

Senators tackle state issues

BY JESSICA FARGEN
Senior staff writer

This year senators dealt with some tough issues — tobacco, guns, minor-in-possession-of-alcohol laws, capital punishment and corporate farming. Also in this 90-day session, which has at least 16 working days left, legislators have the task of sorting through a \$4.7 billion state budget.

All the while, lawmakers are adjusting to Gov. Mike Johanns after eight years with former governor Ben Nelson.

Proposals still alive include a measure that would halt the death penalty for two years while it's studied, a bill that would raise the cigarette tax from 34 cents to \$1 per pack and a bill that would put restrictions on meat-packing.

Bills debated this session that have been put on the back burner, possibly until next year, include a bill that would allow Nebraskans to carry concealed weapons, a bill that would stiffen the state's minor-in-possession laws and a bill that would make not wearing a seat belt a primary offense.

Debate on some bills has gone quickly, while discussion on other bills has reached near the 10-hour mark. Many times, because he disagreed with a bill, Omaha Sen. Ernie Chambers has used stall tactics on bills, thus drawing out debate.

Death penalty may be halted

It has happened every year since 1970: That's the year Chambers became a state senator. Every year since then he has sponsored a bill to abolish the death penalty. It is usually shot down in committee, but has made it to the floor a few times and actually passed in the 1970s before being vetoed.

This year, lawmakers advanced the bill past the first round of debate, with some major amendments. LB76 would place a moratorium on the death penalty, meaning all state executions would be stopped for two years while the state studies the fairness of all the death

penalty sentence cases since 1973.

People could still be sentenced to death and the appeals process would go on, but no one could be executed during the moratorium.

Chambers has said the death penalty is racially biased. Race, along with gender, religion and economic status, would be looked at during the study.

If the bill passes the remaining two rounds of debate and Johanns signs it, the sentencing of the death penalty would be studied.

66-cent cigarette tax increase

The problem? Smoking — especially teen smoking. The solution? Make it more expensive to smoke.

That's the way Lincoln Sen. David Landis sees it, which is why he is pushing for an additional 66-cent tax on a pack of cigarettes. This would bring the tax to \$1 per pack.

But the bill has failed to pass the first round of debate. During debate last month, senators suggested raising the tax by 30 cents, while some wanted to leave it where it is. The debate ended with a vote to delay debate until at least May 14.

Tobacco lobbyists and senators who oppose the bill have said increasing the price of cigarettes won't make people quit or even slow down.

Many have cited examples of black markets for cigarettes forming in states with high tobacco taxes. Others said the high tax would drive Nebraskans to buy their smokes out of state.

Landis said bracketing the bill would give him and other senators time to sort out what type of increase, if any, is in the best interest of the state.

Farm bill takes on meat packers

Aside from the meat packers it targets, few people have spoken against LB835.

The Agriculture Committee introduced the bill in response to drastic livestock price drops, especially in the hog industry. The bill's supporters say meat

packers have too much control over the market.

Ewing Sen. Cap Dierks, Agriculture Committee chairman and the bill's chief advocate, said the bill is intended to make competition more fair for small farmers and ranchers.

But packers argue that targeting them won't solve the problem. Too much supply pushed prices down, they say.

It looks likely, though, that the Legislature will pass the bill, which requires price reporting by packers, prohibits packer feeding of animals and says that packers cannot discriminate on quantity alone.

The bill has one more round of debate left — final reading — and Johanns said he will probably sign it as long as he has no objections to any new amendments that might be introduced.

Concealed weapons

Eight hours of debate, nearly 40 amendments and high emotions characterized discussion on a bill that would make it legal for Nebraskans to carry concealed weapons.

After first-round debate, senators voted to indefinitely postpone it, essentially shelving it until possibly next year.

Nickerson Sen. Ray Janssen, the bill's sponsor, has called the measure a safety bill, not a gun bill.

The bill would require safeguards such as gun-training courses and background checks. But that didn't sway senators who opposed concealed weapons. Senators who opposed the bill worried it would increase gun sales and increase violence.

MIP

Some people called it the "use and lose" bill. LB126 would have taken away the licenses of minors caught drinking alcohol. License revocation would last six months on a first offense, and minors would have to pay \$250. Minors who enter the diversion program after a MIP would lose their license for 90 days.

Police aim to put stop to illegal partying

BY JOSH FUNK
Senior staff writer

If police and the university have their way, underage drinking parties may become an endangered species.

Last fall, Lincoln Police set out to exterminate the troublesome gatherings with undercover and uniformed teams.

The problems associated with large house parties — including physical and sexual assaults and neighborhood disturbances — have grown along with the parties, which were attended regularly by more than 100 people per party, Lincoln Police Chief Tom Casady said.

The enforcement effort was planned with the help of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to maximize its effects, said James Griesen, vice chancellor for Student Affairs.

"This was a conscious and coordinated effort with Lincoln police," Griesen said in September.

Some officers worked undercover to infiltrate parties where alcohol was sold, and uniformed officers then broke up the parties.

The problems inherent in these parties quickly multiply when two officers are dispatched to a 100- to 200-person party, Casady said.

"People have figured out that there is not much two officers can do," Casady said. "Much of the risk has disappeared."

"We are trying to change that." The special detail of officers gives police the resources they need to handle larger parties, Casady said.

Officers also seized evidence from the parties including beer kegs, money from illegal sales and signs advertising prices.

After the busts, police identify people who bought the alcohol and call landlords who own the party houses.

Police also notify parents of partygoers and the university when students are involved.

Under the Student Code of Conduct, Griesen said, students could face penalties ranging from a warning to a dismissal from the university in addition to criminal charges.

Though the university does not usually exercise its jurisdiction for misdemeanors that occur off campus, these parties are a special case, Griesen said.

"It's our students they are marketing to, and our students at risk," Griesen said.

"These parties are a detriment to our purpose."

Griesen said the university's stronger stance on alcohol in campus housing in recent years has pushed the parties out into the city.

"(The university and police) have to work together to diminish the drinking, not just move it," Griesen said.

Over the course of the year, neighborhoods once overflowing with partygoers on weekends have become more composed, police said.

"On any given night you could stand on the corner of 1100 Charleston Street (in the North Bottoms) in full uniform and write tickets until your hand cramps up," Casady said.

But since the enforcement started, Casady said, it has become more difficult to find parties because numbers have decreased.

Casady emphasized that police are only trying to address some of the problems associated with large parties.

"We're not interested in stopping parties," he said. "We just want smaller, legal parties."

Parking problems divide UNL community

BY SHANE ANTHONY
Staff writer

The fees are rising and so is the tension. Faced with a \$50 million price tag for three parking garages on city campus, UNL officials introduced parking permit fee increases in March.

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James Main, assistant vice chancellor for business and finance, and Tad McDowell, director of Parking and Transit Services, tried to explain the increases and the garages through discussion sessions.

So far, the response has been less than positive. "You're not taking care of your employees," said Gayle Schuler, a clerical assistant for the school of biological sciences. "I can't afford your prices."

Schuler was just one of several UNL staff members who expressed their concerns at an April 15 presentation. Employees said they are less able to absorb the new increases than the higher-paid faculty members and administrators for whom they work.

The increases will raise faculty and staff permit fees by 2004. All will increase, but certain permits will also increase, with certain permits increasing from \$81 a year to \$288 a year.

The Academic Senate also passed a motion April 6 supporting proportional fee increases for faculty and staff based on income.

McDowell and Main, at their April 15 presentation, said Chancellor James Moeser had asked the human resources department to review the proportionality idea.

Academic Senate members raised many of the same concerns that staff raised. They passed a resolution urging UNL administrators to fund the 1999-2004 parking initiatives through means other than a substantial increase in user fees for faculty, staff and students.

Senators also passed a motion asking that the Master Plan — which maps UNL's future look for the next 12 years and beyond — be reconsidered with input from the Academic Senate or a senate subcommittee.

Part of that resolution grew from concerns about safety. After hearing women faculty members talking about how unsafe they would feel with the proposed garages, Walter Mientka, a professor of mathematics and statistics, spoke passionately.

Faculty members do not necessarily work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., he said. Late-night walks will be unavoidable and safety concerns must be addressed.

"We cannot let this go forward," he said.

McDowell said parking cadets will patrol the garages and video cameras will be installed as safety measures. The plan also calls for extending shuttle service until at least 11 p.m. A tracking system will let rid-

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TAD McDOWELL

director of Parking and Transit Services

ers waiting in the garages know exactly where the shuttles are.

Main said the garages are necessary. Because of the UNL Master Plan, new building construction and the city's Antelope Valley study, the university will lose about 4,000 parking spaces.

The three city campus garages will replace about 3,600 of those. But by centralizing parking, McDowell said, faculty, staff and students will have an easier time finding parking spaces in the future.

"There's a transition period that will be painful," he said. "But once it gets done, you will be a lot better off than you are today."

Construction on the first garage at 17th and R streets will begin this June. Past ASUN President Sara Russell played a crucial role in convincing the administration to build that structure first. Without it, she said, massive amounts of parking would have been lost.

The other two garages will be at 14th and Avery streets and 19th and Vine streets. All three are scheduled for completion by 2004.

All three garages being located on city campus sparked criticism from East Campus faculty and staff who will pay the increases, but will not get any garages during that period. Two garages are planned for East Campus, but the current fee increases do not pay for those structures. Main said permit fees could change again if those garages are built.

For now, though, McDowell and Main have asked students, faculty and staff to be patient.

"We know what we've got to do right now," McDowell said. "We know what the effect of doing nothing will have on our campus community."