

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

As a conservative senator from a conservative district in a conservative state, 44th District Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial sometimes wondered what Legislature he was serving in this year.

It certainly wasn't the same body he'd seen during his first six years as a Nebraska senator. "This was nothing but a liberal session," Christensen said as he looked back on the 90-day session that adjourned last week.

With new senators joining the ranks this year, Christensen said the Legislature took on a liberal bent this year.

In his past experiences, the body looked at ways to spend money that invested in the long-term future of Nebraska. "This year, it was all about how we can spend money to help the individual instead of long-term investment in Nebraska," he said.

He likened it to the old proverb: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

There wasn't much teaching going on this year's session, he lamented. It was about what the Legislature could do for somebody right now, he added.

He said the Legislature raised the income threshold for what is considered poverty and that effort will continue.

Rather than bringing more people into that category, why not work on getting them better educated so they can get better jobs, he questioned.

"If government is going to give people everything, how are we going to afford it? We'll tax everyone to death," he said.

In retrospect, he said the session would get a grade anywhere from a C to D and an F in some instances.

He cited one example of "F" legislation when the Legislature approved allowing people with sexually transmitted diseases to get medication for their partner as well, without the partner ever seeing a doctor.

He said legislation that got out on the floor this year and will come up early in next year's 60-day session will allow co-habiting couples to adopt.

It won't matter whether the couple is heterosexual or homosexual, he said. Studies show this type of adoption is not beneficial to the children and is yet another way to redefine the meaning of family, he added.

Legislation, Interim Studies

In terms of legislation passed this session, Christensen said he wasn't able to accomplish what he sought out to do.

LB 16, which adjusted the terms under which the county took over Champion Mill, passed early in the session.

LB 386, which addressed notification by counties when road maintenance is done adjoining private property, passed as well.

Christensen has several bills that remain either on General File or Select File.

His attempt to get compensation for surface water irrigators who are forced to give up water for state compact compliance remains on Select File.

However, he fears the body will never pass the bill.

Other bills on General File deal with work camp incarceration provisions, employment provisions for people committed to the Department of Correctional Services, and limiting a governor's authority to restrict firearms under the Emergency Management Act.

He has also asked for several interim studies to be conducted this summer and fall.

He wants to see the impact of breaking up Health and Human Services into the departments they were before merged under Ben Nelson's stint as governor.

Three others deal with water issues.

The first would look at the impact of allowing surface water users without wells to put in a well. Their surface water rights would be surrendered on the respective tract, with the water being used for compliance efforts.

For irrigators who use both surface and groundwater, the Department of Natural Resources would determine if sufficient surface water is available, then no groundwater could be pumped.

If there is not sufficient surface water in any one year, then irrigators would only be allowed to use their groundwater wells and not surface water.

He also wants to see a study that would allow any river basin to be designated over-appropriated.

Politically, that study is a bad move, Christensen said, because many will oppose that.

However, he felt it was more important to get the issue on the table now versus having legislation introduced next session without any input.

What scares Christensen is that water legislation gets drafted by Lincoln or Omaha senators who don't have a keen understanding about water in out-state Nebraska.

Sustainability Task Force

Christensen also plans to keep close tabs on a new water task force championed by Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege.

He said Carlson's goal is to achieve sustainability by limiting water use to no more than can be recharged.

Frankly, he sees Carlson's move as a way to get a hard cap on pumping in the Upper Republican Natural Resources District. That could be eight inches, he warned.

He said Carlson has no regard for economic sustainability when it comes to water use and management. That could be devastating in the middle and upper regions of the Republican River basin.

Governor's Race Heating Up

Christensen said it will be an interesting summer as more candidates throw their hat into the governor's race.

Omaha senators Brad Ashford and Steve Lathrop, along with Sen. Carlson have all expressed interest.

That could all change if former Speaker Mike Flood re-enters the race.

Flood dropped out after his wife was diagnosed with cancer. But Christensen said treatment is going well and wouldn't be surprised if Flood jumped back into the race.