

Chambers' return changes session

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Sen. Wightman notes Democrat, Republican voting block

Longer-serving state senators like John Wightman know what legislative sessions are like with, and without, Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha.

Term limits ousted Chambers in 2008. He was re-elected four years later and returned for the 2013 session that ended last week.

“He dominates the session and takes up a lot of time on the bills he opposes,” Wightman said.

More than half the senators had not experienced Chamber’s intellect and mastery of the filibuster to delay action on bills.

Although frustrating at times, Wightman said Chamber’s tactics stop bills that might have passed, which is often legislation that holds back spending.

“I think we pass more bills than we need to sometimes,” he said.

Wightman described the session as interesting, especially with a coalition of moderate Republicans (including himself) and Democrats that often voted together.

A group of more conservative Republicans tried to filibuster to keep mostly spending bills from passing but were largely unsuccessful, he said.

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"The moderate Republicans voted far more with the Democrats on spending bills," Wightman said.

A highlight of the 90-day session, he said, was passage of a bill that sets in motion a major study of state tax policies including the exemption of farm machinery and manufactured goods from sales tax.

The governor withdrew legislation that would have eliminated the exemption and state income tax.

Wightman, who's a member of the appropriations committee, plans to attend some of the 20 meetings of revenue committee members who will study tax issues.

"It's a good idea to study what ought to be done before we decide on the governor's proposal," he said.

The senator, who suffered a stroke last summer and complications from numerous knee replacement surgeries earlier, said the session didn't bother him as much physically as what he thought it might have.

He said he's recovered fairly well from the stroke but has some memory issues such as remembering people's names.

Because he has first-hand knowledge of Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital in Lincoln, where he was a patient after the stroke and knee surgeries, Wightman's priority bill involved the facility.

With its passage, Madonna can now build a facility in Omaha to house half of the beds now in Lincoln.

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Another bill he supported that passed is a 40-year minimum sentencing option for juveniles convicted of murder.

The legislation expands sentencing options beyond life imprisonment without possibility of parole, Wightman said.

Eric McCain of Gothenburg, who was convicted of shooting and killing a local police officer in 1990, could be affected by the legislation, he said.

McCain was 17 years old at the time of the shooting.

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