

It's sine die for Senator Mark Christensen

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 01 May 2014 00:00 -

Eight years as a senator

in Nebraska Legislature

comes to an end

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Sine die: to adjourn without a day on which to appear or assemble again.

After eight years in the Nebraska Legislature, 44th District Senator Mark Christensen of Imperial leaves with the utmost respect and appreciation for the only unicameral state legislature in the nation.

Things have to get done and it's up to the 49 senators in that body to do what's best for the state, he noted during an interview Monday.

It's sine die for Senator Mark Christensen

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 01 May 2014 00:00 -

Washington, D.C. could take some lessons on how to govern from the Nebraska Unicameral.

Christensen said there could be contentious debate between senators on the floor. But after the session adjourned for the day, those same senators would sit down and have a beer together.

The body was always able to find ways to get things done, he added.

Represented water interests

Sen. Christensen will be most remembered for his efforts to save irrigation in the Republican Basin.

While running for the 44th District seat in 2006, Christensen built his campaign on dealing with compact compliance issues resulting from the 2002 compact settlement with Kansas.

His bill LB 701, passed in his freshman year, was a crowning achievement that will positively impact Nebraska water policy and issues for years to come.

"This bill marks a historic moment for water in Nebraska," Gov. Dave Heineman said when he put his signature on the landmark legislation in 2007.

Tackling the water issues in the Republican Basin was a daunting task, but one that couldn't be ignored, the governor noted.

It's sine die for Senator Mark Christensen

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 01 May 2014 00:00 -

The bill allowed natural resource districts (NRDs) in the basin to take a number of compliance actions, such as surface water and groundwater buyouts, vegetation control and augmentation of existing water supplies.

It also authorized the creation and use of a \$10 per-irrigated-acre occupation tax and granted bond authority. These enabled NRDs in the basin to pay for efforts that continue to keep the basin and the state in compliance with the compact settlement with Kansas.

Without LB 701, Christensen believes Kansas would have been successful at some point in shutting down irrigation, both surface and groundwater, in the Republican Basin.

The bill faced several court challenges but ultimately prevailed when the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled the bill was constitutional.

The bill continues to provide the framework necessary to insure irrigation continues to drive the economic engine in the basin.

Two augmentation projects to keep the basin and state in compliance with Kansas would not have been possible without passage of the bill.

Bittersweet ending

Despite his work over the past eight years to protect irrigation in the district, disagreement over water legislation this session made for a bittersweet ending to his eight-year term that ended April 17 due to term limits.

It's sine die for Senator Mark Christensen

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 01 May 2014 00:00 -

Last year in LB 522, Christensen sought compensation for surface water irrigators in the eastern end of his district who lost their water after the state claimed it for compliance purposes.

He got first round passage of the bill but faced an undercurrent of opposition that ultimately stalled the bill.

He sought to get the bill moved in this year's session without any success. In addition, the state has claimed the surface water for a second year with no compensation.

With a district that includes both groundwater and surface water irrigators, Christensen said it put him in a no-win situation.

If he did what was right for surface water irrigators, it would harm groundwater irrigators and vice-versa.

Nonetheless, LB 1074, a water bill introduced by Omaha Sen. Steve Lathrop, put Christensen in the crosshairs of irrigators from both ends of his district.

The bill targeted areas of significant groundwater decline and created the potential for allocation limits while seeking to provide more water for surface water irrigators.

Threats of reduced allocations or possible shut-downs produced a groundswell of opposition in western portions of the Upper Republican NRD.

Ultimately, the bill died, with more amenable language being rolled into another key water bill of the session, LB 1098.

It's sine die for Senator Mark Christensen

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 01 May 2014 00:00 -

Christensen said a state senator has to expect and be prepared for attacks that come from taking a stand on legislation. But it's not easy when those attacks move beyond the legislative role and become personal.

Even though LB 1074 never became law, his association with the bill has negatively impacted his livelihood going forward as he leaves the Legislature. That's what makes the ending bittersweet, he and his wife, Kathy, said.

Advice for his successor

Three candidates are seeking to succeed Christensen in the Legislature. That number will drop to two after one is eliminated in the May 13 primary.

They include Dan Hughes of Venango, Steve Stroup of Benkelman and Dennis Berry of McCook.

When asked what advice he would offer his successor, he said a state senator has to be ready to make sacrifices, especially when it comes to family.

As a western Nebraska senator, it means lots of time away from home and plenty of windshield time back and forth.

He also urged them to never compromise on their values once they get to Lincoln.

Christensen said he took some stands based on his moral beliefs and has no regrets of doing so.

It's sine die for Senator Mark Christensen

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 01 May 2014 00:00 -

He also never made excuses for being a fervent supporter of gun rights. This year, he was able to get his priority bill, LB 390, passed by a large margin.

The bill removed the power under the Emergency Act, that allows the Governor to suspend or limit the sale, dispensing or transportation of firearms.

He was also able to get an amendment on a bill that changed truancy law language this year. The previous law counted any absence as part of the eight that could trigger truancy action.

His amendment specified the absences must be “unexcused absences” before truancy actions could begin against parents and/or students.

What about higher office? He said he gave some thought about running for the Third District seat in Congress. But educating children in Washington, D.C. or traveling back and forth every weekend doesn't hold any appeal.

Christensen said his focus will remain on raising and providing for his family.