**For Release Wednesday, August 11, 2021**

**Capitol View
*Commentary by J.L. Schmidt***

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**Nebraska Economy Rebounding, but You Will Have to Wait for Sushi**

A sign in the truck stop restaurant said the lack of staff could result in delays in seating and service. A friend said they had a 45-minute wait for sushi at a favorite restaurant. What does it say when you have to wait for raw fish?

Nebraska’s top two economists – well, they’re the most vocal ones – say that labor shortages are the main challenge to post-pandemic local and state economic recovery. Ernie Goss of Creighton University and Eric Thompson of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln said that Nebraska has had the lowest unemployment rate in the country all but one month this year. The June rate of 2.5% was the lowest it's been in more than 20 years.

Goss said a smaller labor force than pre-pandemic is part of the reason the unemployment rate is so low in both Lincoln and Nebraska as a whole. He said the lower labor force participation is "a significant and negative factor slowing growth in the state." Nebraska has stopped participating in a federal program that offered an extra $300 a week in unemployment benefits, but it's too early to tell if that has had any effect on increasing labor force participation.

So, what’s keeping people out of the work force? Government payments, such as stimulus checks and advance payments of child tax credits, as well as a lack of childcare options for some parents, he said.

Thompson said a monthly economic indicator put out by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Bureau of Business Research showed an increase for the ninth straight month in June, which "confirms that economic growth will be strong in Nebraska through the end of the year.”

He admitted that there are concerns that the current robust economy could slow down once pandemic-related government stimulus programs end, but there are some good signs that the economic growth may have staying power. He said that stimulus money is also likely to be

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spent over time rather than just this year, which will also support further growth in the coming year.

Goss said higher agricultural commodity prices are another positive factor. The sector continues to benefit from some of the best prices and economic conditions since 2012-13. Since agriculture is by far the state's top economic sector, its success trickles down through the rest of the economy, leading to more jobs, higher wages and demand for other products and services.

On a less optimistic note, the federal eviction moratorium expired at midnight Saturday, leaving some renters with questions on what to do next. There’s no doubt that freedom from the threat of eviction has met with mixed reactions from renters and landlords.

“We will be seeing thousands of evictions that would have occurred but for the moratorium start to roll out in the next few months,” said Milo Mumgaard, executive director of Legal Aid of Nebraska.

But before that happens, he wants people to know there are options. “Letting people know that in fact, there continues to be legal right and most importantly, there continues to be opportunity through the rental assistance program,” Mumgaard said.

Local housing advocates say the urgent need for rental assistance is unwavering as the pandemic carries on. The help is still available to keep a roof overhead. Renters in one program in Omaha have to prove they were financially impacted by the pandemic to receive up to a year of assistance.

Randy McCoy, executive director of the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH) said the need is so high they are giving out about $1 million in rental assistance weekly. “I don't think we have a really good sense yet on how many people were solely relying on that eviction moratorium and not applying for assistance during the course of the year,” McCoy said.

Eviction notices still give a renter at least 30 days to work through the court system, he said, encouraging them to apply for assistance sooner than later.

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If any of these folks need a job to help cover the rent, I know of this truck stop café near Gretna and a sushi place in Lincoln that need help.

Come on, help us get and keep the post-pandemic economy growing.

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