

A breath of fresh air: Openness and transparency in the Legislature

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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A Capitol Commentary

By Renee Pflughaupt

Government often gets a bad rap.

With all the news of scandals, closed doors and shady deals going about, it's no wonder only 15 percent of Americans trust their own elected officials to do what's right, according to a CNN/ORC International Poll released in September.

Walking into public hearings last week, these feelings of distrust were strong.

Hard-edged, weather-beaten faces told senators coldly their own government was abandoning them and their farmland.

Tom Cone of Atkinson accused senators for not listening to their people. In fact, he said he invited each and every senator to his home to see where the pipeline would go.

Only one senator came, he said, anger creeping into his voice.

Multiple times, a tissue came out to dab away tears as testifiers told, again and again, how precious Nebraska's land and resources were.

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These were interspersed with (to put it lightly) “interesting” testimony. Carol and Noah Reed created quite the dynamic duo with their presentation at nearly every public hearing last week.

Noah, a toddler, was proudly (and obviously) showing his support of the Sandhills by wearing a red jumper with Ogallala Aquifer factoids written on it.

After stating and spelling her name, Reed lifted him up before the Natural Resources Committee, stating: “He’s an expert on leaks and spills.”

After a few testimonies like this, I wondered at the cordiality of Sen. Chris Langemeier of Schuyler. Everyone laughed together when the first witness banged the recorder mic.

“Don’t touch the mic!” Sen. Chris Langemeier said with a laugh. He explained the mic was only for recording, not amplification purposes. With a smile he said he didn’t want to get complaints from the transcribing clerk about the bad recording quality.

Even though the pipeline debate often gained a fevered pitch the past few months, it mostly took place out in the open here. Anyone and everyone came to tell their two cents about legislation and the proposed pipeline route.

And that, as Joel Sartore of National Geographic said, made us all very heartened about our state’s open government.

We’re all Nebraskans here. And we don’t turn our backs on our own.

Even when one of our own proudly presents a singing, stuffed Western Meadowlark before a legislative committee.

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I can still hear that tinny representation of our state bird's song in that chamber, followed by her final words:

"This is Nebraska. You don't want to silence this voice."

I'm glad to say that won't happen anytime soon.

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