

Bill would try to ease heating woes

■ LB502 changes taxes on natural gas to be based on usage instead of a fixed rate.

BY GEORGE GREEN

Nebraskans struggling with soaring heating costs this winter might find solace in knowing cheaper bills could be on the horizon.

The Revenue Committee heard testimony Wednesday on LB502, which would change how the state taxes natural gas.

The bill, introduced by Sen. John Hilgert of Omaha, would change natural gas taxes from a 6.5 percent sales tax to an adjustable excise tax based on

energy use.

With a sales tax in place, the state's bank account swells when gas prices rise because citizens shell out more taxable dough, Hilgert said.

If LB502 gets a nod from the Legislature, the government won't get extra tax money when gas prices rise because the new tax would not consider prices, it would only consider use.

Less tax money is good in this situation because it means less burden on citizens strapped for cash, Hilgert said.

"I don't want the state to piggy-back" on the hardship of citizens, he said.

Representatives from a variety of utility companies, includ-

Legislature

ing Kansas City, Mo.-based UtiliCorp United, one of Nebraska's largest natural-gas providers, lined up to support Hilgert's bill.

Doug Clark, a UtiliCorp spokesman, said his company helped Hilgert craft a bill that helped out desperate citizens.

But Stan Timm, the finance director for the City of Omaha, said the bill wouldn't help desperate municipalities.

Of the 6.5 percent sales tax, 1.5 percent goes to cities and 5 percent goes to the state.

By axing the tax, the state

forces some cities into serious financial troubles, Timm said.

The City of Omaha takes in more than \$2 million each year from the sales tax on natural gas, he said.

Yanking these precious dollars would force Omaha to jack up other taxes or cut services, he said.

"We don't want to have our legs cut out from under us," he said.

Hilgert acknowledged the plight of municipalities, but he said the government couldn't put its own difficulties ahead of its citizens'.

"The state shouldn't have a hand in the citizen's hardships," he said.

Campaign finance laws draw criticism

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didates the option of staying under a spending ceiling.

Candidates who choose to forgo the spending limit must provide a good-faith statement detailing how much they plan to spend over the lid. The state steps into the picture after the statement is filed and provides matching funds to the opponent of the candidate who opted out of the limit.

The goal of the law is to equalize the campaign process and keep campaign spending down, Gould said.

Thus far, he said, the law has worked perfectly. Only a hand full of candidates have broken through the voluntary ceiling since the Legislature enacted the law, he said.

And, he said, Ferlic has been the only candidate to truly shatter the barrier.

Moreover, he said Ferlic intentionally schemed against the law.

"It was a contrived effort to shock the

CFLA (Campaign Finance Limitation Act)," he said.

Ferlic announced his spending plan on the last possible day to file spending statements, and Brashear filed a lawsuit against the law on the same day, he said.

Nevertheless, Gould said he supported Brashear's lawsuit because it would test the law and give it finality.

"This could be the case that goes all the way to the Supreme Court," he said.

Until the court rules, he said the law should stay on the books because it protected poor people's freedom of speech.

If it's repealed, he said the wealthy would get another step up on the less fortunate.

"Wealthy men can speak louder than the poor," he said.

Despite its lofty goal, Dave Heineman, Nebraska state treasurer, said the law was "a noble failure."

It's chock full of loopholes that let candidates skirt the restrictions, he said.

For example, candidates who stick to the limits don't get a dime of state money until their opponents spend 40 percent of their money that is beyond the limit. Therefore, crafty-candidates could stop at 39 percent beyond the cap and keep their opponents from getting state money.

The result is one candidate having nearly twice the resources of another, he said.

Issues about independent expenditures, which aren't governed by the law, further cripple the act, he said.

More importantly, he said taxpayers don't want to pick up the tab for campaigns.

Fees paid by citizens who violate the law provide the backbone of the campaign fund.

These technicalities and other more complicated problems shoot a good idea in the foot, he said.

And, Heineman said, lawmakers should recognize the act's problems and erase the law.

"It's time to repeal the law," he said.

Faculty mulls grading changes

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"No single activity the university takes is likely to have a big effect by itself," he said. "The grading system by itself is not what makes the difference. I think it's sad that students will argue against working harder."

Karen Lyons, assistant director of the Honors Program and an English professor, said she was in favor of the new system.

"It allows us much more accuracy in the assessment of students," she said. "I think that

this is a very good grading system."

Lyons said the system would allow students applying to law and medical schools to submit grades that would not be altered to compare with grades from schools that use plus-minus systems.

She also said though students may be worried about keeping scholarships, her sense was that scholarship and Honors Program requirements would change with the system.

Now, honors students must

maintain a 3.5 grade point average — a B+ average — to remain in the program. Under the new system, a B+ average would correspond to a 3.33.

Interim Chancellor Harvey Perlman said he had confidence that the faculty would maintain fairness to students while increasing academic challenges under the new system.

"The grading system is an assessment of student performance," he said. "The real test is, 'Can you challenge students to perform at a higher level?'"



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Reunion holds onto past

REUNION from page 1

struction remain. Paint splatters line the floor and walls, and left-over canvases are scattered around the space.

A random row of lockers sits in the middle of the room. In other rooms, left over display cases remain.

A few precisely positioned buckets collect water that drips into the building.

"The Reunion serves as a transition space," said John Benson, director of Institutional Research and Planning.

The second floor is used to store part of the university museum's collection, Benson said. The lower level contains samples for the earth and conservation survey.

The future of the building remains in limbo. The university's master plan, which spans the next 25 years, eventually calls for the building to be torn down, but no date has been set, Benson said.

Said Jenkins, the building's owner when it was in its union heyday: "Once the first business closed, everything fell apart."

Series of forums help address women's issues

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The Chancellor's Commission on the Status of Women hopes to gather the experiences of women faculty, staff and students to get a feel of what the climate for women at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is like.

Commission members hope to get feedback from women at an 11:30 a.m. forum today in the Culture Center multipurpose room. The forum will be open for women to tell about their experiences.

Three other forums will take place in addition to today's. The next forum will be held Feb. 21 at 11:30 a.m. at the Nebraska East Union. On March 6, the forum will be held in the Nebraska Union at 11:30 a.m. On March 9, a forum will be held during the "Honoring Women's Voices" conference.

Jan Deeds, assistant director of student involvement and a

member of the commission, said she hoped students would participate in one of the forums.

"It's very important that we have student input on what the climate is, as well as faculty input," Deeds said.

Those who don't feel comfortable participating in the forum setting can e-mail Deeds at jdeeds1@unl.edu. Those who e-mail should include whether they want to have their names disclosed. An anonymous letter can also be sent to Deeds at the Women's Center at 340 Nebraska Union.

Deeds said the commission wanted to know both the positive and negative experiences women on campus have had.

"We want to know whether there are places, departments or people that have made them feel welcome," she said.

The feedback gathered will be compiled and presented to the chancellor.

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Ammonia used in meth faces ban

BY GWEN TIETGEN

Charging criminals for making methamphetamine is a problem for Nebraska law enforcement officials.

Anhydrous ammonia, a substance farmers and the agriculture industry use to fertilize corn, soybeans and other crops, is also used to make methamphetamine.

LB815, introduced by Sen. Ed Schrock of Elm Creek, adds anhydrous ammonia to the list of drug paraphernalia and closes the gap in current state law between using the substance as a drug and a fertilizer.

The bill was heard in the Judiciary Committee on Wednesday. No action was taken.

Under the bill, anhydrous ammonia would be illegal when not in a container approved by the Department of Agriculture and when intended for the use of producing a methamphetamine.

Tom Mutt, sheriff of the Phelps County Sheriff's Department, brought the problem to Schrock last fall.

"I felt we needed a law to combat the using of anhydrous ammonia to make methamphetamines," Mutt said.

Because criminals tend to steal anhydrous ammonia from a 200 or 300 gallon tank, Mutt said, it leaves farmers in danger.

"This substance is very dangerous," he said. "It can burn your eyes out, suck the air out of your lungs and cause severe damage to the skin."

Schrock said the bill was aimed at helping law enforcement officials and farmers simultaneously.

"It'll help give law enforcement officers another tool to stop this kind of activity," he said.

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