

Correctional system reforms

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 03 April 2014 00:00 -

Letter Back Home

By Senator Mark Christensen

After today (Thursday) only five legislative days remain in the 60-day 2014 legislative session.

Moreover, several bills hit the floor of the Unicameral for their first round of debate. So, this week I would like to touch on the status of some of those bills, along with sharing a great opportunity for high school juniors and seniors.

Correctional system reform

Back to what happened in the Legislature last week. Both LB 907 and LB 999 were introduced as bills that sought reform in our Nebraska correctional system.

Through the deliberations in the Judiciary Committee, each bill was changed to focus more narrowly on prison overcrowding and the mental health issues within our correctional system.

LB 907 will now provide for the creation of the Nebraska Justice Reinvestment Working Group to work with the Council of State Government's Justice Center. It will also assist the center to utilize its process to study and provide potential legislative solutions for prison overcrowding in Nebraska.

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The bill will also address several re-entry issues, along with requiring that personal inmate mental and behavioral health plans be finished by the time 80 percent of their sentence is completed.

In addition, LB 907 changes the name of the "Legal Education for Public Service Loan Repayment Fund" to the "Legal Education for Public Service and Rural Practice Loan Repayment Assistance Fund." It provides loan repayment assistance to incentivize lawyers to set up rural practices. There is \$500,000 from the General Fund currently provided in the bill.

There are several other provisions in the bill that I do not have space to cover, but amendments and committee statements can be found online at NebraskaLegislature.gov.

The second bill, LB 999, was changed by AM2530. The bill authorizes the Division of Behavioral Health of the Department of Health and Human Services to study the feasibility of the establishment of a Hastings Correctional Behavioral Health Treatment Center at the Hastings Regional Center.

The plan is to provide one or two buildings for up to 200 mentally ill inmates and those dealing with substance abuse.

I supported both of these bills, and believe we are heading in the right direction to provide solutions for our prison overcrowding and inmate reentry and mental health issues.

NAYI

The opportunity I would like to call your attention to is a program taking place from July 7-11 this

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year. The Nebraska Agricultural Youth Institute is a five-day conference on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus. It's for high school juniors and seniors to learn about career opportunities within agriculture.

This educational experience includes engaging speakers, workshops and panels, agriculture education, professional development and leadership experience.

There are also opportunities to network with peers, meet with industry leaders and make new friends. I would encourage young people who are interested in agriculture to attend this conference.

Thanks to generous sponsors, attendance is free of charge. Youth can apply online at www.nda.nebraska.gov. The conference can also be found on Twitter at @The_NAYC or on Facebook at facebook.com/NebraskaAgYouthInstitute. Applications are due April 15.

Weekly call

In his call Tuesday morning, Christensen said the senators will take on the budget vetoes Wednesday.

He said the Appropriations Committee has come back with a veto override package on \$61 million of the \$65 million vetoed by Gov. Dave Heineman.

He said if the veto override package doesn't pass with the necessary 30 votes, then each proposed budget override item is considered one at a time.

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LB 485 advances to the floor

Christensen said his phone has been ringing due to LB 485 advancing out of committee on a 5-2 vote. Christensen was dealing with another bill when the committee voted. However, Christensen said he would have voted against advancing it.

Under LB 485, introduced by Sen. Brad Ashford, it would be an unlawful employment practice for an employer, an employment agency or a labor organization to discriminate against an individual on the basis of sexual orientation.

The Act applies to employers having 15 or more employees; employers with state contracts regardless of the number of employees; the State of Nebraska; governmental agencies and political subdivisions.

Current law prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, disability, marital status or national origin.

Like it or not, Christensen said there are enough votes to pass it as well as override a veto by the governor.

Water bill LB 1098

Christensen said Sen. Tom Carlson has offered his own amendment to LB 1098 that would incorporate similar language from LB 1074 offered by Sen. Steve Lathrop. LB 1074 did not make it out of committee.

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After that occurred, Lathrop filed numerous amendments to LB 1098 in an attempt to slow or kill that bill.

Christensen said a Lathrop filibuster could be dodged with a maneuver by the speaker, known as a super speaker priority.

This can only be invoked by the speaker on two bills a session. The move would allow the speaker to hear Carlson's amendment to LB 1098 before Lathrop's.

If that doesn't happen, Christensen said LB 1098 will likely not advance. This would also mean there would be no legislation to allow spending of water task force funds in the budget.

Carlson's amendment would still address groundwater declines over a 30-year basis and targets the Republican River Basin.

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