

Wightman: Economy improving but not in Dawson County

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Wednesday, 14 April 2010 21:10 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 April 2010 21:12



Effect of Tenneco Automotive closing to be felt soon in county.

Nebraskans shouldn't hold their breath about big improvements to the state's economy.

But they might take little ones with the exception of Dawson County residents.

Even though state revenue is expected to improve about 5% this month, State Sen. John Wightman of Lexington said Dawson County residents will feel a real pinch with the closing of the Tenneco Automotive plant in Cozad later this year.

Wightman spoke at a legislative issues breakfast Saturday morning at Walker's Steakhouse & Lounge that was sponsored by the three chambers of commerce in Dawson County.

He added that money coming in last March met projections for the first time in 14 months.

Senators balanced the budget this session but not without additional cuts.

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The 2010 budget is a done deal, signed by Gov. David Heineman, with no line-item vetoes.

Despite a 5% cut across the board for state agencies during a special session last November, senators approved an additional 2% cut for the same agencies with the exception of Medicaid, state aid to schools and the University of Nebraska—the latter Wightman said will see slight reductions.

He said it's almost impossible to reduce spending for health and human services—because of federal Medicare and Medicaid programs—state aid to education and the University of Nebraska system. The three make up about 70% of the budget.

Two years down the road Wightman said state forecasters predict a 7.2% growth in revenue, leaving the state about \$678 million short of where it needs to be.

About \$321 million in cash reserve is available to help close the gap.

The county also needs to brace itself for redistricting which Wightman said senators will deal with during the 2011 legislative session.

Wightman pointed out that Douglas, Sarpy and Lancaster counties will have 52% of the population of Nebraska based on 2010 census projections.

The western part of the state will lose senators and, for a time, he said there will be unlikely bedfellows as some senators from out-state Nebraska—whose districts will be eliminated—will represent metro districts in the east until their terms end.

Keeping Dawson County intact is something Wightman said he hopes is accomplished, noting that “everyone is fighting for their own turf.”

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More noteworthy legislation includes:

A bill passed that encourages the development of private renewable energy facilities that Wightman said would export most of the energy out of state.

Wind in Nebraska ranks fourth in potential energy nationally and is economically lucrative. One company plans to develop a wind farm in windy Banner County and others are interested.

A law that creates a task force to handle water issues in the Republican River basin. Wightman said the group will develop sustainability plans such as how to deliver water to Kansas during lean water years.

Advancement of a bill that exempts a new hospital under construction in Kearney from a moratorium on new hospital licenses.

Several doctors had split from the existing hospital—Good Samaritan—to build their own hospital which had caused controversy.

An agreement reached between the parties involved means one hospital with two campuses with governance by Good Samaritan and the doctors.

Passage of a watered-down version of a ban on texting while driving which was Wightman's priority bill.

Under the new law, the offense is a secondary one and drivers would have to be pulled over first for another offense.

The senator said texting while driving is a serious issue, pointing to statistics which show that

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texting drivers are 23 times more likely to have an accident compared to drunken drivers who are said to have four times more the potential for an accident.

During a question-answer period, Wightman said consolidation of services is happening more and across the state, noting that one third of Nebraska's counties have less than 1,000 people.

Technology is helpful in this area, he said, noting that more needs to be done to have more efficient government.

The 60-day legislative session ended Wednesday.

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