

NEBRASKANS FIRST NEWSLETTER



Legislative Update and Current Events Report

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LEGISLATURE ENDS SHORT AND DIVISIVE SESSION

The nation's one and only Unicameral adjourned on April 13, 2006 after struggling through sixty working days totally dominated and directed by a single Omaha senator by the name of Ernie Chambers. When the session began back on January 4, there were already 763 legislative bills in the mix that carried over from the 2005 session. Incredibly, then, during the first ten days of the 2006 session the senators introduced another 500 new bills, thereby creating an unimaginable total of 1,263 bills on the overall agenda to be dealt with in sixty days. Way too much on their plate.

Adding a new ingredient to the pot was the fact that twenty of the forty-nine senators were experiencing their last session due to term limits. As one term limited senator said, the session "started ugly, smoothed out, and finished ugly." The main reason for the ugly finish was the controversial Omaha schools restructuring bill that pitted suburban school districts against the big and powerful Omaha Public Schools. The battle brought on by LB 1024 dominated a great deal of time and caused a tremendous split among the senators. Final resolution of the issue is still going to take considerable time and debate.

Earlier in the session, two bills chewed up the lion's share of time because Senator Chambers filibustered them to the maximum extent under the rules. One bill (LB 57) will make it a separate crime if a fetus is harmed during the assault on a pregnant woman; the other (LB 454) would allow qualified Nebraskans to apply for permits to carry concealed handguns. When all was said and done, only 125 bills made it through all three debate phases. The fact that so many bills died in the process is not necessarily a bad thing.

Generally, the fewer bills passed, the better. Officially, we have a one house legislature, but for all intents and purposes, Senator Chambers acts as a second house and thereby slows up the process just as effectively as a second house ever could. In many respects, he is an asset to the process.

The politically correct crowd down in Lincoln holds and tries to sell the notion that losing twenty "highly experienced and knowledgeable" state senators will weaken the body politic to the extent that certain powerful lobbyists and special interest groups will fill the vacuum and take control of the legislative process.

They abhor term limits and try to convince the public that the quality lawmaking process will deteriorate. In fact, just the opposite is true. Senators who have been in office for ten, twenty, and almost thirty years in some cases, have developed strong, close friendships and working relationships with the top lobbyists. These long-term alliances, cemented by fundraising dollars, have bred a comfortable closeness between lobbyists and certain long termed state senators that truly shifts the power to the lobbyists. When brand new senators move in they do so with a sense of independence and idealism...they want to do the right thing and resist undue influence. Unfortunately, as time goes by, many fall into the comfort zone provided by lobbyists. However, some do not, and this is not what the lobbyists want to happen. A fresh infusion of new, free thinking senators into the system is a good thing that helps the legislative process be fair.