

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

This year's 60-day legislative session will mark Sen. Mark Christensen's final session as a Nebraska state senator.

First elected in 2006 and re-elected in 2010, the 44th District's senator will complete his eight years in the Legislature. Under term limits, two terms is all he can serve.

Even though it's his last session, and the shorter of the biennium session, Christensen said last week there's still plenty he wants to get accomplished.

During his stint in the Legislature, Christensen has focused his efforts on resolving water issues in the state. In addition, he's worked hard on pro-life issues, guns rights and trying to make the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) more accountable.

Those issues will continue to be in his sights during the 60 days of his final session.

Officially, the Legislature convened Wednesday this week and is scheduled to run through mid-April. New bills can be introduced during the first 10 days of the session.

Some of Christensen's bills from last year's 90-day session remain on the docket for this year's session.

In addition, Christensen said he plans to introduce another 20 bills this session.

He's realistic that some of those bills won't go anywhere in this session. However, some of those bills will serve as the foundation of bills that will get passed in future sessions, he said.

Rewrite of LB 522

One of his key pieces of legislation last session, LB 522, remains on second reading.

The bill would provide state compensation to surface water irrigators who lose their water through compliance regulation by the state.

In its present state, Christensen said it's unlikely the bill will move off Select File. As a result, he plans to gut the bill and rewrite it during this session to make it friendlier to natural resources districts to gain their support.

Christensen said the Republican River Basin isn't the only area of the state facing water-related issues.

As a result, he wants to see \$50 million of annual funding put into the Water Sustainability Cash Fund already in existence.

He realizes that's a big annual amount but said it's a direction the state must take to address water issues statewide.

He's already looking at two sources of funding—removing the sales tax exemptions on bottled water and bottled pop. Removing the exemption on bottled drinks will generate \$13 million from bottled water with \$18 million coming from bottled pop.

In addition, Sen. Tom Carlson's Water Task Force is recommending diverting 1/8th of a cent of the current 6.5 percent sales tax to the fund. That would create another \$32 million.

Christensen said one use for the funds could be to buy out surface water irrigation districts or retire rapid response acres, each on a permanent basis, in the Republican Basin.

But remember, the Legislature studied the tax system in the interim, so any changes could be difficult during the 60-day session. Much of the input from the study focused on how to reduce property taxes in the state.

Christensen still plans to address other issues affecting surface water irrigators with bills. These issues will include compensation if water is lost, related occupation taxes in that

situation, compact call years and surface water representation.

Allowing guns in schools

Christensen said he plans to make another attempt at allowing teachers and administrators to have guns in schools.

"I'm not forcing this on people," he emphasized. "It's not a bill to arm every teacher."

The most important aspect of his new bill is that it will allow schools to opt-in to the bill.

It would also define the amount of training that would be needed for teachers, along with privacy aspects so it would not be known which teachers have completed the training.

He said he's had numerous requests to bring this bill back to the Legislature.

He said he will introduce a bill to allow active-duty military personnel to renew concealed carry permits either online or by mail.

Presently, they are required to physically appear in order to renew. He feels that does an injustice to military members.

Other bills

Christensen will seek to increase the maximum net worth a beginner farmer can have to qualify for low-interest loans. Presently the maximum is set at \$250,000. He wants to see that raised to \$500,000.

If a beginning farmer has already acquired a combine and tractor, he said it's not hard to exceed \$250,000.

He also wants to see irrigated farm ground valuation reflect the quality of a well. One well may be capable of pumping more than 1,000 gallons per minute (gpm), while another may only be able to pump 300 gpm.

Those two pieces of property should not be valued by the same guidelines, Christensen said, since one has better crop-growing capabilities than the other.