**For Release Wednesday, June 24, 2020**

**Capitol View
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**Nebraska Press Association**

**A Sense of Urgency, National Events and a Rookie Mistake Impact**

 **the Pending Session**

Nebraska lawmakers are expected to return to Lincoln July 20 to wrap up the final 17 days of the Coved-19 interrupted session.

One thing they must absolutely do is pass a budget. That would be do-able under normal circumstances, but what’s normal anymore? Not only has the pandemic changed things, but several killings of black people by police in other states has led to national protests.

The Legislature’s Judiciary Committee responded to weeks of protest in Omaha and Lincoln by holding listening sessions – 15 hours total – in both cities. Nearly 200 people complained about racial inequality in Nebraska and injustice by law enforcement and called for action.

Committee Chairman Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha said he was certain that the committee had been enlightened by the sessions. He noted that the deadline for introducing new bills has long since passed and it will be a challenge to decide what can be accomplished in the final 17 days.

“These listening sessions cannot be another chapter in the ‘go-through-the-motions Olympics,’ ” said Ellen Jorgenson, a Lincoln high school teacher.

“We black and brown people are asking what’s in your heart,” said the Rev. Janet Goodman-Banks of Lincoln. “We need you to act, not tomorrow, not next year. We need you to act now.”

Lathrop explained that lawmakers are totally constrained by the fact they can’t introduce new bills. But he vowed to find a way to implement some of the changes that were suggested.

One bill (LB924) introduced by the veteran and term-limited Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha is ready to be passed. That measure requires all law

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enforcement officers to take two hours of racial anti-bias and implicit bias training each year.

Nebraska Wesleyan University professor of philosophy and religion, the Rev. Jonathan Redding, told the committee he’d taken an anti-bias course with police officers while in North Carolina that had changed officers’ perceptions of discrimination.

“It’s not enough for Lincoln police officers to kneel and dance with protesters,” Redding said. “We have to become anti-racist in everything we do.”

Complicating things is the desire of Governor Pete Ricketts to provide some manner of property tax relief and pass an economic development bill aimed at enticing new business investments. Those two measures were linked and passage of both stalled during the last session.

Further complicating things is what can best be called a rookie mistake, although one would think the state Republican Party knows better. A campaign flyer from the party to freshman Sen. Julie Slama’s First Legislative District constituents included what two former governors described as “racist, negative campaigning” directed at her legislative opponent, Janet Palmtag of Syracuse.

“Simply put, your flyer is way out of bounds and has no place in Nebraska politics,” said former Democrat Gov. Bob Kerrey and former Republican Gov. Dave Heineman. “But what truly marks it as repugnant is the use of race-baiting tactics.”

In a letter, the two wrote the senator from Peru, who is a Rickett’s appointee that has never been elected, “If you refuse to apologize, then you mark yourself as unfit for public office and you should resign.”

At issue are Slama campaign flyers paid for by the Nebraska Republican Party. The flyers depicted photos of Palmtag and Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha along with text that stated: “Janet Palmtag sides with Lincoln liberals, atheists and radical extremists.”

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“Is it really true that the most despicable thing that can be done to your opponent is to Photoshop her standing next to a black man?” Kerrey and Heineman asked. “We have both spent many years in the political arena,” they wrote. “We know that issues inspire passion and vigorous debate.

“We have often disagreed with one another. But the line must be drawn when it comes to purposely misleading voters, to faith-based attacks, or racist attacks. Tragically, your flyer does all three.”

Ryan Hamilton, executive director of the Nebraska Republican Party, said the letter “pretends to know intent of an individual based on vague ‘evidence’ of wrongdoing, presumptive moral superiority of the accuser, a singular interpretation of comments and imagery that creates a binary characterization of the issue, and culminating with an unreasonable demand.”

Two words for Mr. Hamilton’s pontification. Ernie Chambers. Given that Ernie is facing his second term-limited exit from the Legislature, I would imagine that 17 days would give him just about enough time to say everything he has to about bad cops, racism and Republicans. Not necessarily in that order.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 20 years.*