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**Capitol View**

**Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Unfinished Business, Interesting Proposals on the Legislature’s**

**Table Next Session**

Lawmakers hit the ground running when they convene the Second Session of the 106th Legislature next month. They’ll have 80-some bills left over on first round debate from last session to deal with immediately.

They’ll also address those old familiar topics of placement and treatment for troubled youth, a crisis in nursing home care and management and prison staffing and overcrowding. Oh yes, property taxes will likely take a bit of time to discuss as well as business incentives.

But there’s an interesting proposal expected – albeit one that stands a snowball’s chance in hell of being approved. Speaker of the Legislature Jim Scheer of Norfolk thinks it’s time to expand the nation’s only one-house, nonpartisan Legislature to 55 members. That’s up from the 49 – the smallest Legislature of any state – that has been in place since 1963 when it was increased from 43 to 49.

Scheer reasons that allowing the expansion would ease mandatory redistricting after the 2020 Census and would ensure that some rural districts don’t grow so large that one senator can’t cover the entire district. He says that constituents tend to lose contact with their senator in such large districts.

**For Release Wednesday, December 18, 2019 – Page 2**

Look at Sen. Tom Brewer’s District 43, which includes 12 counties and part of Box Butte County. Or Senator Steve Erdman’s District 47, which includes nine counties and the other part of Box Butte County. That’s a lot of land miles in the scenic Nebraska Sandhills and sprawling Panhandle areas.

These are also areas that have more cows and fence posts than people. When the redistricting criteria sets a specific number of people who must live in an area, assembling enough bodies can take some space. Scheer says that’s a disadvantage for senators and constituents to meet and greet that could be alleviated by more compact districts.

It’s a math thing. Divide the state population by 49 or by 55 to see how many would have to be in each district.

It’s an urban/rural thing as well. But continuing population shifts to Eastern Nebraska don’t guarantee representation for smaller areas of the remainder of the state. Scheer says that rural-urban distribution wouldn’t change. He also says it wouldn’t increase costs much.

There’s another math thing. Six new senators at $12,000 a year plus the daily per diem paid based on how far they live from the State Capitol. That’s going to run into some money.

Scheer says the change would also eliminate the oft politically charged decision on which rural district to wipe off the map so it can be moved to Douglas, Lancaster or Sarpy County. Take a look at District 49, which is now Sarpy County. That used to be nestled in between 43 and 47 out in Box Butte County and some points west. He says it comes down to a beauty contest.

Some people are calling the idea interesting. Others are saying “no way.” It would take an amendment to the Nebraska Constitution and require approval of 30 of the 49 senators to place it on the ballot and then a vote of the people to approve it.

**For Release Wednesday, December 18, 2019 – Page 3**

Given that a recent similar proposal to increase the number of senators to 50 never got out of committee, I’m sticking with my “snowball’s chance” prediction.

In my opinion, there are two more important issues that would have a larger impact on the operations of the Legislature. Increase legislative pay and eliminate term limits. It’s been years since senators had their last pay raise. More money might give more people – not just the ones who can afford it – to serve.

And those term limits. Yes, they kept Ernie Chambers out for four years, but he came back and is about to complete eight years. Senator Steve Lathrop of Omaha also termed-out for four years, but is back as well. I ask, what’s the point?

Keep the number at 49, pay them more and let the voters decide when they’re tired of their representative.

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