A Capitol Commentary

By Mary Kay Quinlan

The Nebraska Unicameral is back in town for its 60-day legislative session, creating new opportunities for citizens to influence the men and women who make decisions about how our state government will function.

But some citizens have louder voices than others.

That's because they're able to hire lobbyists to promote their interests at the Capitol.

To be sure, you don't need to be connected to a high-priced lobbyist to make your case. The recent special session, it could be argued, was a victory for grassroots interests who got the ball rolling on efforts to keep the proposed Keystone XL pipeline out of the Sandhills.

But the importance of lobbyists is a given to many interests in the state, including, it would appear, the City of Omaha, whose city council recently voted to hire a prominent Lincoln lobbying firm to augment the voice of its existing full-time lobbyist.

Supporters of the proposal argued that an additional paid voice for the state's largest city was necessary because of anti-Omaha sentiment in the statehouse. The mayor's office also

reportedly argued that the state's urban areas needed strong representation in Lincoln.

Hmmm.

Let's see now.

Douglas County alone has 14 state senators. That's nearly 29 percent of the Legislature's 49 seats.

Throw in Sarpy County's five senators, and the proportion comes to nearly 39 percent.

Lancaster County, Lincoln's home, has nine lawmakers, or 18 percent of the total seats.

When you add it all up, the state's two major urban areas hold 57 percent of the votes in this traditionally rural state's one-house Legislature. That's because roughly 57 percent of the population now lives in those two major urban areas.

To be sure, those 28 urban districts are hardly monolithic. Much of Lancaster and Sarpy counties and western stretches of Douglas County have significant farmland and related agricultural concerns.

And, of course, even in the urban core of Omaha and Lincoln, lawmakers—like the people they represent—are seldom unanimous in their views of anything, except perhaps agreeing that the sun rises in the East.

Nonetheless, it would appear that the one-man-one-vote principle has assured that the state's urban areas already have strong representation at the Capitol. Were they of a mind to do so, lawmakers from just three of the state's 93 counties could steamroller any proposal that came

their way.

Fortunately, it would be difficult to argue that people in urban and rural areas of this or any other state have mutually exclusive interests. In fact, it can be argued that the economic health and vitality of the state's urban areas relies considerably on the health of rural Nebraska.

But to suggest that somehow the state's urban interests are under-represented in Lincoln is just plain silly.

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