

Three major issues: Taxes, DHHS, schools

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 09 January 2014 14:14 - Last Updated Thursday, 09 January 2014 14:31



Same song, different verses could sum up the 104th session of the Nebraska Legislature that convenes today (Wednesday).

State Sen. John Wightman, who represents the 36th District, said bills dealing with taxes, health and human services and education will take center stage.

“Every session we have the most dealings with these three,” he said, noting that state aid to schools and the Department of Health and Human Services use 60% of the state’s budget.

Wightman is starting his eighth and last session. Term limits will make him, and 16 other senators, ineligible for re-election.

Taxes will be the major issue, he said, noting that he expects the governor to try and eliminate the state’s income tax as he did during the last session or substantially reduce the amount.

The lost tax money would be replaced by eliminating nearly half of the state’s sales tax exemptions on such things as agriculture and manufacturing equipment and machinery.

“Ag proponents and people outstate are not going to support that because of what farmers pay

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on machinery,” Wightman said.

A tax modernization committee, that took public testimony about the state’s tax system last summer and fall, recently issued a report that recommends no major changes.

In funding education, K-12, Wightman said there may be attempts to use more state taxes to support it.

For example, the Legislature’s education committee plans to ask for more funding to help small schools merge staff and buildings into one district.

With problems at Kearney’s Youth Rehabilitation And Treatment Center, Wightman said legislators will look at how to make changes at the home for troubled juveniles.

DHHS oversees YRTCs at Kearney and Geneva, a home for girls involved in the court system.

Wightman said the Kearney facility has experienced problems with some residents behaving in violent ways against staff and other residents.

A bill introduced last year, that would close the centers and provide community-based services to keep juveniles in their homes, schools and communities, didn’t pass.

Such things as separating violent from non-violent offenders and changing sentencing methods will likely be discussed, he said.

Because of Sen. Ernie Chambers’ mastery of the legislative process, Wightman said more bills will carry over to the new session.

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He said the high number of carry-over bills (406 in 2014) will continue with Chambers in the chamber.

An example of Chambers in action, Wightman related, happened during a meeting of the Legislature's executive committee when it met in November to approve two donations to the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission to improve state parks.

Chambers refused to approve the gifts unless NGPC commission members changed their minds about issuing permits to hunt mountain lions.

During the 2013 session, senators also approved legislation that allows the NGPC to issue a limited number of permits to shoot the animal.

"I think we do better legislation with him there," Wightman said about Chambers, "but when he's opposing you, you have a hard time thinking that way.

"He makes it interesting."

Wightman said he doesn't plan to do anything differently than before during his last session. He acknowledged he's not been as active as before a stroke in 2012.

So far, Matt Williams of Gothenburg is the only announced candidate for the District 36 seat.

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