

## Senators gear up for budget debate this week

Written by Elizabeth Barrett  
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Sen. Wightman in town, gives legislative update.

How much the state will spend over the next year, a new plane, growing hemp and more were discussed over coffee and donuts Saturday when Sen. John Wightman came to town.

Eighteen people showed up at the Gothenburg Chamber of Commerce to listen to Wightman talk about legislation.

The Nebraska Legislature is less than six weeks away from adjournment on April 17.

Wightman serves on the appropriations committee that is recommending a spending increase of 5.5%.

On Monday, legislators started discussing an update to the two-year \$7.8 billion budget that ends June 30, 2015.

About \$91 million is outside of budget recommendations and could be available to spend.

Some of the budget recommendations include:

\$4.9 million earmarked to lessen the overcrowding of state prisons by leasing a former Air Force building in Lincoln, increasing beds at the McCook work camp and renting space in county jails throughout Nebraska. Wightman said the latter could bring more business to the Dawson

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County jail.

\$45 million to the general fund for state aid to cities, counties and schools and to offer property tax relief.

Despite attempts to cut real estate taxes on ag land by reducing actual valuation from 75% to 65%, he said the bills didn't make it out of committee.

"Senators from Lincoln and Omaha didn't support it," Wightman said. "They'd rather see property tax reduced across the state."

\$11 million to plan, organize and rent temporary space while the heating and air conditioning is updated in the state capitol building.

Over the next 10 years, Wightman said improvements are expected to cost an estimated \$77 million.

\$21 million for water sustainability projects and \$400,000 to be placed in a fund to pay for litigation over water rights with Kansas.

Wightman mentioned several spending proposals outside of the budget.



One is the creation of a public guardian office that would offer legal guardianship for the elderly and disabled Nebraskans, who can't do it themselves.

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If adopted, the measure would cost \$2.38 million over two years.

Wightman supports the measure, noting that it would be the first time for such an office.

“And we’d be the last state in the nation to do it,” he said.

Another is the purchase of a new plane for an estimated \$3.85 million which one senator said is the best investment for the state as opposed to buying a used aircraft.

Wightman said legislators are fortunate to have a pilot in the legislative body—Sen. Bob Krist—to offer expertise and who introduced the legislation.

Allowing the growing of hemp in Nebraska is also on the table.

Wightman voted for the legislation because he said it’s another revenue source for Nebraskans.

Although it’s related to marijuana, the plants allowed to grow in Nebraska must contain 1% or less of the active ingredient of the cannabis plant.

If passed, the state would join nine others that permit the research and growth of industrial hemp since federal approval for commercial use.

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