

New legislators eager, ready to learn the ropes

While some have worked closely with the Legislature before, others are just starting.

BY GWEN TIETGEN

With new state senators completing their first-ever week of legislative duties Wednesday, some may feel a little overwhelmed.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm walking on foot, while everyone else is riding on horseback," said Sen. Chip Maxwell of Omaha.

Maxwell is one of seven new senators this session.

And while some have had some legislative experience, others have had none at all.

Sen. Carroll Burling of Kenesaw, a lifetime farmer before being elected, has been involved in some way with the legislative process since 1986, serving as a lobbyist and as part of the Nebraska and Iowa Farm Bureaus.

"There's really been no surprises; it's just been learning how to be a part of the Legislature instead of an observer," Burling said.

On the other hand, Sen. Doug Cunningham of Wausa, one of three retailers in the Legislature, said the procedures and technical aspects of the Legislature were still all Greek to him.

"I've learned I have a lot to

Legislature

learn," Cunningham said, "but the other senators and my staff have been so helpful."

Despite the freshman senators' varying backgrounds, their work as legislators remains the same.

Serving on committees, talking with constituents, and thumbing through piles of information and paperwork will put freshman senators to the test as the session continues.

"The sheer volume of information is enormous," Maxwell said. "There is no way any one human can process it all at one time."

And that's why experienced senators are patient in repeating information and explaining procedures to new senators.

"Everyone's very accommodating and helpful," Maxwell said, as he explained what he calls his "Columbo privilege," — or the liberty to ask questions about the meanings of certain bills or procedures.

Said Burling of his first week of work: "Go slow. Don't make too many waves early. Establish a good rapport with other senators, and be assertive, but not too aggressive."

Other senators echoed Burling's advice.

"Never be afraid to ask a question. Remember you earned your right to be there just as much as a 20-year veter-

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Carroll Burling
senator

an," Maxwell said.

As one of the few freshman committee chairmen, Sen. Philip Erdman of Bayard heads the Enrollment and Review Committee, the honorary committee chairmanship given to the youngest incoming senator, and was also elected vice-chairman of the Retirement Committee.

"Be prepared," Erdman said. "It's an outstanding opportunity. The swearing-in is very humbling. You have to keep the right attitude as the session goes along."

But one of the most rewarding things for any senator, Maxwell said, was being able to talk with constituents.

Maxwell said Monday a constituent came to Lincoln and visited with him about submitting a new bill.

"We all have the same objective: to figure out the best way to serve our people."

Reactions vary with new board

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Martin said, the commission, which evaluates programs proposed by the regents and creates long-term, comprehensive plans for educational institutions, would lose its ability to eliminate duplication and waste in the system if it's combined with the other groups.

Once the commission is fused with the other institutions, Martin said, it will no longer be able to objectively operate as a check and balance on suggested university programs.

Fortunately, she said, it would take more than a bill to remove the commission, which was created in 1990 by a constitutional amendment.

Martin said because the commission was created by a constitutional amendment, it would take another amendment to disband the group.

Regent Chuck Hassebrook isn't excited about the proposed super-regent group either.

Hassebrook said proponents of the plan need to demonstrate a centralized educational body would improve the quality of state's educational system.

So far, he said, he hasn't heard or seen anything that shows one board would be better than three.

"The evidence is not there," he said.

Martin also said proponents needed to prove their case before changes should be made. And, she said, other states — about 25 — that have a super-regent system have yet to demonstrate the system has boosted the quality of their educational systems.

Hassebrook said he was also worried each institution's individual role and responsibility would be lost in the massive merger.

Still, Hassebrook said he was open to new ideas and will listen to arguments for the plan.

"I'm not unalterably opposed," he said.

Jeff Renner, chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Nebraska State Colleges, which governs the state colleges, said he was also skeptical about the plan, but not opposed to learning about it.

Renner said his main fear was small colleges would be lost during the shuffle.

But, he said, there could be benefits from the system.

"I have an open mind for

Suspected meth lab leads to local fire

The Lincoln Fire Department found more than expected when it responded to an early Sunday morning fire at 4833 S. 66th St.

Deputy Chief Larry Edwards said chemicals recognized for making methamphetamine were discovered in a first floor bathroom of the house on fire.

Edwards said the chemicals may have played a key role in starting the fire, but nothing had been determined.

Marvin Schwab, 52, Deborah Schwab, 50, and Benjamin Schwab, 21, were all in the home at the time of the fire, Edwards said.

The family was alerted by a smoke alarm and Benjamin Schwab, who began hollering, Edwards said.

Benjamin Schwab, who was in the bathroom at the time of the fire, received 2nd to 3rd degree burns on the bottom of his feet, Edwards said.

Benjamin Schwab is being questioned because he was in the bathroom where the suspected meth-making chemicals were at the time of the fire.

The investigation to determine the start of the fire is ongoing, Edwards said.

Law and Order

James Ellis, the fire investigator on the case, said Benjamin Schwab had not been cooperative in supplying investigators with information about the fire.

Benjamin Schwab's story seems false, Ellis said.

Ellis said he was waiting for Benjamin Schwab to be more cooperative with his side of the story before a cause of the fire was determined.

As of yet, no charges have been made.

The 1st Engine Company arrived shortly after 1 a.m. and found heavy smoke coming from the first floor bathroom, laundry room and garage.

Ellis said the damage estimate was \$50,000 to the structure and \$25,000 to its contents.

Although the first floor areas of the home were damaged, 75 percent of the home was unharmed, Edwards said.

Edwards said Benjamin Schwab was now under his parents' care, after being transported to St. Elizabeth Regional Medical Center.

Compiled by Jill Conner

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Legislative Notebook

Bill to redefine smoking areas

LB423, introduced by Sen. Nancy Thompson of Papillion, would extend non-smoking designations established in the Nebraska Indoor Clean Air Act to include grocery stores, convenience stores and assisted-living facilities.

The bill would also force smokers to extinguish their cigarettes in enclosed areas of public access, such as hallways, stairwells, rest rooms, lobbies and waiting areas.

Legislature to get tough on habitual sexual offenders

Sen. Deborah Suttle of Omaha introduced LB434 to help protect Nebraskans from habitual sexual offenders.

The bill, also known as the Habitual Sexual Offender Act, establishes a point system for various sexual crimes based on the nature of the offense. It outlines minimum and maximum prison sentences for offenders based on the point totals.

For example, first degree sexual assault is assigned 3 points and incest is assigned 2. The more points an offender racks up, the longer his prison sentence will be.

LB434 also orders the state

Parole Board to consider whether or not a sexual offender has completed a rehabilitation program when reviewing the inmate's petition for parole.

Bill to speed absentee voting

If the Legislature passes LB410, introduced by Sen. Richard McDonald of Rockville, absentee voters will have to get their ballots in the hands of the election commissioner before the close of Election Day.

Under the old standards, voters needed to mail their ballots with enough time for the ballots to reach the election commissioner by 10 a.m. two days after the election.

Controlled substances provision changed

Under the old code, it was illegal to "induce or entice" any person to drink, breathe or ingest chemicals with the intent to get high.

LB413, introduced by Jennie Robak of Columbus, would also make it unlawful for people to take the substances themselves, even if they weren't enticing others to join in the fun.

Compile by George Green

World-Herald series critical, overall fair

PERLMAN from page 1

off here," he said. "I think they're talking about things that need to be talked about."

Bryant said he hoped Nebraskans would still focus on the positive aspects of the university.

"The story is as Perlman said — people are starting to pull together; and it really is a great institution."

Miles Bryant
senate president-elect

"The story is as Perlman said — people are starting to pull together; and it really is a great institution."

Most senate members agreed with Perlman that the major concern with the series is the affect it will have on student recruitment, an issue addressed in the articles.

"I think the casual reader will come away with a much more negative (attitude than those who read the articles carefully)," Perlman said.

Bryant said he didn't see future recruitment being affected, though. Though the university is in the public eye now, questions of mediocrity will fade, he said.

"I think generally people's attention spans are pretty short," he said. "One day it's there and the next day it's gone."

Perlman did have a quibble with the list of UNL's "High-Quality Programs" in Tuesday's

World-Herald. "That list was not created after elaborate thought," Perlman said. He said it has no connection with the upcoming prioritized list of university programs.

The prioritized list will not outline the university's best programs, Perlman said, but those in which the university intends to invest more resources.

Because of responding to The World-Herald series, Perlman said he was delayed in completing an introduction to the prioritization list, which he was scheduled to present Tuesday. The introduction would outline to the campus community and the public the purpose of the prioritization.

"We hope to get that out pretty quickly," he said.

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- THE BEACH CLUB** SLICED TURKEY BREAD, AVOCADO, AND CHEESE ON THE BOTTOM. ALFALFA SPROUTS, LETTUCE TOMATO AND REAL HELLMANN'S MAYO ON TOP. (IT DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER)

#13 GOURMET VEGGIE CLUB
MY GREAT 7-GRAIN HONEYWHEAT BREAD LOADED WITH TONS OF CHEESE, ALFALFA SPROUTS, AVOCADO, LETTUCE, TOMATO & MAYO! THIS VEGGIE SANDWICH IS WORLD CLASS! (FOR THOSE NOT INTO HONEYWHEAT AND BAIT BRAGOLA TO ENJOY THIS AWESOME CLUB)

#14 THE BOOTLEGGERS CLUB
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Suicides leave questions

SUICIDE from page 1

darn ambivalent about life and death," Cather - Pound-Neihardt Assistant Director of Residence Life Glenn Gray said. "They want to die, but at the same time want to be rescued."

Portnoy said the best way to help a potentially suicidal person was to communicate.

"Sit and listen," he said. "Try and understand and try to support them. Directly asking about suicide doesn't pose any danger."

He emphasized the importance of helping a troubled person seek professional mental health assistance.

"We don't expect people out in the university community to be the therapy," Portnoy said. "It's important not to take full responsibility (for someone) by being the sole counselor. It's absolutely critical that you get the person the help that they need."

Both Portnoy and Gray encouraged students to contact the University Health Center at 472-7450 to find help.

"Even if it means breaking a confidence," Portnoy said, students should get help.

Nancy Ponc echoed that sentiment. "Don't ever feel like you're betraying friends by calling parents," she said.

For students having difficulty dealing with the deaths, a meeting is scheduled in the Cather-Pound-Neihardt north dining room tonight at 8.

At the meeting, students can talk about feelings, ask questions and contact campus and larger community resources for further help.

Residents on the sixth floor of Pound Hall had a meeting Monday to talk about the death. Abel Hall held meetings in December after Ponc's death.

Sophomore civil engineering major and Abel 11 resident Justin Petersen said the meetings were beneficial to the residence hall, and the mood has improved.

"We've recovered quite a bit," he said.

Portnoy, from the Health Center, said when faced with the unexpected death of a loved one, the best way to cope is with "time, talk and tears."

Though Renard's family could not be reached for comment, Nancy Ponc said the grieving process for her son had just begun for her family.

"We're doing OK," she said. "We'll make it through."