**For Release Wednesday, January 23, 2019**

**Capitol View
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**Nebraska Press Association**

**They Have Hit the Ground, Running**

A state senator with world-class credentials has been elected to head the Legislature’s Revenue Committee and her experience in war-torn Iraq might prove valuable in this year’s anticipated tax battle.

Sen. Lou Ann Linehan, one of 30 Republicans in the officially nonpartisan Nebraska Legislature, was elected on a 26-23 vote over veteran Revenue Committee member Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha. Linehan, of Elkhorn, has never served on the committee. But she managed U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel’s 1996 Senate campaign and was his longtime chief of staff in Washington. She also worked for Secretary of State Colin Powell as deputy secretary for legislative affairs and was on assignment in Iraq with U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Gen. David Patraeus for a 2008 Bush administration strategic initiative.

Does that have anything to do with setting state tax policy? Probably not, but it doesn’t hurt to have someone who has above average political skill to nuance what will be one of the most watched and difficult discussions of the 106th Legislature. Think property tax relief versus revenue enhancement to bolster an ailing cash reserve fund. The Governor wants property tax relief and reduced government spending. A special legislative committee warns that the rainy day fund must be replenished. There is talk outside the Capitol of a statewide referendum to impose a sales tax increase to fund property tax relief.

The Linehan-Lindstrom vote was one of several unusual contests as lawmakers organized themselves before ten days of new bill introduction. Unlike two years ago when the so-called Gang of 27 got together before the session to determine committee chairmanships, this year’s legitimate races saw four Democrats elected to chairmanships.

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Incumbent Business and Labor Chair Joni Albrecht of Thurston, a Republican, lost to challenger Democrat Matt Hanson of Lincoln. Incumbent General Affairs Chair Carol Blood, a Democrat from Bellevue, lost to Republican challenger Tom Briese of Albion. Democrat Sara Howard of Omaha will lead the Health and Human Services Committee and Democrat Steve Lathrop of Omaha will head Judiciary.

Education Committee Chairman Mike Groene, a Republican from North Platte, was challenged by vice chairman Rick Kolowski, a Democrat and retired teacher from Omaha. Neither senator received 25 votes on the first round of balloting, so President Mike Foley ordered a second ballot and Groene won 26 to 20. That means not all of the 49 senators cast votes on either ballot.

Republican Mike Hilgers of Lincoln defeated Democrat Kate Bolz of Lincoln by 3 votes for chairmanship of the Executive Board, the official administrative arm of the Legislature. Tony Vargas, an Omaha Democrat, defeated Lincoln Sen. Suzanne Geist, a Republican, by 3 votes for the vice chair position.

It was Hilgers who led a debate on changing the legislative rules that used up many days of the 105th Legislature in 2017. Hilgers was one of three freshmen senators who – in an unprecedented move – were elected committee chairs (he got Rules Committee) in that Gang of 27 incident. He was also one of the Republicans who spoke long and loud about changing the committee elections to an open ballot. Opponents argued that they feared repercussions from the Governor and their own party if they “crossed party lines” to vote.

Given that Democrat Bolz had 23 votes with only 18 Democrats in the Legislature, that means that as many as five Republicans voted for her, or at least four if Independent Ernie Chambers voted for her. The same holds true for Democrat Vargas who had 26 votes. That means either eight Republicans or seven Republicans and Ernie voted for him.

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There are two fewer Republicans in the Legislature this year and three more Democrats. Chambers is the lone Independent.

Omaha Democrat Sue Crawford was elected chair of the Rules Committee for this session. Hilgers led that committee in 2017 when the Legislature operated under temporary rules for 49 days to avoid discussions on 27 proposed rules changes which included everything from open committee elections to changes in the number of votes required to end a filibuster. On the 49th day they made permanent the rules that were in effect on Jan. 4.

The 106th Legislature has avoided the procedural acrimony. Perhaps they’re saving it for the big issues this year. There are plenty of those to come.

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