**For Release Wednesday, July 29, 2020**

 **Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt
Statehouse Correspondent**

**The Nebraska Press Association**

**Delayed Nebraska Legislative Session Resumes**

The beginnings of the pandemic-delayed Nebraska Legislature were a microcosm of all that has transpired since the coronavirus reared its head in March.

Senators gathered in a George W. Norris legislative chamber that reflects many a public place with Plexiglas dividers, hand sanitizing stations and signage about what not to touch. Not all senators wore protective facemasks. Omaha Senator Meghan Hunt said 23 of the 49 were not wearing masks in the chamber, though some did some of the time.

As expected, Omaha Senator Ernie Chambers – one of two black senators – brought up a racist flyer the Republican Party sent out to encourage District 1 voters to support incumbent Julie Slama – a gubernatorial appointee – over her opponent Janet Palmtag. The flyer showed a photo-shopped picture of Palmtag standing next to Chambers saying she agreed with Ernie.

Slama countered that Chambers’ comments were “sexist and disgusting.” Chambers said Slama threw the first stone with the racist flyer and cautioned, “don’t put me in your mess if you don’t want me to respond.”

North Platte Senator Mike Groene told Ernie to give up the 1960s. He referred to the busts of Nebraskans in the hall of fame, which are displayed in the Capitol hallways. "If you want to be in that hallway someday as a great Nebraskan, you've got 16 days to change your attitude and convince the state of Nebraska you're not a racist." Chambers is term-limited for a second time at the end of this year.

Senator Mike Moser of Columbus, who was hospitalized for several weeks with COVID-19, urged his colleagues to wear masks, if not for themselves for their families and friends. “This is one of those times where I think that we

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should pay attention to science and don't take those chances." It's a small sacrifice that could save lives, he said.

Speaker of the Legislature Jim Scheer of Norfolk acknowledged the toll that their absence had taken by reminding people they will still have different philosophies and will not agree on everything. "That doesn't necessarily make the other person stupid or ignorant. It must mean they feel differently," he said. He advised his colleagues not to take things personally because they have a lot to get done in the fleeting days they have left.

In spite of themselves, senators were able to move 43 priority and appropriations bills on the first day. But there is plenty of big stuff left.

Expect a continuing push for property tax relief in spite of pandemic hits to the economy. The Governor has declared Nebraska’s economy on solid footing with news that final state general fund tax receipts for Fiscal Year 2019-2020 exceeded projections by more than $10 million. He said that puts the state in a strong position to work on a few key initiatives, including property tax relief, in the remaining days of the legislative session.

OpenSky Executive Director Renee Fry has a different perspective. She says tax receipts for the fiscal year barely outpaced the certified forecast, which was set a year ago, and they significantly trailed the February forecast that lawmakers were using for legislation proposed this session. The state will also lose another $125 million in Fiscal Year 2021 if the Legislature doesn’t choose to break from recent tax changes set out in the federal CARES Act.

Based on a recent panel discussion sponsored by the policy think tank, she says there is tremendous uncertainty about the pandemic’s impact on our state and its economy. Therefore, legislators should be cautious about passing new measures that increase the state’s spending obligations for non-pandemic related purposes.

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Tax collections — sales and personal and corporate income — had been strong going into the pandemic, which helped the bottom line. General fund net tax receipts finished the 2019-20 fiscal year at 0.2% above the state's forecast of $4.929 billion. Net June receipts were $509 million, 3.3% above the forecast. Corporate income taxes, however, were down 11.5%.

The Legislature's Appropriations Committee Chairman Sen. John Stinner of Gering told a recent webinar sponsored by another policy group, the Platte Institute, that he also doesn't see much money being available for bills this session. He is unsure how much would be available for property tax cuts.

Stinner says a lot of Main Street businesses are just hanging on and how long the economic effects of the virus persist will make a big difference.

Who knows how long the virus will persist.

Let wisdom prevail.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 20 years.*