

Budget remains on front burner

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Wightman: Fewer legislative proposals with tax cost.

Despite a belt-tightening special session in November, the state budget will be the No. 1 priority when the Legislature convenes Jan. 6.

Sen. John Wightman doesn't expect a flurry of bills with price tags in the short, 60-day session because of scarce resources.

Wightman said there will be some tweaking of the state aid funding-to-schools formula and of health care.

The senator represents most of Dawson and all of Buffalo County except for the major part of the city of Kearney,

Preliminary enrollment and state aid figures show that the three largest schools in Dawson County are stable and likely won't be hit as hard as some other districts that will lose funds, Wightman said.

"Education will dominate quite a bit of the time," he said. "Health and judiciary issues too but I don't think they will be major."

Wightman and other senators will closely watch what version of health care reform is passed by Congress.

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“What emerges could affect Medicare spending,” Wightman said, noting that \$100 million in Medicaid costs from which Nebraska will be exempted could also change in the bill.

Nebraska U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson voted to move health care reform forward if his state was spared increased Medicaid costs.

Wightman said there are ways to deal with federal decisions even though state senators must introduce bills in the first 10 days of the session.

For example, the governor can introduce legislation later and some proposals can be declared emergency bills if needed.

Wightman said bills can also be amended before they reach the legislative floor.

Such actions may also be helpful with the budget since the Nebraska Economic Forecasting Board won't meet until February to project future tax receipts.

Tax receipts in November were only less than 1% below projections, Wightman pointed out, but senators met in special session to deal with a \$334 million shortfall in the two-year budget passed in 2009.

“The February forecast could end up negative,” he said. “But maybe there won't be a lot of changes to the budget.”

However Wightman said he and other senators think more cuts may be in store but “hopefully nowhere as big as in November.”

The senator hasn't yet decided his priority bill.

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Wightman does plan to jump on the bandwagon with a bill that prohibits texting while driving for drivers of any age.

“I think it will pass,” he said, noting that passage will reduce accidents—many of which are caused by texting while driving that are unreported.

Strategic planning is also on the plate because of a bill promoted by the executive board, which Wightman chairs, and passed in 2009.

A committee worked on the plan last summer which encourages legislators to be more forward looking and proactive.

“I think it will be helpful with tax and water policies, state economics and in the ag sector,” Wightman said.

Another issue will be positioning the state for redistricting.

Wightman said senators will view preliminary figures which indicate shrinkage in the western half of the state and continued growth in the state’s three largest counties—Sarpy, Douglas and Lancaster—which could gain two additional seats.

Most population loss is occurring west of Lincoln County, he said, with some counties showing losses of up to 20%.

Because of federal law and “one person, one vote,” he said senators cannot limit increasing representation in eastern urban counties.

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On the federal level, Wightman said the third district should retain its seat in 2011 but could lose it in 2021 because of declining population.

Other notable issues during the 2009 session, Wightman said, include:

Whether or not to continue in-state college tuition for children of illegal immigrants. The senator said current law contains several restrictions such as students having to complete three years of high school to be offered in-state tuition rates.

Wightman said he would have difficulty supporting restrictions. He said studies show a positive tax flow from illegal immigrants who also aren't eligible for federal services.

Water legislation dealing with invasive vegetation and liability issues with other states.

Wightman thinks money to eliminate invasive vegetation in the Platte River will continue.

"I think that's the best bang for our bucks," he said.

Bills will also be introduced specifying how Nebraska will fund liability issues under interstate compacts and the state's obligation to pay for water and/or its production by controlling such things as irrigation, he said.

Wightman describes these times as difficult with a struggling economy and trying to fashion a budget.

"We (in Dawson County) have been pretty much spared until now," he said in reference to Tenneco in Cozad that will close its doors at the end of 2010.

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Wightman, who recently filed for re-election, will again chair the executive committee and serve on the appropriations committee.

He will begin his fourth session in the Legislature.

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