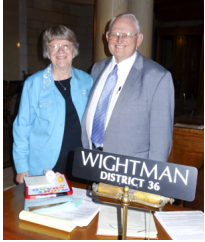


Term limits, health issues bring about Sen. Wightman's last legislative session

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 24 April 2014 14:36 -



Lengthy debate, filibusters make Unicameral frustrating

He'll miss several things about serving in the Nebraska Legislature, yet Sen. John Wightman was ready to be done last Thursday.

When the 60-day session ended Thursday, Wightman was one of 17 senators who were term-limited out of office.

Health issues, such as a stroke and four knee surgeries (including three knee replacements), while in office took their toll on the state senator from Lexington.

"I wasn't as active the last 1 sessions," he said Monday.

And when legislators burned the midnight oil in the waning days of the session, fatigue and rancor set in.

Wightman said he became irritated when Sen. Ernie Chambers and a group of conservative Republicans spent hours, on opposite sides, filibustering and debating bills.

Chambers wanted a ban on hunting mountain lions, and didn't get enough votes to override the governor's veto. The other senators stalled some smaller appropriation and other bills, he said.

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"Spending eight hours on a bill just because you don't want it to pass is frustrating," Wightman said.

To get bills passed toward the end of the session, he said senators tied similar, uncontested ones together.

One highlight of the session included the passage of spending bills, fashioned in the powerful appropriations committee, on which Wightman served for eight years.

The body overrode a gubernatorial veto and passed an \$8 billion mid-biennium budget that includes a heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system renovation project and fountains at the state capitol and more.

Wightman also supported a bill that passed to deal with the overcrowding of state prisons and reduce the recidivism rate of offenders released from prison, among other things.

Passage of a water sustainability bill was also big, he said, noting that money will support several water supply projects that could include the construction of two shallow reservoirs south of the Platte River between Lexington and Overton.

In addition to serving on the appropriations committee, Wightman chaired the executive committee for eight years.

The committee supervises all legislative services and employees and processes legislation dealing with salaries, term limits, ethics and more.

Officially, Wightman won't be finished until the 2015 legislative begins and in November, the executive committee will meet to orient newly elected state senators.

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High points during his eight years include serving on appropriations and the executive committee.

Until floor debate begins each legislative session, the appropriations committee meets every day.

Wightman said his health problems made a big difference in the last two years of service.

"I didn't have the confidence to talk like I used to and remember some senators' names because of the stroke," he said, noting that he had no memory of anything for about two weeks after the stroke.

Still, Wightman is grateful for his time in the Legislature.

"My whole idea of state government has expanded far beyond anything I ever imagined," he said.

One little known fact, the senator said, is that 70% of the state budget is spent on health and human services and education.

Wightman has also enjoyed the people he's met and traveling to different towns in the 36th District to visit with constituents.

He said he'll miss those relationships and also those with other senators.

"On a daily basis, I've been in touch with people who are very educated and have a lot of thought about state government," he said. "And they're all interested in state government."

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The age range of senators is also interesting, Wightman said, noting that the youngest are in their mid-20s and the oldest is 78 years old.

On the last day, Wightman —along with the other retiring senators—gave a farewell speech. Sen. Kathy Campbell of Lincoln presented a tribute to Wightman.

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