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**Capitol View  
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**As Expected, Greater Nebraska Loses a Legislative Seat**

**The Legislature needed a hero.**

As debate dragged on over redrawing legislative districts in its first special session, it became obvious that something big had to happen to break the deadlock. With a population that has definitely shifted to the three largest eastern counties – Douglas, Lancaster and Sarpy – it was obvious that Greater Nebraska was going to lose a senator.

Out of the blue came the hero, button-down banker Matt Williams of Gothenburg, the term-limited representative of District 36 in parts of Buffalo, Custer and Dawson Counties.

There were no smoke-and-mirrors. No special effects. No fiery speeches about an urban-rural split from this guy who also chairs the Legislature’s Banking Committee and has one year left representing his constituents.

“As senators, we are often faced with tough decisions,” Williams said. “I’m making this decision because I believe it is the right decision for the state of Nebraska and my constituents.”

I want you to stop and read that statement again. It would make the father of the Unicameral, George W. Norris, proud. It gives me goosebumps because it is the selfless attitude that can be so prevalent in Nebraskans but seems to have been lost in the pandemic and the rancor in Washington, D.C.

As a practical matter, his offer of District 36, which will now become a part of the heavily populated Sarpy County, allows lawmakers to complete the redistricting process now rather than take it up in January, which would delay next spring’s primary elections.

Reflective of the continuing shift of population from west to east, the last time lawmakers drew new boundaries; District 49 from Alliance was also shifted to the Sarpy County-Metro Omaha area.

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The so-called rural lawmakers didn’t give up without a fight this time around. As the proposal with the shift of District 36 was facing second-round approval, Senators Bruce Bostelman of Brainard and Robert Clements of Elmwood presented a plan they said would not require moving a legislative district, thereby ensuring “proper representation” for rural Nebraska. The measure, presented as an amendment at the 11th hour, was not adopted, but it did give some lawmakers another opportunity to make their case.

Bostelman had said the proposal would give some eastern districts more constituents than those out west, but so be it. Redistricting rules call for equitable numbers. At least one urban lawmaker said such plans would simply open the door for lawsuits and cause the delays officials were trying to avoid. For instance, a delayed primary could also trigger litigation.

Senators Steve Erdman of Bayard and Mike Groene of North Platte said rural representatives have districts that encompass hundreds of miles. Bostelman said that his urban colleagues deal with city blocks while he and others deal with miles and miles, in some cases counties and counties.

Another last-minute dust-up in mapping drew concern from Lancaster County senators with Sen. Matt Hansen of Lincoln offering motions to delay consideration of the final proposal. At issue was the intrusion of rural senators’ districts being expanded into Lincoln. Senators Myron Dorn of Adams and Clements both now have parts of Lincoln in their districts.  
 Already slighted by not receiving an additional senator they had hoped for, the Lincoln delegation contended the city should have six distinct city districts based on population figures. But Hansen withdrew his motions and the bill advanced.

Lawmakers also approved new maps for Nebraska’s three Congressional Districts, the state Supreme Court, the Nebraska Public Service Commission, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents and the state Board of Education.

With the redistricting exercise coming every 10 years, it’s obvious that term limits (every eight years) play a role in the lack of experience and expertise at drawing new maps.

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Hansen said it best. The Legislature shouldn’t even be involved in the process, which is better left to an independent commission, which would then need legislative and executive approval.

Maybe next time.

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