

Concealed-weapons bill makes comeback

Citizens could carry handguns if they pass background check, complete safety class

BY BRIAN CARLSON
Staff writer

Legislature



After stalling in the last legislative session, a bill allowing law-abiding citizens to carry concealed weapons is likely to pass in 1999, lawmakers said.

LB476, sponsored this year by Sen. Ray Janssen of Nickerson, would allow citizens to obtain permits for carrying concealed weapons if they passed background checks of criminal and mental health records and completed gun safety training.

A similar bill, introduced by Sen. Stan Schellpeper of Stanton in 1997, fell short of passage last year. As the 1998 Legislature drew to a close, the bill was dropped when it became clear Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha would use all the allotted debate time to filibuster and block the bill.

"I think it would have passed last year, but we ran out of time," Janssen said.

Lynne McNally, a legislative aide to Janssen, said proponents' priority this year is to get the bill onto the floor early to avoid last year's problems.

"Getting to it sooner is the key," she said. "Support is heavy for the bill, and we definitely have the 25 votes to pass it."

As of Thursday, eight senators had signed on to the bill. The Judiciary Committee had not yet scheduled a hearing on LB476.

Nebraska is one of seven states that has not passed some form of legislation allowing concealed weapons permits.

Janssen said he supported the bill

because it would allow the state to better regulate handguns. It would also allow responsible citizens to defend themselves against attack, he said.

For example, he said people who traveled to and from work through dangerous, poorly lit areas should have a means of defending themselves.

The bill provides sufficient safeguards to ensure that dangerous citizens do not obtain concealed weapons permits, Janssen said.

"You don't just go get a concealed weapon permit," he said. "There are a lot of hoops you have to jump through before you can even come close to getting one."

Opponents such as Sen. Chris Beutler of Lincoln said they believed the bill would create more problems than it solved.

Although some studies, most notably one by John Lott of the University of Chicago Law School, have indicated crime has dropped in areas allowing concealed weapons permits, Beutler called this evidence "inconclusive."

Even if a concealed-weapons law caused a small drop in crime rates, he said, other factors could negate its benefits.

Beutler said he was concerned passage of the bill could lead to a proliferation of handguns, increasing the possibility of violent crime. He also said the permit requirements might not be foolproof.

Most importantly, Beutler said, a concealed-weapons law could lead to an increase in the number of "crimes of passion." Domestic disputes or "road rage" could escalate into violent confrontations that could be avoided if a gun were unavailable, he said.

"When good people lose control — and good people do lose control occasionally — if a gun is available, it might be available at just the wrong instant in time," he said.

Although Beutler said he had not counted votes to see if it would be possible to block the bill, he was resigned to its likelihood of passage.

"Barring a change in attitudes, I believe the bill will be passed in some form this year," he said.

Although some law enforcement officials have expressed concern about LB476, Janssen and McNally said the bill was restrictive enough to ensure concealed handguns do not get out of control and threaten law

enforcement officers' lives.

"We're always concerned about keeping law enforcement safe," McNally said. But concerns among some law enforcement officials "may be about something that won't come to fruition," she said.

Confident of the bill's passage, McNally said supporters would try to push the bill quickly.

"We've got all our ducks in a row, and we hope to have more success this year than last year."



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Body shop catches fire; causes \$7,000 damage

BY JOSH FUNK
Senior staff writer

Quick response helped limit the damage caused in a downtown body shop fire Thursday.

The second-floor body shop in Duteau Chevrolet quickly filled with thick black smoke after a car started burning, acting Deputy Chief Dale Wojtasek said.

Firefighters responded quickly to the fire, on 18th and O streets, which was only a few blocks from the fire station.

"There was a large area of orange flame on the second floor when we arrived," Wojtasek said. "But we attacked it quickly and knocked the flames down."

The fire, which was called in at 12:07 p.m., was confined to the car and its immediate surrounding area, causing \$7,000 worth of damage. Smoke rolled out of the building for more than half an hour.

Carol Wooge, who works at the Family Thrift Store across the street from the fire, was on her lunch break when the fire started.

"I heard an explosion from around the corner, and when I came out I saw the black smoke," Wooge said. "The firefighters arrived in no time."

Wojtasek said the explosion Wooge thought she heard was probably firefighters breaking out windows on the second floor for ventilation.

When the fire started, many of the Duteau employees were having lunch on the opposite side of the second floor, Wojtasek said.

They heard some strange noises, started to smell smoke, and called 911 right away.

It took firefighters half an hour to control the fire after knocking down the initial flames, though much of that time was spent clearing smoke

from the building and looking for other fires.

Traffic was disrupted for 30 minutes on O and P streets to accommodate fire hoses; but there was no structural damage, and business resumed after the smoke cleared.

The fire inspector investigating the cause of the fire could not be reached Thursday.

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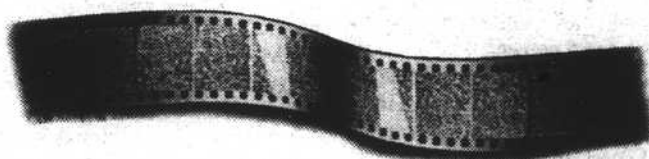
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