Resolution of pipeline controversy reveals many silver linings

A Capitol Commentary

By Erinn Wakeman

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For most Nebraskans, the fall season is a relatively calm time — the kids are back in school, Husker football provides the excitement on Saturdays, the leaves are changing.

With the controversy surrounding the proposed Keystone XL pipeline this fall, however, the atmosphere around the state wasn't so calm. Just in time for Thanksgiving, though, good news has arrived with the decision to move the pipeline away from the Sandhills.

Hundreds of opponents of the pipeline came out to U.S. State Department public hearings in Lincoln back in September to voice their anger and concern over the proposed route of the pipeline, which would cross the Ogallala Aquifer.

The aquifer yields about 30 percent of the nation's ground water used for irrigation.

It also provides drinking water to 82 percent of the people who live within the boundaries of the aquifer.

The proposed pipeline would carry up to 700,000 barrels of crude oil per day from Alberta's tar sands to refineries in the Gulf Coast. Nebraska environmental groups, Bold Nebraska, the Sierra Club, farmers, ranchers, college students and everyone in between spoke out against the pipeline.

In August, six Nebraskans were even arrested during a protest against the pipeline in Washington, D.C.

With no pipeline siting legislation in place, however, at times it seemed there was little the state could do to stop TransCanada from building the pipeline.

Gov. Dave Heineman gave pipeline opponents hope when he called for a legislative special session to find a solution to the pipeline issue, but many were confused when he didn't offer any guiding legislation proposals, which is customary.

As recently as last week, no one could say what legislation, if any at all, would pass in the special session. Yet here we find ourselves, with not one but two bills passed and signed into law Tuesday.

Last Monday, Sen. Mike Flood of Norfolk announced he had negotiated a deal with TransCanada in which they agreed to move the route of the pipeline out of the Sandhills.

Flood also offered an amendment to LB4, the pipeline siting bill introduced by Sen. Chris Langemeier of Schuyler, which would allow the state to pay for an environmental impact study of the new pipeline. This would allow the state the authority to work with federal officials on the study, after which the governor would sign off on the pipeline.

Lawmakers also approved Fullerton Sen. Annette Dubas's bill (LB1), which give the Nebraska Public Service Commission authority for siting future pipelines.

Most observers consider the special session a success. Although some said they didn't want the pipeline at all, most people just wanted a different route that wouldn't endanger the Ogallala Aquifer.

As the controversy around the Keystone XL pipeline finally dies down, I propose that Nebraskans make a few additions to our lists of things we are thankful for this Thanksgiving.

First, we should be thankful that we have finally reached a settlement on the pipeline issue that most of us are actually happy with, something that seemed nearly impossible just a few months ago.

We should be thankful that our neighbors are brave, outspoken people who stand up for what they believe and don't allow foreign companies to dictate what we should do with our land.

We should be thankful that our state has an open system of government that gives voice to the people and cares about what we think and what is best for us as a state. We should be thankful for our legislature, for their willingness to listen to our concerns and work for a solution.

We should be thankful to those oddballs, the few whose passion for a cause was matched only by their quirky methods of expressing that passion. At the very least, they provided welcome comic relief in tense moments and showed us that no matter how strange or unusual a voice may be, it is still a voice that is free to be heard.

We should be thankful that not only as Nebraskans, but as Americans, we have the right to hold public meetings on controversial issues, to peaceably assemble.

We have freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

This fall, during a time when many Nebraskans were angry about the proposed pipeline, we exercised those freedoms, and for that, we should be proud. And thankful.

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