**For Release Wednesday, October 20, 2021**

**Capitol View
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**Officials Discuss Spending Pandemic Funding**

I will admit that the number one billion boggles my mind. That’s 1,000 million, a one followed by nine zeros. It would take 10 million $100 bills to total $1 billion in cash.

That should help as we fathom the $1.25 billion in federal pandemic recovery assistance that is currently being doled out by the state. Including the $1.25 billion provided through the Coronavirus Relief Fund, Nebraska has received over $10 billion in federal coronavirus assistance.

These funds have gone toward public health initiatives, providing health care, small-business payroll protection, extra unemployment benefits, and education—among other uses.  These funds also include the $1.6 billion Nebraskans have received in economic impact payments, the direct payments of up to $1,200 per individual tax filer and $500 per dependent.

The Governor says to put that amount in perspective; Nebraska’s Gross Domestic Product is roughly $114 to $120 billion. Thus, federal relief has been significant to help Nebraska’s recovery from the pandemic, which has claimed the lives of nearly 500 residents.

The main priorities for these funds include: stabilizing businesses and livestock producers; supporting community institutions to meet critical needs such as food security, shelter, and mental health care; reimbursing state and local governments for coronavirus-related expenses; and shoring up the State’s Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund and potential General Fund budget flexibility.

It’s the promise of flexibility in the General Fund that recently brought the Legislature’s Appropriations Committee together to do their part in setting a course for recovery. Part of me says we should stash most of any excess funds in the state’s cash reserve. But part of me wants to dream big.

**For Release Wednesday, October 20, 2021 – Page 2**

Appropriation’s Vice Chair Sen. Anna Wishart of Lincoln urged Nebraskans to think big. She suggested developing tourism through water resource and recreation sites. Then there’s creation of a national agricultural research center at UNL's Innovation Campus focused on flooding, drought and the impact of climate change on agriculture. Also, creation of a rural health complex at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Big stuff.

There are plenty of other worthy ideas and proposals on the table now that would help build the state's future: increased investment for workforce development; expansion of rural broadband, funding assistance for shovel-ready construction projects; that national infectious disease center at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

Anything, Wishart says, that would qualify as a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

I like the idea of finding an upside to the Coronavirus Pandemic that shut things down 19 months ago. Relief Funds provided to Nebraska through the CARES Act for coronavirus response, as well as the $158 million provided to the State of Nebraska in the Emergency Rental Assistance Program have gone a long way to soften that blow. But entities across the government, businesses, and non-profit sectors continue to experience significant and unprecedented challenges to their operating capacity and sustainability.

That’s why the federal dollars have been essential to mitigate the impact of economic losses stemming from declining revenues, increased expenses, and employee layoffs or furloughs. The State of Nebraska has done a good job establishing programs to help stabilize impacted businesses and livestock producers and support community institutions to meet critical needs such as food security, shelter, and health care.

The Governor says the biggest funding source has been the Paycheck Protection Program ($6.4 billion). Nebraska ranked among the top states, per capita, in accessing these funds because community banks did an excellent job helping small businesses get approved for the program so they could keep people employed.

**For Release Wednesday, October 20, 2021 – Page 3**

When the numbers are crunched and everything else is covered, it appears there could be $427 million left for bolstering the Unemployment Trust Fund and potential General Fund Budget Flexibility.

That’s the stuff dreams are made of. After the hellish 19 months we’ve endured, the thought of creating something bright for the future is very appealing. Keep your wits about you and forge ahead Senators.

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