Capitol View

By Ed Howard

The competition for Republican nomination to the U.S. Senate is a little more interesting these days, thanks to the tea party.

A couple of tea parties, actually.

State Treasurer Don Stenberg, a GOP warhorse of more than 30 years standing, has been endorsed by FreedomWorks PAC, known as “a deep-pocketed Tea Party group that has promised to get involved in Republican primaries.”

Word around the campfire is that this outfit might provide Stenberg with some serious money.

Meanwhile, Attorney General Jon Bruning, who already has serious money, has a tea party endorsement of his own. He was given the nod previously by the Tea Party Express.

Polls to date have shown Bruning leading Stenberg, as well as state Sen. Deb Fischer of Valentine and Pat Flynn of Schuyler.

Stenberg supporters are understandably fond of pointing out that Bruning was a Democrat back in his college days, while their boss has generally been to the right of Barry Goldwater since birth.

It had to make Stenberg feel good when FreedomWorks Executive Director Max Pappas said: “Nebraskans described Stenberg to us as ‘tea party-minded before we had tea parties’ ….”

Stenberg was the star of several failed Senate bids, including one in which he narrowly lost to U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson, the incumbent Democrat who is considering a bid for a third term.

If he should win the primary, Stenberg’s campaign finance worries would be virtually over. The national Republican Party has made clear that Nelson is their No. 1 target in the 2012 congressional elections.

Stenberg and Bruning have earned reputations as gut fighters when it comes to politics. Their previous opponents would undoubtedly agree on the importance of a maxim central to survival in the ring — whether the political kind, or the type used for boxing: Protect yourself at all times!

The Senate race and the fight over the path of the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline have dominated political news around the Capitol throughout the summer, and there’s no indication that will change before the year ends.

Whether the controversial pipeline eventually carries tar sands oil from Canada through Nebraska’s Sand Hills and over the Ogallala Aquifer will be a political issue, and continuing story, for many years.

Part of that story will center on the role the Legislature chooses to play, or not to play, in the economic / environmental policy war generated by the project.

To date, the State Department and Congressional Research Service have insisted that the state has authority over routing such pipelines, if the Legislature decides to exercise it.

Gov. Dave Heineman has been just as adamant in contending that he doesn't believe it.

Heineman has refused to call the Legislature into special session to work on the issue, and only a few legislators have shown an interest in having the Unicameral call itself back to Lincoln through a vote of 33 of its 49 members.

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