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

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**STAR WARS Committee Considering Down to Earth Concepts**

No joke. Lawmakers amended and passed a bill last session to create the STAR WARS Committee to consider ways to spend federal coronavirus recovery funds.

Originally dubbed the Lower Platte River Infrastructure Task Force, the measure (LB406) was amended and the Statewide Tourism and Recreational Water Access and Resource Sustainability Committee – STAR WARS – was born to study strategies to secure Nebraska's future water supply and strengthen Nebraska's flood control infrastructure, while considering economic and recreational opportunities and exploring innovative solutions for the state.

Among ideas on the table now, "the concept of doing a larger reservoir lake between Omaha and Lincoln,” said Speaker of the Legislature Mike Hilgers of Lincoln. That’s not a new idea. It has been discussed for decades but was sidetracked after someone suggested flooding Ashland to create the lake. Hilgers said that’s not going to happen.

Understandably, there are lots of questions yet to be answered about the impact of such a lake. Professional engineering and financial consultants hired by the committee are studying all of that now.

Plus, the project would have to compete with several ideas from other parts of the state. Water development opportunities already identified at Lake McConaughy near Ogallala, and at Lewis and Clark Lake and Niobrara State Park along the border with South Dakota, are all on the legislative study committee's project list.

Hilgers emphasizes they’re concepts now. They are all under review and the Governor is in the loop too. The idea would be to move them from concept to proposal for discussion – and hopefully action – in the 2022 legislative session.

The timing is right.

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The Speaker thinks it could be a highlight of the 60-day session. A billion dollars of federal pandemic recovery funding will be flowing into the state. Governor Pete Ricketts will be serving his final year as governor while "a number of great senior senators" who have been legislative leaders will be completing their second and final term in office, Hilgers said. That's a recipe for action.

The resolution that launched the study was introduced by retired Fire Chief state Sen. Mike McDonnell of Omaha. The study committee has already held public hearings at Mahoney State Park, in Ogallala and at Niobrara State Park.

I am most intrigued by the ideas pitched for Lake McConaughy, which already draws 1.9 million visitors a year to the more than 100 miles of sandy beach. Talk of building a marina, destination resort, a new master planned community and other improvements have created a buzz.

A fishing village might be created at Lewis and Clark Lake, along with boat landings. Proposed enhancements extend to neighboring communities such as Ogallala and Niobrara that serve as gateways to the recreation sites.

Hilgers cautions that a great idea might not be doable due to its environmental impact or potential impact on water supply. That’s all part of taking the conceptual to the real.

But what about that big reservoir between Lincoln and Omaha? If such projects require cooperation between the state’s two largest cities, don’t stand on one leg waiting for it to happen. Collaboration would be a regional airport located somewhere between the cities. I’ve always thought that made economic sense. But some agreements come hard.

I remember a past Legislature some 30 years ago who proposed building a giant statue of a Cornhusker football player straddling Interstate 80 between Lincoln and Omaha. Yes, a football player. Surely you remember when the University of Nebraska had a championship football team.

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The idea stalled over a debate about which direction the player would face. Seems that nobody wanted to be the butt of that joke. The idea was never heard from again.

So just imagine what could happen with plans to get an awful lot of water from someplace to create a recreation area with some potential for economic and tourism development. What could possibly go wrong?

To his credit, Hilgers said he believes the committee is "unified on purpose and goal."

May the force be with them.

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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.*