



Stop part of listening tour focusing on state's ag industry

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Republican gubernatorial candidate Pete Ricketts said when Nebraskans elect a governor, what they're really doing is electing a CEO for the state.

Ricketts wants to be that CEO.

He made a stop in Imperial Tuesday night as part of a campaign listening tour through Nebraska focusing on the ag industry and more especially the ag manufacturing industry.

Voters may well remember Ricketts from the U.S. Senate campaign in 2006. He won the Republican primary but fell short of unseating incumbent senator Ben Nelson.

Experience as CEO

Ricketts believes his experience in the business world gives him a better perspective on running the state, compared to career politicians.

After receiving his MBA from the University of Chicago in marketing and finance, Ricketts returned to Omaha in 1993. There he joined Ameritrade, a brokerage company founded by his father.

He spent time in all phases of the business from the trading floor to serving as chief operating officer for the company.

As CEO, he fostered the growth of the company, now known as TD Ameritrade. The company employs 2,000 in Nebraska and 6,000 nationwide.

He said his management style focuses on collaboration and an open-door policy. As CEO, the easy decisions never reached his desk, he said. It was the difficult decisions that he and his team had to handle.

Ricketts feels this experience of working well with others will serve him well as governor. He sees himself as a facilitator, who can bring people with diverse ideas together to find solutions to the state's problems.

Education, jobs, taxes

Ricketts sees three challenges facing the state—education funding, job growth and a competitive tax environment.

He said Nebraska schools offer a great education to its students but can still do more.

He wants to see that 65 cents of every dollar spent in education is spent in the classroom. Right now, he said that figure is closer to 62-63 cents.

He said the formula for state aid to education needs better balance across the state, as well as becoming more predictable for schools.

It's difficult for schools to budget, he said, with the variability in the present formula.

In visiting numerous ag manufacturing businesses on his tour, Ricketts sees the need to develop the right skill sets for students coming out of high school.

More needs to be done to expose kids to the trades, he said. He said one manufacturer said they need more welders but have trouble finding them.

Community colleges do a good job there, Ricketts said, but believes more can be done at the high school level in steering students towards trade careers.

Another issue Ricketts wants to address is job creation and better paying jobs in the state.

He said work force education is one tool in that process.

Job creation also revolves around a more competitive tax environment for Nebraska.

First, the state needs to hold the line on spending to help keep taxes in check.

In addition, Ricketts believes Nebraska could lower overall taxes by modernizing the sales tax system. Presently, state sales tax exemptions cost the state billions of dollars each year.

He said he consistently is asked what he's going to do about the rise in property taxes.

Property taxes serve as the local funding element for schools, cities and counties.

One possibility would be an increase in state aid to help reduce property taxes.

Another option might be to limit how fast valuations can grow.

Record ag commodity prices several years ago helped push up the price of land, resulting in higher valuations. A cap on how much values could change could also provide some tax relief.

He noted South Dakota ties property values to productivity of the land.

Those are the kind of ideas Ricketts said he wants to glean during his listening tour.

Governor's race

With his mid-September announcement, Ricketts joined a burgeoning field of Republicans seeking the party nomination.

Other Republican candidates include state senators Beau McCoy, Charlie Janssen and Tom Carlson. Present State Auditor Mike Foley is also in the race.

On the Democratic side, two candidates have emerged: state senator Annette Dubas and Chuck Hassebrook, former executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs and a former Nebraska Regent.