

Senators discuss erosion, NU candidates and pass two bills

Written by Haley Dover
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Nebraska News Service

LINCOLN—Nebraska lawmakers discussed a variety of topics this week including controlling excessive erosion and rules pertaining to university candidate searches, among other topics. Here is a summary of some of the key bills that were considered.

Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege introduced to the Natural Resources Committee Legislative Bill 896 that would define excessive erosion and implement a process for Natural Resources Districts to resolve erosion issues. Currently, the Erosion and Sediment Control Act limits NRDs in dealing with potential problems, Carlson said.

The bill would define excessive erosion as “the occurrence of erosion in excess of the applicable soil-loss tolerance level, which causes or contributes to an accumulation of sediment upon the lands of any other person to the detriment or damage of such person.” Ephemeral and gully erosion also would be included. If an NRD determines that excessive erosion has occurred from activity not associated with cultivation of farmland, LB896 would authorize the district to petition for an immediate cease and desist order until the excess erosion problem was resolved.

The Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee heard testimony Feb. 6 on a bill that would change public records requirements for certain university job candidates’ application materials. Currently all job application materials of the final four candidates for employment by a public body are public record.

LB1018, sponsored by Sen. Galen Hadley of Kearney, would make an exception for certain positions at the University of Nebraska. The bill would change the law to release application materials of only the final candidate for president. The bill also would apply to finalists for vice president or chancellor positions.

“The main argument for a closed search is that you will get a better pool of people applying for that position,” Hadley said. “One of the reasons that you try and get sitting presidents in the pool is that they have experience at these complicated jobs.”

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Those who attended the hearing in opposition of the bill are concerned about depriving the public of an opportunity to compare top candidates for the position.

UNL journalism professor, John Bender, said the bill runs contrary to the public nature of a university and a closed search could lead to cynicism about the selection process among the public.

Rose Ann Shannon, news director of KETV in Omaha, said she believes students, faculty and the public have a right to know who is being considered to lead the university. She said the bill could lead to “creeping government secrecy.”

Lawmakers also gave final approval on Feb. 7 to Sen. Jeremy Nordquist’s bill intended to promote transparency in the cost and quality of health care services in Nebraska.

LB76 establishes a Health Care Data Base Advisory Committee that will make a series of recommendations to improve transparency in the state’s health care system. Members of the committee will be appointed by the state Department of Insurance director and will include representatives of academia, the health care and insurance industries and consumer advocates.

The database will be used to:

provide information to consumers and purchasers of health care;

determine the capacity and distribution of existing health care resources;

identify health care needs and inform health care policy;

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evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs on improving patient outcomes;

review costs among various treatment settings, providers and approaches; and

improve the quality and affordability of patient health care and health care coverage.

Senators also passed a bill on Feb. 7 that authorizes the state tax commissioner to electronically file levies against personal property.

Sponsored by Hadley, LB33 authorizes the state Department of Revenue to contract with in-state financial institutions for a pilot project to levy against real and personal property of delinquent taxpayers.

The bill also makes a number of other changes, including:

allowing the department to waive the traditional three-year statutory lien period when a taxpayer has entered into an agreement to satisfy an overdue tax liability;

repealing the individual income tax return checkoff for contributions to the Campaign Finance Limitation Cash Fund; and

authorizing a 25 percent penalty for filing a late tobacco products tax return.

Senators passed the bill on a 42-0 vote.

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