

'An opportunity' for Lincoln 'to come to us'

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 28 September 2012 13:07 -



School finance focus of education committee hearing

Mary Lou Block admitted feeling nervous before testifying at a legislative committee hearing in Gothenburg.

The city was one of four stops for the Nebraska Unicameral's education committee on Sept. 18 when members heard testimony dealing with the financing of public education and early childhood education programs.

Legislators, school officials and the public gathered in the high school performing arts center for the two-hour hearing.

Block, who had never before testified at a legislative hearing, described it as "an opportunity to have Lincoln come to us" and to express a viewpoint.

The rancher said local ability to fund schools is already inappropriately tied to sharply rising agricultural land values.

"If the formula is changed, it will likely hit the ag sector even harder," Block said.

Although agriculture has experienced good growth and revenue, she said that won't continue with input costs changing, prices rising and falling and the persistent drought.

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“Over-reliance on ag puts the producer at risk during downturns and makes viability difficult,” she said.

Not all ag producers are making perceived profits, she noted, and rising land valuations and high levies to meet school budgets put some at risk.

Block said not everyone involved in ag can afford to pay high prices for land.

“Many choose a more prudent route for their operation and others simply cannot afford it,” she explained. “Yet their valuations change, giving the false impression to those unfamiliar with the big picture of agriculture that ag real estate is a revenue source like an oil reserve, waiting to be tapped.”

If changes are suggested to state aid to put additional reliance on agriculture, Block said to leave it alone.

She also suggested:

tying valuations into land acquisition prices

seeking additional funding elsewhere

working to control spending.

Karla Jensen, who attended the hearing but didn't testify, agreed that ag is bearing the burden of increased valuation.

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Several other local and area residents testified such as Jack Ostergard, Dale Gronewold and Glade Smith of Cozad.

Sen. Greg Adams of York, chair of the education committee, said he will share the testimony given with the revenue committee of which he is a member.

Adams said the state aid formula considers the amount of valuation a district has but doesn't set valuation.

"Other state law determines how land is valued," he said.

The senator said the committee, which had its last hearing in Gretna Tuesday, will review what citizens said to determine whether or not to make adjustments to the state aid formula during the 2013 legislative session.

Adams said the formula tries to direct state aid to districts which have the greatest need.

Gothenburg was chosen as a site because the education committee tries to have hearings across the state, Adams said.

"And we knew Gothenburg would be a good host," he added.

Similar hearings were also in Gering and Albion.

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