By Renee Pflughaupt
Nebraska News Service

State lawmakers witnessed a complete about-face this week. Speaker Mike Flood of Norfolk announced on Monday, Nov. 14, that TransCanada agreed to reroute the proposed Keystone XL pipeline.

"This is a good day for Nebraska," Flood said during a press conference Monday. "This does not belong to government.

This does not belong TransCanada. It belongs to the people."

While eliminating the immediate reason for the special session, senators now can focus on creating a framework to deal with future oil pipeline siting and approval.

Gov. Dave Heineman called the Legislature to special session on Oct. 25 to address oil pipeline regulation in the face of growing public concern over TransCanada's proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline route, which drew opposition because it would go through the environmentally sensitive Sandhills.

Here is a short synopsis of activity in the Legislature this week.

Fullerton Sen. Annette Dubas' bill, LB 1, passed the second round of approval during floor debate this week. This bill would vest the Public Service Commission with oil pipeline authority.

Because of the compromise, Speaker Flood urged that the bill not apply to TransCanada's proposed pipeline.

The bill was amended and will apply to all future oil pipelines.

The timetable for application and public hearings was also shortened to streamline the application process.

Schuyler Sen. Chris Langemeier's bill, LB 4, received first-round approval on the floor this week.

The bill, which originally would have given the governor oversight of oil pipeline projects in Nebraska, was amended to authorize the state Department of Environmental Quality to collaborate with the federal government on a supplemental environmental impact study for oil pipeline projects in Nebraska.

This would enable Nebraska to work with the State Department as it reviews and assesses the environmental impact of TransCanada's new proposed routes.

Speaker Flood said the supplemental study, which would be paid for by Nebraska tax dollars, would be optional. The governor would also be required to indicate to the federal government, in writing, either approval or disapproval of the proposed route within 30 days of receiving the department's report.

Lawmakers also gave second-round approval to LB2, Lexington Sen. John Wightman's appropriations bill allocating funds to pay for the special session, which was expected to last until Tuesday, Nov. 22.

The total estimated cost of the special session could be in excess of $136,000, according a Nov. 2 legislative report.