

**By Russ Pankonin**

**The Imperial Republican**

Residents in western Nebraska have often expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clout and representation the region gets in Lincoln.

There's been talk, but never any action, of western Nebraska seceding and becoming part of Wyoming, or regions in southwest Nebraska wanting to join up with Colorado or Kansas.

In Colorado, counties on the eastern plains of the state feel some of those same sentiments when it comes to state government dominated by the Front Range urban area.

In Colorado's Nov. 5 election, 11 northeastern counties voted on a referendum that would create a 51st state, with those counties seceding from the state of Colorado.

Colorado's Phillips County, Chase County's neighbor to the west, favored the initiative by a wide margin, 1114 to 676, or 62-38 percent.

It was one of five rural counties approving the measure. The others included Cheyenne, Kit Carson, Washington and Yuma Counties.

Counties voting down the secession question included Elbert, Lincoln, Logan, Moffat, Sedgwick and Weld.

### **More rural voice**

Phillips County commissioners advocated a vote for the 51st state served as a message for change in the rural voice in the state legislature.

Feeling that rural Colorado is no longer being heard in the state legislature, the commissioners sought the vote in an effort to obtain a real voice in government.

Secession supporters in five counties knew their votes were largely symbolic, designed to grab the attention of a Democratic-controlled Legislature.

They say the vote emphasized a growing frustration in the conservative plains towns and counties with the more populous and liberal urban Front Range, which has helped solidify the Democrats' power.

"We can't outvote the metropolitan areas anymore, and the rural areas don't have a voice anymore," said Perk Odell, 80, a lifelong resident of Akron in Washington County, one of the five counties voting to secede.

The five counties share borders, covering about 9,500 square miles and have a combined population of about 29,200.

Four of the counties—Phillips, Yuma, Kit Carson and Cheyenne—border Kansas. Phillips County also borders Nebraska.

They are solidly Republican areas that have long identified more with Kansas and Nebraska because of their agricultural background.

The secession discussion first started with Weld County commissioners in June. There, commissioners proposed the secession option.

Phillips County administrator Randy Schafer reiterated that even though six counties nixed the secession question, "We will work so that we have a voice," he stated.

### **The Phillips County Plan**

Schafer came up with a different idea for state representation, now dubbed the Phillips County Plan.

He pointed out that 12 of the 65 members of the Colorado House of Representatives can be considered rural representatives and six of the 35 senators represent the rural populace.

The Phillips County Plan would call for equal representation per county in one house of the legislature.

For example, the Colorado House could be represented on the basis of one per county, which would make for 64 members. There are currently 65 based on a population representation.

Schafer said the participating counties in the 51st-state movement will be meeting Nov. 18 to determine the details of their effort to move forward in trying to change statewide representation in the legislature.

The five counties that voted to secede currently only have two state representatives and one state senator.

### **Probably a long shot**

For the cluster of rural counties to become a new state, Colorado lawmakers would have to sign off, followed by Congress—a scenario that even supporters of the plan say is highly unlikely.

Though a long shot it may be, supporters of the 51st state movement say they believe they've succeeded in getting their message across that lawmakers at the state's Capitol aren't listening to their concerns.

One of the concerns that wasn't heard was about a proposal mandating that Colorado's rural cooperative electric associations get 20 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2020, up from 10 percent. The bill was approved by Democrats without GOP support.

Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper has taken notice. "We understand that some rural areas still feel underrepresented and are not being heard," he said.

"We remain committed to listening more and working with local communities all across Colorado."

Republicans next year are planning a proposal to apportion state Senate seats by land mass instead of population to grant a bigger voice to the sparsely populated areas. Republicans hold 28 of the 65 seats in the House and 17 of 35 seats in the Senate.

### **Mixed messages**

Akron resident Charles Johnson, 69, said there were many unanswered questions about how secession would work—like what the state would be called, where the capitol would be and how schools would be funded. He also didn't like the message a secession vote would send.

"The sad thing is it makes us all just look like whiners out here," said Johnson, a retired teacher and former superintendent.

Kim Weninger, 55, doesn't see it that way. "I do think that we do have to send a message to the Front Range that you aren't the only people in the state," she said.

Folks out here don't like that voters approved recreational marijuana last year. And they chafe at new restrictions on firearms, including banning magazines that hold more than 15 rounds. The gun laws only highlighted an urban versus rural divide, Weninger said.

"I have people tell me all the time that I have no reason to have a gun. Well, you know what? We have rattlesnakes in our yards. We have coyotes that get a hold of our cats. I need a weapon to protect animals, to protect myself. But somebody in Boulder is not going to understand that," she said.