

## **Christensen: Most intense session ever**

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Wednesday, 25 April 2012 20:24 - Last Updated Thursday, 26 April 2012 21:28

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**By Russ Pankonin**

**The Imperial Republican**

This year marked Sen. Mark Christensen's sixth session in the body and never before can he remember a session that proved as intense as the 60-day session completed Wednesday,

April 18.

Christensen said several factors played a role in setting up the spirited session.

Senators started the session not long after a contentious special session on the Keystone XL pipeline.

"That special session wore senators down," Christensen said this week. He felt they were never quite able to recoup from that experience going into the 60-day session in January.

Having some excess funds available to spend this session played right into a scenario of creating more friction amongst senators. Everybody had ideas for that money, the senator said, from tax relief to increased school state aid.

Christensen wanted to see money being repaid to the state by Republican Basin natural resource districts to go into a Water Cash Reserve Fund for use on state water issues.

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Instead of the \$7.2 million he asked for, he got \$1.4 million set aside this year for the fund under LB 950. He plans to go after next year's loan repayment during next year's session.

Several bills generated spirited debate, such as LB 559, which ultimately restored pre-natal medical services to women not covered by Medicaid, including illegal immigrants.

Christensen joined pro-life forces on the bill, which pitted them against the governor and those fighting it on the illegal immigrant front.

Christensen joined 29 other senators on the final day of the session to override a veto by Gov. Dave Heineman.

Christensen said the session also had the hint of some positioning by several senators who may be seeking the governorship.

## **Five Christensen bills pass**

Five of Christensen's bills passed during the 60-day session.

He said LB 950 will be of future benefit to everyone in his district.

LB 1125 gained approval that will allow irrigators in the Lower Republican NRD to seek refunds for occupation taxes on irrigated land enrolled in conservation or retirement programs. Previously, the NRD had no authority to make refunds in such instances.

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LB 1126 defined the one-mile jurisdiction of villages to come in line with that of other classes of cities.

LB 739 approved the transfer of Champion Mill State Park to Chase County.

He is also asking for several interim studies. One would look at providing an additional recovery amount for compensatory or actual damages sustained due to an unreasonable delay or denial by an insurance company.

Another would look at the ability to transfer flood water during a flood situation without the need to have the water appropriated by the Department of Natural Resources.

A pair of other studies would look at the policies and tax rates on malt beverages.

### **Veto overrides**

On the final day of the session, Christensen sided with the governor to sustain two vetoes but override another.

Christensen voted to sustain the veto on LB 806, a bill that would have allowed the State Racing Commission to regulate pari-mutuel wagering on historic horse races. The override fell one short of the 30 needed for the override.

He also stood with the governor on his veto of LB357 which would allow municipalities to

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increase their sales tax to 2 percent with a vote of the people.

Christensen said he could have gone either way on the bill. He had lots of constituent input against the bill and voted as such. However the veto was overridden on a 30-17 vote.

Christensen did vote to override the governor's veto on LB 599, which was overridden on a 30-16 vote.

### **Session highlights**

**Budget:** State senators tweaked the two-year budget by providing \$17 million for child welfare shortfalls and \$80 million for higher education projects, including \$50 million for a cancer research center at UNMC, among other provisions.

The projects also includes \$15 million to expand the nursing program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney and \$14.2 million for Chadron State College and Peru State College to improve their athletic centers.

**Child welfare:** Several changes were made to the child welfare system. They include:

**LB820—**The Foster Care Reimbursement Rate Committee will be tasked with developing a statewide standard for foster care payments.

**LB821—**This bill creates the Nebraska Children's Commission, which will create a statewide plan for child welfare reform.

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LB961—This bill ends case management privatization throughout most of the state and sets standards to reduce case loads, but allows the state to contract with the last remaining contractor in the eastern service area through a pilot program.

LB1160—This bill will lead to the development of a statewide web-based child welfare information system.

Tax relief: With passage of LB970, Nebraskans will receive about \$97 million in income tax relief over the next three years. The bill would have originally provided \$327 million in tax relief, which was the governor's intention, but was trimmed down during debate.

### **Constitutional issues**

Nebraska voters will have the opportunity to amend the state's constitution on the November 2012 general election ballot. Issues up for approval include:

LR40CA—decide if the rights to hunt, fish and harvest wildlife should be added to the state's constitution.

LR358CA—decide whether to let state senators serve three consecutive four-year terms, instead of the two terms allowed by current law.

LR373—decide if state senators get their first pay raise since 1988, from \$12,000 to \$22,500.