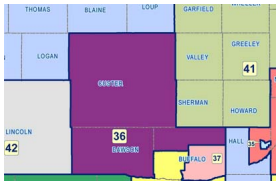


CIR, redistricting, budget centerpiece of 2011 session

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 02 June 2011 13:38 -



Legislature adjourns record three days early.

Sen. John Wightman showed up in a wheelchair to participate in key votes during the last four weeks of the Legislature.

Wightman missed about five weeks of the 2011 session because of a recurring knee infection.

Senators must be present to vote on bills.

The session adjourned last Thursday which was three working days earlier than the scheduled adjournment date of June 8.

Wightman, who represents the 36th district, described the passage of bills that change how public employee labor disputes are handled, rework legislative and congressional districts and craft a new budget as highlights of the session.



WIGHTMAN

Perhaps the biggest challenge, Wightman said, was reaching a compromise with all of the interest groups on LB 397 which changes how the Nebraska Commission on Industrial Relations does business.

The CIR arbitrates labor disputes between public sector and government employees.

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“It is as good as what we could do,” Wightman said, noting that the CIR was not eliminated, which had been proposed, nor is the new legislation too weak. “The parties are generally reconciled to the bill.”

Key is the ability now for bargaining groups to examine total compensation—salary, health and retirement benefits—and compare those to what comparable entities are offering.

Redistricting, Wightman said, brought about a couple of battles—particularly the redrawing of congressional lines in Districts 1 and 2—because the process was political.

The size of District 36 expands under the legislative district plan with the addition of Custer County even though Wightman will represent less of Buffalo County.

Growing population in the Sarpy County area, which gained a northwestern district, brought about the change since legislative districts are based on population.

He noted that Lancaster, Douglas and Sarpy counties now represent more than half the population of the state.

As a result of his newly defined district, Wightman will have to travel farther to see constituents while candidates wanting to represent the district—the senator will be term limited in 2014—will have more area to cover while campaigning.

“I’ll also need to make new relationships in these next three years,” Wightman said.

Wightman’s priority bill, which helps increase the number of new commercial and industrial sites ready for business development, passed as part of a Talent & Innovation Initiative.

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The economic package will help Dawson County, he said, because of its potential to enhance the site now occupied by Tenneco Automotive which will close. A site southeast of Gothenburg, where an ethanol plant had been planned, could also benefit.

Senators also filled a \$1 billion budget gap that eliminated state aid to cities and counties which probably won't be reinstated, he said.

In retrospect, Wightman described the session as more political than past ones which may continue as younger senators pursue a future in politics and align themselves more with a political party.

With fewer Democrats in the legislative body, he said there's also a little less balance .

He also noted that the rural/urban split—despite more urban representation—is not as bad as some people may think.

“There's still many senators connected with farming but I think that may change a generation from now,” Wightman said.

The senator is scheduled to undergo surgery for a new knee on June 29.

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