. Some said they were considering coronavirus a short-term issue.
But Goss said the uncertainty that COVID-19 is creating can clearly be seen in the stock market's wide swings and the current yields on U.S. treasury bonds. Essentially, when you take into account inflation, people right now are willing to buy U.S. treasuries at a loss rather than risk their money in the stock market.
"I don't want to call it panic," Goss said. "It's almost panic."
There may be steps that leaders in Washington can take to try to stimulate the economy and keep the nation from falling into recession, such as interest rate or tax rate cuts. There was much talk of an aid package on Wednesday.
But Goss said the best thing the country can do right now was reflected by Wednesday's moves that impacted basketball fans here: get COVID-19 under control.
"We need a vaccine," Goss said, "not a rate cut."
By Henry J. Cordes

OWH: Sick, quarantined teachers should get paid medical leave, education groups say

Teachers can be notorious for toughing out coughs and colds and heading to work sick.
But with coronavirus on the prowl, they should be encouraged to stay home, a trio of state education groups said Wednesday.
Some teacher contracts are written in a way that encourages teachers to save sick time. To that end, the groups said, local Nebraska school boards should amend contracts to ensure paid medical leave for teachers sickened by or quarantined because of coronavirus.
"The purpose of this is to get people to take their sick leave," said Maddie Fennell, executive director of the Nebraska Education Association. "We have people who are concerned about running out of sick leave and what happens if I'm not sick but I've been quarantined. Am I covered or not?"
She noted that a number of Nebraska teachers and coaches are self-quarantined after attending a Fremont Special Olympics event, where a participant would later be diagnosed with COVID-19.
The NEA, Nebraska Association of School Boards and Nebraska Council of School Administrators are asking local school boards and education associations to approve an addendum to their negotiated agreements that would

provide for paid sick leave through the end of this school year.
The contracts should be amended to strongly encourage employees who experience symptoms of a virus infection to stay home so as not to expose others to COVID-19 or any other contagious or infectious disease.
Paid medical leave should be granted until an employee is able to resume their duties without exposing others to the disease.
The contracts also should hold employees accountable for using the leave appropriately, the groups said.
Sick leave amounts and how employees can accumulate it typically varies among districts, Fennell said.
“We incentivize people not using it because we have so few subs right now,” she said, “so teachers don’t use it, and then when you retire you get paid part of your sick leave. So we really try to get people not to be sick and not to use sick leave. Except in this case we really need them to use their sick leave, because otherwise they’re going to reinfect.”
Nebraska already has a state law, passed in 1919 immediately after the Spanish flu epidemic, that requires teachers to be paid their full salaries if schools are shut down due to an epidemic.
By Joe Dejka

NTV: Nebraska to receive over $6.5 million to respond to COVID-19

Over $560 million will be awarded to states, localities, territories and tribes to provide resources in response to the COVID-19 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced that Nebraska will be receiving over $6.5 million.
The awarded money is provided from the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act.
The act provides $8.3 billion government-wide, with resources directed for grants or cooperative agreements to states, localities, territories and tribes for preparation and response to the COVID-19.
Officials say the act will fund experts to develop tools and strategies, provide technical assistance and program support, as well as ensure ongoing communication and coordination among public health agencies and partners throughout the response.
"State and local health departments are on the frontlines of responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, and we are deeply grateful for their work," said HHS Secretary Alex Azar. "CDC is distributing this new funding extremely rapidly, as called for by Congress. President Trump, and his entire administration will continue working to ensure state and local jurisdictions have the resources they need to keep Americans safe and healthy."
"Our state, local, tribal and territorial public health partners are on the front lines of the COVID-19 response. The action we are taking today will continue to support their efforts to increase public health capacity where it's needed most," said CDC Director Robert R. Redfield, M.D. "These funds will allow public health leaders to implement critical steps necessary to contain and mitigate spread of the virus in communities across the country."
To view the list of CDC funding actions to jurisdictions, click here
For more information about this virus, please visit CDC's website: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html

LJS: Judiciary chairman forces discussion on prison crisis

The Nebraska Legislature has lost focus on the crowding and staffing crisis at the Department of Correctional Services, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee said Wednesday.
To bring back that attention, Omaha Sen. Steve Lathrop moved to amend an appropriations bill to spend $52 million next year to construct or expand a community custody prison in Omaha to allow 300 new beds. The expansion of beds was recommended in a Department of Correctional Services 2014 master plan report.
The amendment failed on a 14-13 vote, but Lathrop was able to get senators talking about prisons again for about an hour and a half.
He said the investment is modest compared to a proposal by the Department of Corrections. After his bill (LB916) was heard by the Appropriations Committee, the department announced it was going to put out a request for information for a public-private partnership to build a new, approximately 1,600-bed prison, possibly between

Lincoln and Omaha.
Lathrop called it "imaginary," a way to get people to think there's a solution on the horizon. Even if it materialized, he said it's four to five years down the road. And in the meantime, the prisons are projected to grow by 200 inmates a year, he said.
"They're not appropriating any money," Lathrop said.
If the new prison is built and the state leases it, it will be borrowing money, he said. And then it will pay about $70 million a year to lease, staff and operate it.
"And by the way, we can't staff the places that we have right now," Lathrop said. "Colleagues, this is not the solution. ... I would submit that if it were a serious request that we'd have a request for proposal and not a request for information."
As of this week, the prisons had 5,572 inmates, 5,669 including those housed in county jails. That is about 160% of design capacity. At those numbers, in order to reach 140% design capacity, the population would have to be reduced by 720, and to reduce it to 125% by 1,250.
Community custody beds are more practical, he said, because people in that lower custody level transition to the community more successfully. It also could be used to bring back parole violators who could maintain their employment or continue an apprenticeship program or education.
Sen. Curt Friesen of Henderson asked whether the Department of Corrections would even spend the money for community corrections beds if the Legislature approved it.
Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair said he feels Lathrop's proposal isn't the right approach.
"There is a role we can play in Corrections," he said.
But he would like to see more leadership, a more prompt plan from the administration to address the corrections problem. A new facility that is adequate to house the current overflow and expected influx in the future is the better approach.
"But I think it's something that does need to happen sooner than later," Hansen said. "I think it would be appropriate to start getting some plans put together from the administration to make sure that we can address this problem."
Sen. Robert Clements, who is a member of the Appropriations Committee, said he doesn't approve of working against the administration on the prisons issue, but doesn't see the 1,600-bed proposal from Corrections as the best one either.
Lincoln Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks said the prisons need programming and sentencing reform.
A sentencing reform bill (LB131) debate was started in mid-February that Lathrop and Appropriations Chairman John Stinner said could be as consequential as any property tax or business tax incentives bill because of the big money that could be required as prison overcrowding continues.
But the debate was cut short — didn't even get its three hours — and never returned to the agenda.
Pansing Brooks introduced the bill that would require that a minimum sentence for certain class felonies be no more than half the years as the maximum number sentenced. For example, if the maximum sentence is 20 years, the minimum could be no more than 10 years.
The change would have the practical effect of allowing offenders to become parole-eligible sooner, while alleviating the overcrowding crisis in Nebraska prisons, Pansing Brooks said.
"We have been in avoidance mode," she said. "This pattern of avoidance is just our greatest downfall."
By JoAnne Young

OWH: Nebraska state senator files motion to pull abortion bill out of committee so it can be debated

Abortion bill
The lawmaker who introduced a bill to ban a common second-trimester abortion method filed a motion Wednesday to pull the measure out of committee.
State Sen. Suzanne Geist of Lincoln filed the motion to get Legislative Bill 814 out of the Judiciary Committee and before the full Legislature for debate. She said she doesn't expect the controversial measure would emerge from committee otherwise.
"I filed it so that it could be heard," she said.

LB 814 would ban an abortion procedure used from week 13 through week 24 of a woman's pregnancy. The procedure, which involves dilating a woman's cervix and removing the fetus in pieces, is known medically as dilation and evacuation. Opponents call it dismemberment abortion.
Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha, the Judiciary Committee chairman, said there are not five votes to either advance or kill the bill. He said he generally opposes so-called pull motions because he doesn't believe they respect the committee process.
A pull motion would require 25 votes to succeed. Geist has 25 co-sponsors on LB 814.
Supporters of the proposed ban say the abortion method targeted is "gruesome," "barbaric," "inhumane" and "immoral." Abortion rights supporters said it could endanger women and would be an unconstitutional violation of a woman's right to abortion.
Sick senators
Two state senators are battling illnesses as the coronavirus outbreak continues to be a concern at the Nebraska Legislature. Norfolk Sen. Jim Scheer, the Speaker of the Legislature, said Wednesday that while there's scuttlebutt about pausing the session for a few weeks, that hasn't been decided.
State Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue was in the hospital Wednesday, according to her office, suffering from a hard-hitting flu, not the coronavirus. Her office said Blood expects to be back at the Capitol next week.
Meanwhile, Gordon Sen. Tom Brewer has been diagnosed with pneumonia, which might have grown from a long-running ear infection, according to a legislative staffer. Brewer, a decorated military veteran who was twice wounded while serving in Afghanistan, may have to be tested for coronavirus before returning. The staffer quoted Brewer as assuring people that he was "invincible."
By Martha Stoddard

LJS: Nebraska supporters of LGBTQ nondiscrimination bill say time is now to pass it

About 100 people rallied at the state Capitol on Wednesday evening to stop LGBTQ workplace discrimination and to support a bill prioritized by Lincoln Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks.
Her bill (LB627) would add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of prohibited reasons for discrimination in employment, public accommodation and housing. The bill was debated in 2019 and passed over after failing to reach a vote after three hours.
Pansing Brooks has reprioritized LB627 so that it will return for debate this session.
With endorsements from the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and other local chambers, and a majority of senators who will vote for it, there was too much momentum to let it die, Pansing Brooks said.
Several people spoke at the rally in the Rotunda, including Pansing Brooks, Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt and Kayla Meyer, coordinator of the Lincoln Young Professionals group and representing the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce.
Pansing Brooks told those gathered they should feel loved and not be diminished by the opinions of others.
"It is not up to others to judge love," she said.
As a mom, she understands liberation and being able to come out as the person each one is authentically, she said.
That authenticity gives people strength and courage to move forward and to stand up, recognize they are loved and feel the embrace of those around them.
What worries her most in this country, she said, are those that use religious liberty and protections as a sword toward people who don't agree with them, rather than as a shield.
Hunt, who identifies as bisexual, asked how it is that she is good enough to make laws that affect everyone in the state, but not good enough to be out about whom she loves.
She asked those assembled to keep spreading the word about what is needed in Nebraska for full equality, in the workplace, housing, access to services, parental rights, all things that need to improve.
"People do not want to live in a state with legalized discrimination," she said. "This is the first step. This is called the bare minimum, and this is what I expect of my colleagues."
Meyer said fairness and equal treatment are essential for a welcoming economy and are the basis of anti-discrimination laws.
Work and merit should serve as the basis of reward, not factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, she said.

"Business thrives when we have the best talent available in Nebraska," Meyer said.
Abbi Swatsworth, executive director of OutNebraska, which sponsored the rally, has lived in Nebraska more than 30 years.
"Now is the time to pass LB627," she said. "Retaining and attracting young talented workers is a top priority in keeping Nebraska's business ecosystem growing and thriving."
The Rev. Oscar Sinclair, of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, said LB627 is not complicated or a particularly long bill. But there is a moral reason to pass the bill now.
Each person has inherent worth and dignity, he said, and this is not a negotiable position. It's one that faiths around the world share. All life is interconnected, and somehow all tied together.
"For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be," he said. "And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."
By JoAnne Young

OWH: State Fair board calls in investigators after 'suspicious activity' found during review

LINCOLN — The State Fair Board has called in the Nebraska State Patrol and Attorney General's Office after "suspicious activity" was discovered during an internal review of the fair's finances.
Beth Smith, who chairs the State Fair Board, said Wednesday that a forensic investigation firm has also been hired to look into the fair's banking and financial transactions.
"This is going to take a bit of time," Smith said. "We will release more information to the public when the investigation is completed."
After two fairs in a row lost money, the operation was forced to lay off several workers, take out a $1.1 million line of credit and revamp its operations.
The fair's financial director described the situation as "the verge of bankruptcy" in November and criticized the decisions of the fair's executive director, Lori Cox. But last month, Cox said the operation is on the rebound.
Smith said Wednesday that the fair board still "feels positive" about the future and "new safeguards" that have been implemented.
She added that the investigation will have no negative impact on preparations for the 2020 Nebraska State Fair.
By Paul Hammel

OWH: Defense chief won't replace Offutt's aged Open Skies recon planes until fate of treaty is decided

The maintenance team at Offutt Air Force Base's 55th Wing is going to have to keep its ancient, trouble-prone OC-135 photo reconnaissance planes flying at least a few more years.
Defense Secretary Mark Esper told the Senate Armed Services Committee last week that he won't spend money appropriated by Congress last year to buy a replacement jet for the missions, which are mandated by the 1992 Open Skies treaty, because of political uncertainty over the treaty's future. Those two jets, both based at Offutt and flown by Offutt crews, were built in 1961 and have a checkered maintenance history.
He said he toured one of the planes during his visit to Offutt last month and talked with some of the crew members.
Congress has appropriated at least $41.5 million toward replacing the jets in its 2020 budget. About $250 million is needed. A bidding process was to be started in April, and a contract awarded in September, according to Trump administration budget justification documents. The planes were expected to be delivered beginning in 2024.
But Esper appears poised to halt the purchase in light of recent efforts by a faction of conservative Republicans to pull the U.S. out of the treaty.
"Until we make a decision about the path forward, I'm not prepared to recapitalize aircraft," Esper said at the committee hearing March 4, adding that the U.S. and its NATO allies "need to speak out more clearly about Russian noncompliance."
There's little doubt new planes are needed. The OC-135Bs were built by Boeing at the dawn of the jet age. The four-engine aircraft are based on the same airframe as the Boeing 707 civilian airliner, the company's first jet, which was last flown by U.S. airlines in 1983.

The Trump administration's budget justification document states that the OC-135Bs have experienced "decreasing mission reliability due to age, difficulties with out-of-production parts, and increased operating costs." The document said the planes have completed just 65% of their missions between 2007 and 2017, driven by failures in their engines, fuel system, landing gear, generators and airframe.

"By not recapitalizing the Open Skies aircraft, we are adding risk to our aircrews," said Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., a retired Air Force brigadier general who formerly commanded the 55th Wing, including the OC-135s. "The current aircraft are old, have bad maintenance rates and are prone to breakdown in Russia, putting our crews in bad situations where they are harassed by Russian authorities."

The Open Skies treaty allows the 34 member nations — including the United States, Canada, Russia and most European countries — the right to conduct supervised aerial photography flights over one another's territory, using expensive cameras, known as sensors, with capabilities strictly regulated by the treaty.

The treaty enjoyed bipartisan support until several years ago, when a hard-line faction of Republicans, including former National Security Adviser John Bolton and Sens. Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Ted Cruz of Texas, began working to scuttle the treaty. They have alleged that Russia is leveraging it to gain an unfair advantage over the United States.

"The Open Skies Treaty no longer serves to reduce tensions or build trust, if it ever did. Instead it gives Russia a spying capability it wouldn't otherwise possess, which jeopardizes U.S. security," Cotton said in a Washington Post op-ed published in December.

Cotton and other critics have cited restrictions of flights along the border of several conflict zones within the neighboring Republic of Georgia where pro-Russian breakaway governments have declared independence. There are also restrictions on the length of flights over Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea that is packed with military sites.

The treaty's defenders, though, say it is still quite valuable, especially to our allies, by letting them keep an eye on each other. It also keeps NATO militaries working together, since most U.S. missions are flown in partnership with other countries.

"The Open Skies Treaty is a cornerstone of European security and stability. Crucially, it allows even small countries to get information on military activities around them," said Rep. Emanuel Cleaver II, D-Mo., at a House Armed Services Committee hearing last October. "The violations should be dealt with by diplomatic means, not used as a case for hasty withdrawal."

Last fall, the National Security Council reportedly drafted a letter directing the U.S. to begin efforts to withdraw from the treaty. Bacon and Rep. Jeff Fortenberry co-sponsored legislation — later included in the Defense authorization bill — that would place procedural hurdles in the way of withdrawal and require notice to Congress.

"I think we needed to let the White House know, 'Hey, we're going to stand up and defend this,'" Bacon said in October.

Nebraska Sen. Deb Fischer said in a statement that she continues to support the new aircraft, but she deferred to the Trump administration on whether the U.S. should stick with the treaty.

"I have advocated for the recapitalization of the OC-135B," she said. "Should the administration elect to remain in the treaty, I will continue to do so."

In his Washington Post op-ed, Cotton conceded that the old planes are in bad shape. But he sees no value in replacing them.

"Modernizing these aircraft would cost nearly a quarter-billion dollars," Cotton said. "The money would be better spent on tools that increase the combat effectiveness and survivability of U.S. troops."

By Steve Liewer

OWH Editorial: Legislature, end the stalemate

Nebraska state senators are sent to Lincoln to be problem-solvers. But the Legislature has failed that duty by stalemating — session after session — over how to achieve property tax relief and provide a major increase in school funding. That failure needs to stop this session.

It needs to stop next week, in fact, by approving the sensible compromise legislation that will enable Nebraska to finally move forward on property tax relief and school aid policy.

Nebraska school districts play a key role in this debate. Legislative negotiators this week reached reasonable compromise on several major points of concern raised by school officials. That is welcome flexibility on an issue that's long generated heated disagreement.

Now, school districts need to reciprocate by demonstrating similar flexibility, looking to Nebraska's statewide interest. All parties need to give a bit in order for this to work. After all, as part of this package the state will be significantly increasing its aid to schools. The last thing Nebraska needs on this issue is unbending naysaying by lawmakers and school districts.

The key aims of the legislation, after all, are crucial. Nebraskans would receive property tax relief on multiple fronts — residential, agricultural, commercial. And after years of justified complaint, Nebraska would finally begin to move up from the 49th position in state aid to schools.

It will be a horrendous failure by the Legislature if senators continue their needless stalemate at a time when negotiations have produced sensible compromise. Senators need to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Time in this 60-day "short session" is quickly slipping away, and it would be irresponsible for senators to spend these final weeks setting down further roadblocks to agreement.

The Legislature similarly would be shirking an all-important duty if it fails to approve a new version of the state's business incentives law. The current legislation is a major improvement on existing law, which expires at the end of this year, and the bill sponsor, State Sen. Mark Kolterman of Seward, has long been open to responsible compromise.

Senators need to be wide awake to the economic stakes involved. The coronavirus threat has begun to cause tremendous disruptions nationwide, with further uncertainties ahead. Our state and country are facing the serious possibility of a recession. In the face of such conditions, the Legislature would be grossly irresponsible to allow our business incentives policy to expire with no well-crafted replacement.

The Legislature has been mired in deadlock on these issues for far too long. The time has arrived for action. Lawmakers need to do their duty, to serve Nebraska's best interest.

OWH Midlands Voices: Urban League joins with OPS to boost education

The writer is president and CEO of the Urban League of Nebraska.

The year a student transitions between middle school and high school — 8th grade — is described in education circles as a "make or break" year. That's why the Urban League of Nebraska, in partnership with the Hewlett Foundation and the National Urban League, has launched the "Building Public Will" initiative at Monroe Middle and Benson High Schools.

We identified a 150 students, and we are providing support in their Freshmen Academy. The plan is to provide supplemental support and incentives to encourage students to improve their school attendance and academic achievement.

We're firing up parents and local stakeholders to get involved and engaged with the students, and we've committed staff resources and focused our existing educational programs and assets, in partnership with the building administrators, on those students who are transitioning to high school.

The strategy is aligned with the Omaha school district's "Strive for 95" program, which encourages students to attend 95% of the school days or miss fewer than 10 days during the school year. According to the research, this benchmark leads to an 85% graduation rate.

The Urban League has been working very closely with the Omaha school district and the Nebraska Department of Education on the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The tenets of ESSA include reducing chronic absenteeism and improving college readiness and career preparedness.

The Urban League's contribution into the design of the Nebraska's ESSA plan was to ensure that the concept of "equity" was woven into the fabric department's strategic goals. Defined, "equity" means "all students have meaningful access to the educational resources they need at the right moment, at the right level and with the right intensity. Educational equity allows students to discover and explore their passions and make meaningful connections within the context of their postsecondary interests."

The Urban League of Nebraska is a nonprofit, community-based agency that administers programs in education/youth development, employment/career services, and we are a traditional civil rights organization. We

advocate for social justice-related issues and have been engaged in efforts to reform our juvenile justice system and educational institutions, as we endeavor to assist our youth and young adults reach their full potential.
In order to assist our corporate community meet its future demands for labor, we are preparing the next generation's workforce by instilling in them the importance of attendance, punctuality and basic workplace etiquette. In order to grow our economy, we need to tap into the human capital within the underserved segments of our society and cultivate the local talent that is indigenous to our community.
In collaboration with our local school district, we are doing our part to prepare our students for success in school, work and life.
By Thomas Warren Sr.

OWH: Peterson, Ricketts are wrong

Once again Attorney General Doug Peterson and Gov. Pete Ricketts are blaming the Nebraska Racing Commission for their own shortsighted view about legal gambling in the state. Not only would it help Fonner Park, but it also would help our tax shortfall, roads and infrastructure and please the majority of Nebraskans who want to legalize gambling.
Meanwhile, throngs of people continue to cross the river to gamble, taking with them those dollars and revenue to Iowa. Mr. Ricketts and Mr. Peterson, please wake up and remove your head from the sand. You will not stop gambling, and this is 2020, not 1980.
Michael T. Costello, Gibbon, Neb.

LJS Editorial, 3/12: Split off tax reform; salvage business incentive plan

It didn't seem like a great idea back in January, but it didn't seem like a train wreck, either.
It was the preferred option of neither Gov. Pete Ricketts nor the Journal Star editorial board.
But legislative leaders decided the best way to accomplish property tax relief and replace the state's retiring business development and tax incentive program was to join them at the hip.
The idea was to tie together the fates of the big cities, who want their tax incentives to fuel economic growth, and rural areas, who strain under the weight of high property taxes, thereby giving everyone an incentive to play nice in the legislative sandbox.
We are now closing in on train-wreck territory.
Hopes are dimming for a tax compromise. But that's a problem for another day (Sunday, specifically, when the Journal Star editorial board weighs in on that topic).
Right now the clock is running out on a replacement for the Nebraska Advantage Act, which would leave the state by the end of 2020 without a tax incentive plan to draw new businesses and create incentives for growth.
With or without passage of meaningful tax reform, the state will be less equipped to grow its tax base without Imagine Nebraska, the new incentive plan outlined in LB720 and introduced by Sen. Mark Kolterman.
With 21 pending amendments as of Monday, LB720 can't really be considered in its final form. But it's safe to say that it will represent lessons learned from the Nebraska Advantage Act and from efforts at passage of a replacement incentive plan last session.
Incentives scale up with wages for newly created jobs and with investment. Accountability and transparency are addressed. And rural areas get some tax incentive love.
There are good ideas here, and further amendments might build on those. But all this good work will be for naught if lawmakers don't uncouple LB720 from tax reform and do it fast.
True tax reform must be addressed, but it needed to be addressed last session. And the one before that. And the one before that. And the one … well, you get the idea. Without it, though, there's still a mechanism – albeit a flawed one – to continue to collect revenue for the state.
But when the Nebraska Advantage Act is gone, it's gone, along with an effective tool to grow the tax base, which represents the most organic way to ease the overall tax burden.
For the good of the state, lawmakers should uncouple tax reform and business incentives and pass LB720. Pairing them shows no signs of working.

LJS: Questioning nominee's objectivity

The future of medical cannabis in the state of Nebraska has been dealt a blow by the confirmation of former senator and current leader of SAM (Smart Approaches to Marijuana) Nebraska John Kuehn to the State Board of Health.
Kuehn has made way too many negative public statements about a drug and industry he will have a part in regulating. The conflict of interest is too large to ignore.
Gov. Pete Ricketts should have appointed a more neutral person to sit on the board.
Michael Davis, Omaha

LJS: Get guns out of state Capitol

State Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh is right to call for better safety at the Capitol.
When people who are not on-duty police openly carry guns to the Capitol or any public place, that's intimidation. Even if legal, it's wrong.
I want the Nebraska Legislature not only to ban guns from the Capitol grounds but to repeal the state's open-carry law so this never happens again.
Curtis Bryant, Omaha

OWH: Sasse, bipartisan commission say U.S. government, private sector are behind on cybersecurity

WASHINGTON — America needs to get its act together on cybersecurity.
That's the bottom-line warning embodied by a 122-page report released Wednesday by the bipartisan Cyberspace Solarium Commission.
"The United States now operates in a cyber landscape that requires a level of data security, resilience and trustworthiness that neither the U.S. government nor the private sector alone is currently equipped to provide," according to the report.
That lack of preparedness is only growing worse, according to the report, as countries such as China, Russia and North Korea continue to probe U.S. critical infrastructure with impunity.
Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., wrote the legislation that established the commission and also served as one of its members over the past year.
At a Capitol Hill event rolling out the report on Wednesday, Sasse said it was necessary because both the executive and legislative branches are broken.
"The digital revolution is remaking everything about American and global life," Sasse said. "And our institutions in general — but specifically the clunky, slow- moving institutions of government — are not ready for this."
Commission members said the report is intended to be a blueprint for real action and includes about 80 recommendations organized into half a dozen pillars.
Within the pillar of government reform, for example, is a call for creating new congressional committees devoted specifically to cyber issues, establishing a Senate-confirmed position of National Cyber Director and strengthening the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.
Other general pillars include promoting national resilience in the face of attacks, improving collaboration with the private sector and preserving military options to deter attacks.
The report highlights what's at stake when it comes to cyberattacks.
"A major cyberattack on the nation's critical infrastructure and economic system would create chaos and lasting damage exceeding that wreaked by the fires in California, floods in the Midwest and hurricanes in the Southeast," according to the report.
In an interview, Sasse described the report as an "opening bid" and a way to define areas that need work rather than the final word on the subject.
Some of its discussion about election security, for example, is more focused on looking back at Russian interference in the 2016 contest than planning for future attacks by adversaries such as China, Sasse said.

And he suggested that some of the recommendations should be more aggressive, such as its call for congressional committees specifically dealing with cybersecurity.
Creating those committees is fine, Sasse said, but a wholesale reorganization of the congressional committee apparatus is really what's needed.
"The committee structure of Congress does not work on cyber and so we need to reform that," Sasse said. "And there are a whole bunch of career, permanent politicians here who don't want their committee assignments to lose any jurisdiction."
Sasse said he expects to see congressional movement on some of the report's recommendations yet this year. Specifically, Sasse said he expects to join Sen. Angus King, a Maine independent, in introducing a dozen proposals as part of the upcoming annual defense bill process.
By Joseph Morton

AP/CNN: Trump suspends travel from Europe, outlines virus response plan

President Donald Trump said Wednesday he is suspending all travel between the U.S. and Europe for 30 days beginning Friday as he seeks to combat a viral pandemic.
Trump made the announcement in an Oval Office address to the nation, blaming the European Union for not acting quickly enough to address the "foreign virus" and saying U.S. clusters were "seeded" by European travelers.
"We made a lifesaving move with early action on China," Trump said. "Now we must take the same action with Europe."
Trump said the restrictions won't apply to the United Kingdom and the U.S. would monitor the situation to determine if travel could be reopened earlier.
Trump said he was also directing agencies to provide unspecified financial relief for "for workers who are ill, quarantined or caring for others due to coronavirus," and asked Congress to take action to extend it.
Trump said the U.S. will will defer tax payments for some individual and business filers for three months to lessen the impacts of the virus outbreak. He said the Small Business Administration will also make low-interest loans available to businesses to help them weather the storm.
"This is not a financial crisis," he said. "This just a temporary moment of time that we will overcome together as a nation and as a world."
Trump also reiterated his call on Congress to pass a cut to the federal payroll tax in order to stimulate the economy.
Trump said "we are marshaling the full power" of the government and private sector to protect the American people.
Congress, for its part, unveiled a multibillion-dollar aid package that was expected to be voted on by the House as soon as Thursday.
The mounting effort to contain the virus and financial fallout intensified on a grueling day: Communities canceled public events nationwide, universities moved to cancel in-person classes, and families grappled with the impact of disruptions to public schools. The number of confirmed cases of the infection topped 1,000 in the U.S. and the World Health Organization declared the global crisis is now a pandemic.
"I can say we will see more cases, and things will get worse than they are right now," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, said in testimony before the House Oversight and Reform Committee. He said the virus is "10 times more lethal than the seasonal flu."
In a week of mixed messages and false starts, Washington suddenly seemed poised to act.
"Now we're hitting a patch and we're going to have to do something with respect to getting rid of this virus as quickly as possible and as safely as possible," Trump said.
"As you know, we have another part of the world, Europe, that is in very tough shape, having a hard time right now with the virus," Trump said during a meeting with bankers to discuss how the financial services industry can help consumers and small businesses affected by the outbreak.
On Capitol Hill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi unveiled an economic assistance plan that was gaining bipartisan backing. Central to the package is free coronavirus testing nationwide and emergency funding to reimburse lost paychecks for those self-quarantining, missing work or losing jobs amid the outbreak.

The draft legislation would create a new federal emergency sick leave benefit for people with the virus or caring for a coronavirus victim. It would provide two-thirds of an employee's monthly income for up to three months.
To that end, the administration floated several other strategies, including the rare idea of declaring a national disaster that could potentially unlock funding streams, according to a person unauthorized to discuss the planning and granted anonymity.
A major disaster declaration provides additional authorities for federal agencies, including the military, to assist in responding to an emergency, including medical care, sheltering and distributing goods.
The White House was expected to delay the April 15 federal tax filing deadline for some taxpayers in a bid to soften the impact of the virus outbreak on the U.S. economy.
For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.
The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.
Congress' attending physician told staff there could be 70 million to 100 million coronavirus cases in the U.S. That's on par with other estimates. A Harvard official has estimated that 20% to 60% of adults will get the virus, noting it's "a pretty wide range."

AP: Canadian firm starts US prep work for Keystone XL pipeline

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — A Canadian company said Wednesday it has started preliminary work along the route of the proposed Keystone XL oil sands pipeline through the U.S. in anticipation of starting construction next month, as opponents await a judge's ruling on their request to block any work.
TC Energy spokeswoman Sara Rabern said the Calgary-based company was moving equipment this week and will begin mowing and felling trees in areas along the pipeline's 1,200-mile (1,930-kilometer) route within the next week or so.
The work is planned in Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska, Rabern said. She did not provide further location details.
In April the company plans to begin construction at the line's border crossing in northern Montana. That would be a huge milestone for a project first proposed in 2008 that has since attracted bitter opposition from climate activists who say fossil fuel usage must be curbed to combat global warming.
The company also plans work next month on employee camps in Fallon County, Montana and Haakon County, South Dakota.
Environmental groups in January asked U.S. District Judge Brian Morris to block any work. They said clearing and tree felling along the route would destroy bird and wildlife habitat. The judge in December had denied a request from environmentalists to block construction because no work was immediately planned.
The request by environmentalists came days after the Trump administration approved a right-of-way allowing the $8 billion line to be built across federal land.
“It is irresponsible for TC Energy to jump the gun before Judge Morris rules on our motion," Stephan Volker, an attorney for the Indigenous Environmental Network and North Coast Rivers Alliance, said Wednesday.
Keystone XL was rejected twice under former President Barack Obama over worries it could make climate change worse.
The pipeline would transport up to 830,000 barrels (35 million gallons) of crude oil daily from western Canada to terminals on the U.S. Gulf Coast.
President Donald Trump has been a strong proponent. The Republican issued a special permit for the pipeline last year after Morris had blocked the project in November 2018, citing potential spills and other environmental concerns.
A legal challenge to Trump's permit is pending before Morris.
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. Critics say a damaging spill from Keystone XL is inevitable given the length of

the line and the many rivers and other waterways it would cross beneath.
By Matthew Brown

Ryan Kopsa

Office of Governor Pete Ricketts
Office 402-471-1966
ryan.kopsa@nebraska.gov
governor.nebraska.gov | **Facebook** | **Twitter**