

Discussion of guns in schools more civil this year

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Wednesday, 05 March 2014 17:52 -

Letter Back Home

By Senator Mark Christensen

This last week, the Judiciary Committee had the public hearing for my bill, LB879. The bill would give freedom to the governing body of any school to choose a security policy in their school that allows chosen employees who have taken 24 additional hours of training to carry a concealed handgun in their school.

I would like to highlight in this letter how this discussion this year seems to be a more balanced discussion than my first bill in 2011. I see this as encouraging as this debate continues.

LB516, from 2011, my first attempt to allow concealed carry of a handgun by administrators, teachers, and security personnel in a school, brought out almost hysterical arguments in opposition. I'm happy to say the conversations this time around have been mostly reasonable and constructive.

In my opening in the hearing I spoke of several states which allow it and others who are considering whether to allow concealed carry in schools.

For example, Utah has allowed any concealed carry permit holder to carry in schools for the past 14 years, without incident.

New Hampshire and Hawaii have no laws against it, and the Missouri Senate just passed SB613, which includes a provision allowing concealed carry by local choice.

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But, the point I stressed to the committee is the vast differences in schools throughout Nebraska.

In the North Central, Western, and Southwestern parts of this state, response times to a school shooting could be 15 to 30 minutes, depending on where the closest law enforcement officer is located at the time the shooting occurs.

The potential harm could be devastating, without any ability for school employees and students to defend themselves.

Many rural schools do not have the finances to hire a full time resource officer, and law enforcement does not have the personnel to spare. A one-size-fits-all approach to school security does not make sense in Nebraska. Local control regarding school security is the direction I believe Nebraska should head.

I believe the idea is beginning to sink in that what is good for large schools in the eastern part of the state is not necessarily good for schools everywhere.

In fact, John Bonaiuto, with the Nebraska Association of School Boards, made it clear in the hearing that although the official position of the organization was opposed to LB879, that there were members in the western part of the state that see a potential need for such policy because of the vast differences in response times and resources.

During the hearing, I asked the committee that as a society, how should we respond to such senseless violence, like what happened at Millard South High School in Omaha, or a Columbine or Sandy Hook?

I said people tend to respond in three different ways, the way I see it. We either resign ourselves to the idea that, "this is just the way things are now" and do nothing; or we crack down by taking freedoms away, which usually affects law abiding people the most; or we give

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people more freedom to defend themselves.

Most of you know that the latter is how I lean. I believe that the governing bodies of schools can handle the freedom and make wise choices in their schools and communities to take care of faculty and students.

Weekly call

Christensen said senators begin full-day debate with the completion of hearings on introduced bills. He said they will end the day at 4 p.m. for the next week or so to allow the Appropriations Committee time to work on the budget.

Water funding in budget

Christensen said \$31.4 million is expected to be included in this year's budget. That would be the most money ever that's earmarked for water projects.

He said \$11 million will go into a water cash reserve fund on an annual basis.

The other \$21.4 million will be a one-time injection of funds from the state's rainy day fund. This money will be used to pay for deferred natural resources districts' projects across the state.

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He speculated another \$20 million will be needed next year to get all delayed projects completed.

He said LB 1074, that deals with groundwater sustainability, remains in committee but he expects it to come out with some revisions.

He said the bill will likely target sustainability over a 30-year period with 5-year and annual reviews on progress.

Christensen also explained why he did not prioritize LB 522, which would have compensated surface water irrigation districts for loss of water for compliance purposes.

He said any compensation would have come from the amount of money now budgeted for water projects. Because of that, he didn't feel there was enough support to get the bill passed. "I'm the lone man standing on that one," he said.

Tax relief efforts

As for tax relief, he said LB 96, which would exempt repair or replacement parts for commercial agricultural machinery and equipment from sales and use tax, is on final reading. He expects it to pass.

However, he didn't know what would happen with a bill to move ag land valuations from 75 percent of market value to 65 percent.

He said doing that won't solve property tax issues because the difference will have to be picked

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up on the residential and commercial side.

He favors putting more money into direct property tax relief by increasing the amount of money the state returns to counties.

In other action of interest, it appears the senators will approve approximately \$3 million to buy a new state plane; Chamber's bill to ban mountain lion hunting has moved to final reading; and another \$27 million will fund additional renovation inside the state capital building.

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