

Christensen pleased with accomplishments of session

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Senator Mark Christensen, 44th District representative from Imperial, left Lincoln last week with a good sense of accomplishment for the Legislative session just completed.

But resting on his laurels he is not. He's already setting his sights on crafting a solution to insure the occupation tax in LB 701 remains intact for Republican Basin natural resources districts (NRDs).

Christensen wants to grant the use of an occupation tax for water issues to any NRD that is in a fully- or over-appropriated river basin.

Right now, that would include 11 NRDs in the state, including, of course, the Republican Basin NRDs.

The property tax in Christensen's LB 701 passed in 2006 was ruled unconstitutional by the state courts and the occupation tax is also being challenged.

Both revenue sources created funds to be used in compact compliance efforts in the basin.

Christensen said the unconstitutional property taxes will be repaid, either through a levy credit or direct refund through county treasurers.

Occupation tax key to district

Christensen said not having an occupation tax available to NRDs in the 44th district really puts the district at risk.

Without funds to buy surface water or complete other compliance projects, NRDs could be forced to lower their allocations if drought-like conditions reappear.

In a water-short year declaration, there's nothing in place to work around it except allocation cuts of as much as seven inches from the current 13-inch allocation in the Upper Republican NRD.

Christensen plans to seek legislation to open up the occupation tax to other NRDs next session.

By opening it to more NRDs, it removes the "closed class" situation that doomed the property tax in the Republican Basin.

Victory on a number of bills

While Christensen will be gearing up for next year's battle on the occupation tax, Christensen can claim victory on a number of bills he sponsored, co-sponsored or supported.

He looks at the passage of concealed weapons carry law as an important piece of legislation.

LB 430, which he sponsored, was passed and signed into law.

The bill declared that state law overrides city and village ordinances or regulations that regulate the ownership, possession and transportation of firearms, except as expressly provided by state law.

It also allows church security to carry firearms and considers military personnel to be state residents in regards to carrying concealed weapons.

The bill passed on a margin of 45-3.

Two other bills he sponsored on the McCook Work Ethic Camp (WEC) also passed.

LB 429 allows schools to use the services of work camp inmates and LB 274 gives the Director of Correctional Services authority to assign a felony offender to the WEC. Presently,

only the courts or parole board have that authority.

These bills will insure increased use of the WEC within the correctional system.

His bill, LB 5, to allow roadside trapping, passed on a 30-18 vote.

Christensen was able to get the pro-life bill, LB 675, which he co-sponsored, passed.

The bill requires a physician who is providing an abortion to perform an ultrasound at least one hour prior to the abortion. That ultrasound image must be displayed such that it is viewable by the woman, should she so choose to view it.

Christensen said this marks the first time in seven years that any pro-life legislation has been approved by the Legislature.

Budget increases 1.1 percent

Christensen said the body worked hard to pass a good biennial budget that increases only 1.1 percent over two years.

Governor Dave Heineman was adamant on not allowing any new taxes or spending increases.

Christensen said the influx of federal stimulus money allowed them to fully fund schools and appropriate \$16 million to deal with safe haven issues.

Without the stimulus money, that wouldn't have happened, he said.

Within the budget, Christensen was able to get funding for the renovation of Champion Lake, as well as \$8.7 million for a new education wing at the Technical College of Agriculture in Curtis.

Other issues he's working on

Christensen said he will still be working on legislation addressing human trafficking, escort services and sexually-oriented businesses such as strip clubs.

In addition, he's still working on marriage education, a livestock growth act and licensing of mini-trucks.

Imperial site for hearing

Christensen said Imperial will be the site for an interim study hearing being conducted this summer.

The study will address a proposal by Senator Beau McCoy of Omaha to reduce the number of NRDs in the state to one per river basin.

Christensen said he will announce the date and time in the coming weeks.