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Legislature begins session anew

UNL seeks money from state budget

BY GWEN TIETGEN

Collecting more cash is on the brains of many university officials as the 97th legislative session begins.

The university is seeking money for a laundry list of improvements, including raising faculty salaries, funding for health care costs, renovations of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and revitalization of rural Nebraska communities.

Funding for faculty salaries is necessary for the university to stay competitive with its peer institutions, said Ron Withem, the UNL director of government relations.

"The core of academia is its faculty," Withem said. "There's a lot more requests for funds than is available. In the end, we hope to be persuasive enough to get what we asked for."

The state's budget, which is set biennially, will be approved this year, and UNL hopes to get a share of the pie for all its requests.

A piece of this pie would be eaten up by a 5.22 percent average salary increase for faculty, funds for increasing health care costs and a long-awaited replacement of the heating, air conditioning and humidity system in the Sheldon Art Gallery.

A request for aid for the Sheldon Art Gallery was killed in the last legislative session.

A new issue this session concerns the university's status as a land grant institution.

Because UNL is a land grant institution, it has a responsibility to provide funding for the economic development of rural Nebraska, Withem said.

"We've been told by those in rural Nebraska that their economy needs some assistance," Withem said.

In answer to this, the university supports a rural initiative that would help rural Nebraska's economic state.

Tobacco settlement funds and cigarette tax money are among other issues the university has its eye on.

The university will support an initiative to donate one-third of the tobacco settlement funds for biomedical research, Withem said.

The university also supports the governor's initiative to continue a two-cent diversion of the cig-

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Sen. Chip Maxwell of Omaha checks his e-mail Monday in the Legislative Chamber. Maxwell is serving his first term in the Legislature and is still familiarizing himself with his computer after the fourth day of the new session.

David Clasen/DN

Redistricting state among tasks

BY GEORGE GREEN

The Legislature kicked off its 97th session with a full plate of work.

The year will be particularly busy because the Legislature has to tackle redistricting the state, a daunting task that rises only once every 10 years when the Census is taken.

Moreover, the Legislature has to complete a two-year budget for the state in a year where budget shortfalls are being discussed in terms of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Sen. Roger Wehrbein of

Plattsmouth, chairman of the Appropriations Committee, said redistricting the state to comply with census tract numbers will be "contentious."

Redistricting generally pits urban districts against rural ones or eastern districts against western ones, he said.

Population shifts from rural areas to urban cities generate bitter disputes as lines are redrawn to match population densities.

Sen. Jon Bruning of Sarpy County said preliminary numbers seem to indicate that Lincoln and Omaha

stand to gain at least 2 seats in the Legislature. These additional seats will have to be sacrificed by western districts, he said.

"It's going to be a very delicate process," Bruning said.

Senators will not have time on their side when they tweak district boundaries because the final census numbers will not be available until April 1, Bruning said.

This leaves the senators just two months to hash out the boundaries.

To get an early start on the issue, the Legislature planned to debate the

rules of the redistricting process today, said Sen. Bob Wickersham of Harrison, chairman of the Revenue Committee.

Senators will consider forming a special committee composed of three senators from each congressional district charged with overseeing the work, he said.

The Legislature will also consider a proposal to hold public hearings in each congressional district about the redistricting, Wickersham said.

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Veterans see seats go to new senators

BY GEORGE GREEN

As university students entered classrooms for the first time Monday, state legislators walked into the Capitol to begin their fourth day on the job.

The 97th Legislature convened last Wednesday and has since tackled questions concerning committee assignments and chairmanships and has begun introducing new legislation.

Last week, some veteran senators were surprised to learn they had lost their committee seats to less experienced – and even freshmen – senators.

One of the most poignant examples of younger senators taking seats from veterans occurred in the Appropriations Committee.

Two veteran senators, Mark Quandahl and Pam Brown, both from Omaha, were passed over in favor of a brand new Omaha senator, Lowen Kruse.

Brown, who had served on the Appropriations Committee for six years, said the special Committee on Committees, which decides committee membership, might have ignored her request because of her fiscally conservative ideology.

"I can only operate on what I heard about me being too frugal," she said.

Although she said she was disappointed with the Committee on Committees' judgment, Brown said she could live with the decision.

"You live by the sword, and you die by the sword," she said.

Kruse's appointment tips the balance on the Appropriations Committee toward new senators who have never worked on a two-year budget before.

Brown said veteran senators have the neces-

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Passing a legislative bill isn't as easy as it sounds

BY GWEN TIETGEN

As Nebraska's senators tackle the fifth day of the 90-day legislative session today, the air is calmer than it will be in the following months.

But whether it's Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, a 30-year veteran, or Sen. Philip Erdman of Bayard, the youngest senator at age 23, the focus is on the agenda of bills that will be heard in the first committee hearings starting Jan. 16.

Senators can submit their bills during the first 10 days of the session.

Sen. David Landis of Lincoln said right now all the action is taking place away from the floor.

"Now we're just taking leadership and doing paperwork," Landis said.

This year's Unicameral leadership sees both new and old faces.

Speaker Doug Kristensen of Minden

will become the longest standing Speaker of the Legislature if he finishes out his term, Ombudsman Marshall Lux said.

While others, such as Sen. Ron Raikes of Lincoln, chairman for the Education Committee, are new to leadership positions.

But the legislative process is more complex than just committees and paperwork.

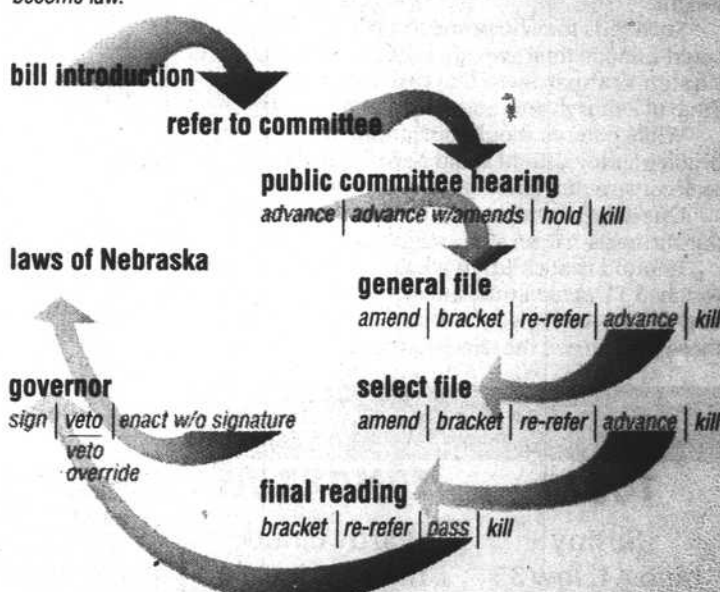
Before bills are introduced on the floor, the process has already started with an idea that can be made by anyone – citizen or senator.

Ultimately, it's up to the senator to decide whether he or she wants to turn a suggestion into a bill.

After being drafted and introduced, the bill is referred to a committee, where

How a bill becomes a law

A bill advances through the Nebraska Legislature in specific steps. Only if it advances to the desk of the governor and leaves with his signature does it become law.



source: www.unicam.state.ne.us

Melanie Falk/DN

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Hagel: Bush team to 'enlighten' foreign policy

■ The Nebraska senator also said the President-elect would assemble one of the best national security teams while in office.

BY BRIAN CARLSON

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEBRASKAN

WASHINGTON — When George W. Bush becomes the nation's 43rd president on Jan. 20, he will inherit a world situation that requires continued U.S. leadership, U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel said last week.

"The next great power, if not the United States, may not use power as beneficently as America has over the last century," said Hagel, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a

Vietnam War veteran.

Hagel spoke to reporters in his office in the historic old Russell Senate Office Building, where his walls are adorned with dozens of photographs from his overseas travels, the flag he raised at the opening of a U.S. consulate in Ho Chi Minh City and a weapon Theodore Roosevelt carried when he charged up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War.

During the Republican National Convention, Hagel said Bush would assemble "one of the best national security teams that we've seen in modern history."

In an interview on Thursday, Hagel said Bush would be well-served by Colin Powell, secretary of state designate, Donald Rumsfeld, secretary of defense designate and Condoleezza Rice, national security adviser designate.

He said that team would make a comprehensive review of U.S. interests and commitments and pursue an "enlightened, engaging foreign policy."

During last fall's campaign, Rice suggested at one point that the United States remove its peacekeeping troops from Bosnia and Kosovo and shift that burden onto the Europeans.

Asked about that suggestion, Hagel said he believed Rice's statement was campaign rhetoric, but that it had nevertheless "unnerved some of our NATO allies." He said he doubted Bush would pull the United States away from that type of responsibility, and Hagel said he would oppose U.S. disengagement from the world.

"When I think they're wrong, I'll take them on,"

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