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**Capitol View
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**The Nebraska Press Association**

**Senators Return to Finish 2020 Session in A Strange Environment**

The Nebraska Legislative Chamber, just like practically everything else in our lives, looked different when senators gathered Monday to finish the final 17 days of the long strange 2020 session.

Plexiglas shields were everywhere, just like your favorite grocery store or big box retailer. Most senators were wearing masks and access to the legislative chambers was severely restricted. Reporters were confined to an upper balcony. No lobbyists. No public spectators. Just Clerk of the Legislature staff (somebody’s got to keep track of stuff), pages, State Troopers and sergeants at arms (somebody’s got to keep order and decorum) and some legislative staff.

Among the group was Senator Tony Vargas of South Omaha who lost his father to COVID-19 in New York State in April. Senators Steve Erdman of Bayard and Steve Halloran of Hastings appeared without masks and a different idea to address this unusual global pandemic.

The two have urged an end to restrictions in the state and said "herd immunity" to the new virus can be achieved by allowing healthy Americans who are less vulnerable to "interact with the disease" while protecting vulnerable Americans who might not be able to survive exposure.

Doctors say that may be wishful thinking since some patients have caught the virus twice. And researchers are warning of long-term effects and complications from the virus on multiple organs, even on younger patients or those with milder initial symptoms. And studies are showing immunity may be short-lived.

It would be interesting to ask the 26 members of the Mississippi Legislature who tested positive last week after weeks of working at their state capitol about this herd immunity stuff.

One would think that Nebraska Sen. Mike Moser, 68, of Columbus, would have some opinions on the matter. He contracted the virus while the Legislature was on a break and was hospitalized five weeks, getting out June 13. He said in an interview with the Columbus Telegram he is still working to get his strength, balance and agility back from the "miserable virus."

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Life during pandemic. Strange at best, disruptive at the worst.

Speaker of the Legislature Jim Scheer of Norfolk acknowledged it's up to individual members whether they will follow the recommendations. He did assure that long days, many priority bills and intense issues await senators, along with the threat of rising COVID-19 cases in the state.

Vargas has said while he had concerns about the Legislature reconvening, he is hopeful all senators will take it seriously and make an effort to take care of each other.

The senators will be spending long days together, with 10 of the 17 days remaining in the session reserved for late nights. Scheer said they’d meet until 10 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays for the first two weeks and then four days in August.

"It'll be interesting to see how the intervening four months, in the relationships and conversations between senators, may or may not impact movement of particular bills," Executive Board Chairman Sen. Mike Hilgers of Lincoln told the Lincoln Journal Star.

A major focus of the session has been property tax cuts and business tax incentives that are set to expire at the end of the year. Scheer said last week he didn't think there is consensus on the issues. While he’d like to see something move forward, he doesn't believe there are the 33 votes needed for either proposal.

A regularly scheduled meeting of the Nebraska Economic Forecasting Advisory Board this week will give senators an idea of how much money the state can expect to use to balance its budget. Predictions are that there will be a virus-induced shortfall.

Scheer said it doesn’t make sense to spend money “we don’t have.”

Vargas chairs the Legislature's long-term planning committee that has been looking at economic trends and how the state can deal. He said it’s important to figure out a way we can bounce back the economy.

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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.*