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**Capitol View**

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**Partisanship on the Line, Urban-Rural Divide Too?**

There’s been a lot of talk about preserving the officially nonpartisan nature of the Nebraska Legislature. But there is another issue, occasionally discussed with similar zeal in years past, that’s creeping up again.

(Gasp!) It’s the urban-rural split. While the focus has been on party loyalty – there are 32 Republicans and 17 Democrats in the officially nonpartisan Legislature – there are also 26 “urban” lawmakers (18 from Omaha and 8 from Lincoln) to just 23 “rural” senators. That reflects the shift of two rural districts, 49 and 36) to the Omaha metro area in the past four years.

District 49 was moved from the upper Panhandle to the Gretna area in 2018 and attorney Andrew La Grone was appointed to be the Senator. He was defeated two years later by current Senator Jen Day. Then, just last year, redistricting moved Central Nebraska’s District 36 to Bellevue when term-limited Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg offered the district number to easily solve the problem.

Yes, the population center of the state has, as predicted, shifted toward the east end. But it hasn’t created much of a floor fight so far. Redistricting debate coincides with the taking of the census.

Urban-rural discussion could surface this year as lawmakers, at the urging of Governor Jim Pillen and a special committee he has appointed, start digging into school finance. The urban-rural divide is huge in that arena with sparsely populated schools needing more resources while urban schools sometimes suffer a loss of state aid under some proposed finance schemes.

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I don’t want to encourage the debate, but in more than 40 years of observing the Legislature I have seen my share of such nastiness. Criminal justice reform is another area that could trigger the issue. After all, the common belief is that most of the criminals are in Lincoln and Omaha and the prisons are mostly in the eastern part of the state.

Comments made recently by the Department of Corrections interim director indicate even if the state builds a new prison, they may need a second one to handle the nation’s worst overcrowding. Potential sites have been evaluated in Fremont, Omaha and Lincoln. It’s a costly issue.

“If there’s not some meaningful prison reform — which by the way will make our communities safer — then we’re looking at spending half a billion dollars to accommodate our prison population to the year 2030,” retiring State Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha said. Lathrop headed the Judiciary Committee and was the primary advocate for measures that would include alternative sentencing and programming.

Then-Governor Pete Ricketts said the measure was “soft on crime.” His law-and-order partner, then-Attorney General Doug Peterson agreed and pushed the “lock ‘em up” mentality, with the help of Lincoln Senator Suzanne Geist. That ultimately stalled the Lathrop-supported bill through a filibuster.

Geist, who represents southeast Lincoln, said she’ll focus on issues affecting law enforcement and the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services as she moves into her final two years in the Legislature.

She said she also plans to sponsor legislation that seeks to enact some of the criminal justice reforms sought in the sweeping package that she helped derail. She was part of a panel that engaged with the nonprofit Crime and Justice Institute to develop the recommendations.

Her opposition centered on concerns about softening sentencing for minor drug crimes so judges could order inmates to serve consecutive sentences and cap minimum sentences to provide inmates more time on parole. The Republican lawmaker has vowed to work with

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Democrat Omaha Sens. Justin Wayne and Terrell McKinney to reintroduce portions of the failed reform attempt.

Of note, Geist is challenging Lincoln’s Democrat Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird in the city's spring election. One can only imagine her vision that the promise of a new prison being built in the community would sweeten the pot for her.

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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*.