

□ *Editor's note: Information from the Nebraska Press Association was used in this article.*

By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

When voters receive their ballots at the Nov. 6 election, those in Nebraska will also be voting on four amendments to the state constitution.

Amendment 1

Candidates for office who commit a misdemeanor in pursuit of the elected position would be subject to impeachment if voters adopt this amendment.

Lawmakers approved LR19CA to bring this matter to the voters in the aftermath of a highly controversial University of Nebraska Board of Regents race eight years ago.

After newly elected Regent David Hergert was seated in 2004, it was discovered that he violated campaign finance laws by not reporting his spending in time to trigger automatic public funding for his opponent, incumbent Don Blank of McCook.

Current law allows for the impeachment of an elected official only for misdemeanors performed while in office.

Amendment 2

If approved, under Amendment 2 hunting, fishing and trapping would become protected rights for Nebraskans. The Legislature passed LR40C to place the matter on the ballot.

Proponents said it would help preserve the heritage of such activity for Nebraskans and serve as a preferred means of managing and controlling wildlife.

To answer critics, they pointed out that the measure would not modify any provisions of law dealing with property rights or trespass and would also be subject to other restrictions as prescribed by existing law.

Nebraska Game & Parks Commission Wildlife Officer Dirk Greene of Imperial said he's "been advised to take a neutral stand" on the issue, although he has his personal feelings.

Amendment 3

State senators would be allowed to serve three terms instead of two if voters approve Amendment 3. Term limits were adopted under Initiative 415 in 2000, a move that limited senators to two terms in office, or eight years.

The new measure was introduced by Sen. Tom Carlson with the rationale that eight years created too much turnover and gave more power to outside groups, particularly lobbyists, political parties and the executive branch.

Doug Kagen of Omaha is the leader of American Taxpayers for Freedom, which has teamed with Western Nebraska Taxpayers Association of North Platte to form the coalition Nebraskans Against Amendment 3—Save Term Limits!

Asked if eight years is not enough time to learn the ropes and see full programs instituted, Kagen said, "If state senators can't learn the regulations and wherewithalls in eight years, they probably don't belong there anyway."

Senators limited to two terms can sit out a term and then campaign to reclaim their office. However, Kagen said, "If they come on again, they will have lost their seniority on committees and their close contact with lobbyists, and they wouldn't be entrenched on committees" with the attached power.

In his flyer against Amendment 3 Kagen wrote, "Three times we've voted by whopping majorities to impose eight-year term limits to our state senators. Each time, the powers-that-be

have tried to toss our vote in the trash.”

State Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial thinks the proposed amendment is good policy. He pointed out that when he was elected six years ago, 23 out of the 24 senators elected that year were new to the job. “That’s too much change in one year,” or a 50 percent turnover.

“It take a couple years to get your feet under you and to understand the rules. Only one-third of the senators would change (if the amendment passes) and that’s the reason I like it.”

Sen. Christensen addressed the power issue brought up by Kagen, saying, “There’s too much power in the state department heads by having short term limits. I think that what is wrong is when a state department can outlast a senator to keep something out” of a statute or to ignore a directive.

He noted that the Governor has gained more power, too, with shorter term limits.

“If you go to 12 years, you have two-thirds memory there (in the Legislature) after the election and some people with at least eight years of experience,” he said.

Amendment 4

The last time voters agreed to increase the salary of legislators, they raised it to \$12,000 at the beginning of the legislative session in 1989.

That increase tripled the \$4,000 annual salary the senators had received for years.

Proponents of the new measure say that nearly a quarter century of economic change is long enough and senators should receive a raise.

If this amendment is approved, beginning Jan. 9, 2013 senators will receive \$22,500 per year.

Sponsors of the bill had sought a \$32,000 annual salary, but a committee amendment lowered the amount and lawmakers approved it.

Sen. Christensen approves a raise for legislators.

“My issue is this. No one but the rich and retired can afford to go there (Legislature) for \$22,500, let alone \$12,000. We limit who can run for office,” he said.

He said there are senators who work at Target at night to make ends meet, and they make the state’s laws. “I don’t think that’s fair.”

After a senator uses his salary and per diem, Christensen said, it costs about \$10,000 of his or her own money to serve.

Senators may purchase state health insurance if they wish, but insurance is not provided for them.

If a senator lives more than 50 miles from Lincoln, he is paid the postal rate for mileage for one trip per week. He also receives per diem of \$123 per day while the Legislature is in session.

If he lives less than 50 miles from Lincoln he receives the cost of one trip per week and \$35 per day in per diem while the Legislature is in session.

The senator thinks that senators should receive \$40,000-60,000 per year. “I believe in the principal and not for myself,” he pointed out.

The legislative sessions run alternating 60 and 90 days every other year. The \$22,500 salary looks pretty good if those were the only days the legislators worked, Sen. Christensen said.

However, work is being done the days the Legislature is not in session. Last week, Sen. Christensen was in five different communities on five different days for meetings with entities and organizations.

Increasing the salary “broadens the base of who can run,” he concluded. “The middle class just is not represented.”