

# Johanns rejects aid bill after new amendment

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ing if the Legislature cut state aid, he said.

"Within the framework we have imposed on them, they have no place else to go," he said. But he said he offered the amendment only to structure the debate - he did not support Kristensen's amendment, even with the change he proposed.

Kristensen supported Wickersham's amendment, which eventually passed, but the possibility of raising property taxes made other senators nervous.

Wahoo Sen. Curt Bromm said reducing property tax levies required a tough battle and a deliberate plan.

"We have to follow through with what we started," he said.

Sen. George Coordsen of Hebron said the last time the state saw a revenue reduction was 1936. Since then, he said, the biggest reduction was actually a lower increase from a previous year.

"The administration seems to be talking about an Armageddon," he said. If an economic downturn is on its way, he said, the first ripples have been seen in agriculture - the very industry that would suffer by an increase in property tax levies.

But Plattsmouth Sen. Roger Wehrbein, who supported the Kristensen amendment, said his support was not based on a looming economic disaster. If tough times come, he said, schools should share in the cuts.

"(The amendment) simply says we're going to leave that option if and when that time comes," he said. "You have to say where we are going to draw the line."

But Hastings Sen. Ardyce Bohlke joined other senators in saying the bill would send schools back to the instability that prompted LB149.

The Kristensen amendment, Bohlke said, would not let schools know for certain how to plan budgets until the end of the legislative session.

"I believe it pulls the rug out from the whole issue of predictability and stability," she said.

The bill exempts schools from paying back \$19.3 million via cuts because of a miscalculation. It also changes the date for recertification of state aid to Feb. 1 to allow for more accurate budget figures in time for schools to meet April 15 deadlines for making staffing decisions.

Stanton Sen. Stan Schellpeper agreed. Schools in his district will not be able to operate without additional state aid, he said. The real thrust behind Kristensen's amendment, he said, was Johann's property tax rebate plan.

Kristensen said his motivation for introducing the amendment traced back to arguments against failed Initiative 413, which would have set a constitutional limit on spending. It was hard for him to explain senators could not touch half the state budget, he said.

Set items in the budget force senators to look at university and state college funding or courts or smaller items, he said.

"You are not stewards of each individual school district's budget," he said. "You are stewards of the state budget first."

After Wednesday's vote, he said he was disappointed.

"The Legislature missed a great opportunity to remove the entitlement concepts of state aid," he said. "We

## Legislative Notebook

### More fees on traffic tickets proposed

Omaha Sen. Deb Suttle presented a bill Wednesday that would tack on an additional \$20 fee for traffic infractions in addition to the cost of the ticket and court costs.

LB222, heard by the Judiciary Committee, aims to protect the public amid inadequate law enforcement of traffic laws by making breaking the law more expensive, Suttle said.

The additional fee money under the bill would go to individual law-enforcement agencies that made the traffic conviction.

The bill would give offenders the option to appear via television instead of in the courtroom. The bill does not apply to trials, but to procedures such as preliminary hearings.

Sgt. Ron Ochsner, with the Hall County Sheriff's Department, said prisoners walk in chains up and down three flights of stairs and pass by a public door on the way to court in Hall County. A prisoner once escaped out that public door while walking to court.

Eliminating that trip to court and replacing it with a video appearance is safer and could save time and money, he said.

"We feel it's a safety issue, and it's a benefit for everybody," he said.

### Domestic-violence convicts face limited gun access

Trenton Sen. Tom Baker wants to bring Nebraska into accordance with federal law designed to prevent handgun purchases by people convicted of misdemeanors that involve domestic violence.

LB613, heard by the Judiciary Committee on Wednesday, would require law enforcement to make fingerprint cards that designate an assault as a domestic violence assault. LB613 would bring Nebraska up to speed with requirements in the federal Brady Bill. Although domestic violence itself is not an offense, it is an element in some assaults. Domestic violence may occur when a person such as a guardian or spouse assaults an acquaintance such as a current or former spouse, or parent or guardian who is living with them.

Omaha Sen. Kermit Brashear pointed out that it is already possible to track down domestic violence offenders.

Bill proponents, which included law-enforcement groups and anti-violence coalitions, said tracking down people who commit acts of domestic violence sometimes requires determining the county where the offense was committed, which can be tedious.

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### Bill would cut down on prisoner transports

Brashear asked the Judiciary Committee on Wednesday to consider his bill, LB623, which would give prisoners the option to appear in court via television.

Members of various law agencies testified in favor of the bill, saying it would make the public, corrections staff and prisoners safer.

### Statewide S.T.O.P. classes proposed under new bills

Currently about half of Nebraska's 93 counties offer a traffic-safety class as an alternative to being convicted of a minor traffic infraction, such as speeding.

Two bills heard by the Judiciary Committee on Wednesday would mandate Safety Training Option Programs as a pre-trial diversion across the state. Traffic violators would be given the option to take the class.

LB565, sponsored by Ord Sen. Jerry Schmitt, and LB593, sponsored by Columbus Sen. Jennie Robak, would coordinate statewide traffic diversion programs.

Schmitt said the fee for S.T.O.P. classes varies greatly from county to county.

Traffic violators in Omaha can opt to pay a flat \$35 fee for the class, while Hooker County residents pay \$150 for the class plus court costs.

He also pointed out it is hard to track who has taken the class and when. Traffic violators are allowed to take the class once every three years.

Schmitt said people who garner offenses in different counties quite often take the class more than once in three years.

County Turnbull, from the Nebraska County Attorneys Association, opposed the bill because he felt current county programs were adequate.

He also said mandating programs may not be the fairest route because people in Omaha and people in western Nebraska have different driving experiences.

Compiled by senior staff writer Jessica Fargen

missed an opportunity to give the system flexibility, and that's a real shame."

Chris Peterson, Johann's press secretary, agreed.

"This is about who drives the bus," he said. "LB149, as it is currently written, asks the governor and the Legislature to take a seat on the bus while the computer drives the bus."

Lincoln Sen. LaVon Crosby, who joined Omaha Sens. Ernie Chambers and Pam Redfield as the only dissenting votes on the bill, said she was against the bill from the beginning.

"I'm not for the concept of just

handing (schools) the money," she said. "But obviously it's on a fast track."

Bohlke, who has been the chief proponent of LB149 as the Education Committee chairwoman, said she was pleased with the vote despite pressure from the governor's office. Senators are committed to property tax relief and quality schools, she said.

When asked if she thought LB149 supporters had dodged a bullet Wednesday, she said:

"I would say it just showed that we have bulletproof vests when it comes to those issues."

## CORRECTIONS

Because of a reporting error, Monday's story about a UNL distance-education program contained incorrect information. The Communications Learning and Assessment in a Student-centered System curriculum for high school will improve upon, but not replace, UNL's paper-based correspondence courses. Twenty CLASS courses are available, and 55 - enough to complete a high school diploma - will be offered by October 2001.

Because of an editing error, a story last week about student loans contained incorrect information. NEB-HELP went from a nonprofit organization to a for-profit organization.

Because of a reporting error, Wednesday's story on the J.D. Edwards Honors Program in Computer Science and Management contained incorrect information. Fifteen students who will be recruited regionally will enroll in the graduate program in August.

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