

Murphy's Law could be a new state motto

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Thursday, 11 December 2008 16:37 - Last Updated Thursday, 11 December 2008 16:44

By Ed Howard

The warning inherent in 'not being able to see the forest for the trees' is generally understood to be particularly appropriate where lawmaking is involved.

A public policy debate reflective of inadequate vision might go like this: "Well, here we have this rotten tree in the middle of the forest, and science tells us that, unless we get rid of it quick, its infection will spread to the other trees in this beautiful, dense forest. We need to act quickly!"

"Yes, indeed. But, if we chop it down, then we will have to chop it up. And if we chop it up, we'll have to haul it out. And if we haul it out, we might damage more trees. Isn't there a more cost-effective way to get rid of this thing?"

"Certainly! The fastest and most economical way to get rid of this one tree is to just burn it down. One match, one tree! And tree huggers say that when a tree is destroyed by fire it replenishes the soil, or something."

In the wake of the resulting fire, which ultimately took out the tree, the forest, a half-dozen farms and a high-tone suburb, there came an outbreak of headshaking and concern. Everyone was so well-intentioned.

Thus it happens. Over and over and over.

In Washington, it can involve anything from notoriously prodigious costs of hammers and toilet seats, to the gargantuan costs of bailing out banks, or whole industries. Somehow, the same questions keep coming up.

"Uh, where'd the money go?"

"Whoa! Did you know that was gonna' happen?"

In Lincoln, and other state capitols, the differences are of scale. But the same sort of whoopsie! is possible.

Now, consider this. If you've seen very many government buildings, you know that their designers are fond of sayings and slogans and prayers. "In God We Trust" and the Ten Commandments have always enjoyed particular favor.

Nebraska's statehouse is inscribed with two assertions of particular worth.

"Political society exists for the sake of Noble living"

And, my favorite:

"The salvation of the State is watchfulness in the Citizens"

The thing is, such pronouncements are of a general nature. What has become obvious, in the wake of everything from Nebraska's safe haven law debacle to the sub-prime lending fiasco in Washington, is that policy-makers need reminders that are both more direct, and applicable to virtually every situation — from the lawmaking chamber to the committee hearing room to the restrooms.

It is with this in mind that we suggest an amendment to the Constitution of the State of Nebraska, requiring that, upon a wall in every senator's office, in every committee hearing room, in several places around the legislative chamber, and even in every rest room accessed by lawmakers in the Capitol, there hang, in bold type, appropriately sized plaques, proclaiming Murphy's Law: "If It Can Go Wrong, It Will Go Wrong"

Murphy's Law could be a new state motto

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Thursday, 11 December 2008 16:37 - Last Updated Thursday, 11 December 2008 16:44

Two things prove the worth of this proposal.

The first is history.

The second is the fact that the best indicator of future behavior is previous behavior.

We would further suggest that, when lawmakers are meeting in the legislative chamber, the Clerk of the Legislature be required, every hour on the hour, to make the following announcement:

“Mr. President, in accordance with requirements of the state constitution, and on behalf of the taxpayers and future generations of taxpayers, you and the members of the Legislature are reminded that, if it can go wrong, it will go wrong. You are urged to conduct yourselves accordingly.”

Those signs all over the place, and that constant verbal reminder, would no doubt be an almost constant annoyance to a lot of senators, and to most lobbyists.

And some lawmakers would no doubt rail against the whole setup, claiming that it is a waste of time, and time is precious, etc.

Such an argument might easily be rebutted, if not refuted, by another old saying reflective of the history of lawmaking.

“There’s never time to do it right, but there’s always time to do it over.”

Ed Howard is the statehouse correspondent for the Nebraska Press Association.