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 **Capitol View**

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**Pending Issues Portend Major Cultural Shift in Nebraska**

In four decades of covering government and politics in this state, I never thought I’d see the major cultural shift we are facing right now. At least not in my lifetime.

Casino gaming and legalized marijuana measures are before Nebraska lawmakers right now. The casino matter came from the will of the voters. Medical marijuana has been discussed before and almost came to a public vote in November thanks to a massive petition drive. But the state Supreme Court said the petition covered too many topics and kept it from the ballot. If it passes legislative muster, a recreational marijuana measure could face voters in November 2022.

I’m neither a prude nor naive. I have watched lawmakers and local governments debate these issues since the 1970s. Yet the success of the petition drives placing them on the ballot and the results of the vote on gambling were something I had not seen coming. Given the demographic shift in Cornhusker values, the odds of these issues passing were probably improving unbeknownst to me.

I remember a time when the blessings of the governor and the University of Nebraska -Lincoln football coach were essential to make big things happen. Don’t forget that it was the seal of approval from the beloved former Chancellor of the University of Nebraska, Woody Varner that got state senators their last pay raise. And that was some time ago.

So, the value of influence and respect has changed and lawmakers now have the responsibility to adopt rules and regulations governing the already approved casino gambling. The same will be true if the marijuana issues come to pass.

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Nebraska joins 23 states and two U.S. territories that have commercial casinos founded and run by private companies on non-Native American land. Neighboring states Colorado, Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota and Wyoming are in that group. In addition, 30 states (including Nebraska) and neighbors Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota and Wyoming have Native American gaming.

One of the controversial sections of Sen. Tom Briese’s regulation bill (LB561) deals with regulating sports betting and allowing people to play keno using an electronic app. Briese, of Albion, said he would have opposed the bill in other years, but he introduced the measure now to ensure that the will of Nebraska voters gets carried out properly.

The bill fleshes out a trio of voter-approved ballot measures that include a constitutional amendment allowing casino gambling at licensed horse racetracks and laws regulating the casinos and earmarking most of the tax revenue for property tax relief. He was joined in his support during initial floor debate by Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha who said sports betting was approved under language authorizing all “games of chance” at the racetrack casinos and the bill is needed to set limits on such betting.

“This isn’t about whether you like sports betting. This isn’t even about whether you like gambling or not,” Wayne said. “The issue is whether you want regulations around it or not.”

Wayne is also the sponsor of a proposed constitutional amendment (LR2CA), which, if approved by the voters in 2022, would legalize the recreational use of cannabis in Nebraska for persons over the age of 21. He noted that voters in South Dakota just approved recreational marijuana and it’s only a matter of time before it happens here.

Let me pause and reflect on something my mother used to ask, “If all of your friends jumped off a cliff, would you join them?”
 Since 2012, 15states and Washington, DC, have legalized marijuana for adults over the age of 21. And 36 states have legalized medical marijuana — meaning that a majority of Americans now have some form of access to marijuana, whether medically or recreationally.

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Lincoln Sen. Anna Wishart’s bill (LB474) adopts the medical cannabis act and provides all regulatory framework to establish access to cannabis for medical purposes. It arose from the blocked petition drive.

If the cultural shift is headed in that direction, then let’s regulate it as tightly as we can.

Just don’t be looking for me to be standing at the edge of the cliff.

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