

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Wednesday marked the first day of the 90-day session of the 102nd Nebraska Legislature. It also marked the beginning of a new four-year term for 44th District Senator Mark Christensen of Imperial.



Christensen won re-election to the seat, defeating former state senator Tom Baker of Trenton in the November election.

Prior to heading to Lincoln this week, Christensen shared his outlook for the upcoming session.

The first 10 days of the new session will include reorganization of the body's leadership, assignment of committees and introduction of bills.

Rather than seek a committee chairmanship, Christensen said he will continue to concentrate on the three committees he served on the last two years—Executive, Judiciary, and Banking, Commerce and Insurance.

State's Budget Woes

Perhaps the biggest issues facing the legislators will be how to tackle the state's estimated deficit of nearly \$700 million for the two-year budget.

Christensen said it's a good thing Nebraska's state's budget must be in balance, along with a 3 percent cash reserve. Without that, he said Nebraska could well be facing a much bigger crisis, like other states in the country.

The real question coming into the session, Christensen said, centers on whether his colleagues are ready for the hard work and choices it will take to make the cuts necessary.

He said he's ready and wants to start by going through every department in state government to see where cuts can be made.

He's also proposing cutting the senator's library and the legislative research office. However, he said he's getting significant push-back on cutting legislative research.

### Castle Doctrine Bill

Christensen said this week he plans to introduce between 16-20 bills during the 10-day bill introduction period.

Among his top priorities will be legislation to get the Castle Doctrine adopted in Nebraska.

The Castle Doctrine gets its name from the basis that a person's home is their "castle." As such, one has the right to protection from illegal trespassing and violent attack.

Castle laws give people the legal right to use deadly force to defend their “castle” and other people in the home from violent attack or an intrusion which may lead to violent attack.

After the bill got killed last year, Christensen has made changes to the bill’s language to gather more support.

He said the proposed language will allow shooting an intruder in the back while still in the home but not when they have fled the home and are running off the property.

If an intruder is shot, the bill will exempt the person defending their “castle” from any civil liability to the intruder, his family or anyone acting on the intruder’s behalf.

However, it will not dismiss civil liability if the person shoots an innocent third party in the household in the process, since a gun owner must be in control of their weapon, Christensen added.

He said the law will also extend to the workplace and one’s vehicle. The key in those situation centers on the element of imminent threat.

### Water Transfer Bill Planned

The senator, who has carried a number of water bills during his first term, plans another water bill this year.

This one, he said, will be targeted at transferring water between river basins when one basin is experiencing flooding.

He said water must be out of its banks somewhere within the affected basin before it can be

transferred to another basin.

Christensen said the Platte frequently experiences lowland flooding in times of high water.

If water can be diverted upstream from the flooding, it will reduce the flooding pressure in affected areas.

Christensen said it's possible to divert water from the Platte Basin into the Republican Basin at various locations from Sutherland east.

He said he's been working with the Central Platte Natural Resources District and is meeting with the Central Public Power and Irrigation District on the issue.

He said diverted water could be purchased to help meet compliance in the Republican Basin.

It would be a win-win, he said, because flooding could be eased with the Republican Basin getting water for compliance.

He said a lot of water gets wasted in Nebraska during flood-stage conditions, not to mention property damage. The key, he noted, is to get this legislation and agreements in place this year so these could be implemented in the future.

### Other Bills

Christensen indicated he will introduce three to four bills aimed at stemming human trafficking.

Contrary to what people believe, he said Nebraska serves as a pipeline to move young women through the state. Often, these women are being forced to participate in sexual activities without their consent.

He said he will also have several bills aimed at sexually-oriented businesses who he suspects provides a haven for this type of trafficking.

He plans to reintroduce a bill that would require that state appointees have the qualifications for the position in which they will be serving in. A similar bill died in last year's session.

Re-districting starts in April

In addition to the budget, senators will also redefine legislative districts after complete census figures are released in April.

Christensen said the jockeying has already begun, even before the session begins. One thing is for sure—rural Nebraska will lose one seat, based on initial census figures.

The Nebraska Legislature operates on a biennial schedule, meeting for a 90-day session this year and a 60-day session next year.