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**Capitol View**

**Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Where in the World is the Governor and What is He Doing?**

Where is the Governor and what is he doing?

We probably shouldn’t be surprised that stealth candidate Jim Pillen who refused to debate and was elected Governor anyway hasn’t been releasing information about his public schedule. No schedules, nor press releases, little or no comment about issues. A staff that is tight-lipped and covers for him.

The way it’s going, the Columbus pig farmer could be spending his days running Pillen Family Farms and showing up at the state Capitol from time to time in his classic sport coat and slacks, no necktie, when his handlers say he has to be in Lincoln.

In case you think I’m making a big deal out of nothing, this is the first time in at least three decades that Nebraska’s top executive has been this silent. His predecessor, Pete Ricketts, flooded the media with information. It gave reporters directly, and the public by extension, a comfort level that the rich guy from Omaha was doing gubernatorial type stuff. Stuff that he was elected to do.

Ricketts and his predecessors gave almost a blow-by-blow detailed description of when the governor was off cutting a ribbon someplace or attending a Husker football game or traveling out of state. So far, it’s been weeks of near radio-silence from the offices of Governor Pillen and Lt. Gov. Joe Kelly.

Pillen spokeswoman Laura Strimple described the change in practice as simply a different way of doing business. She said Nebraskans know what Pillen is doing based on press coverage from events he attends, saying his presence and comments are covered broadly. Hmm, by reporters who just happen to stumble on to the events?

“Every governor determines the way they wish to communicate information and availability to the public and the media,” she said. “There is no requirement or formula for how it is done.”

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Strimple, who was previously Chief of Staff for the Nebraska Department of Corrections, did a stellar job protecting her boss, Corrections Director Scott Frakes, whose early years in the Ricketts’ administration were marked by two prison riots and at least four deaths. It makes one wonder what she’s trying to buffer now for the first farmer turned governor in more than 60 years.

Fellow reporters say that inquiries about the schedules or upcoming events have yielded silence or incomplete information. Previous governors’ schedules have provided advance notice of news conferences, speaking engagements, participation on public boards and appearances complete with information about dates, times and places.

More importantly, when is Kelly or Speaker of the Legislature John Arch of Omaha in charge if Pillen is out of the state. As for such trips, Strimple said, “Nebraskans can be assured” that “appropriate steps are taken” to ensure the job is being handled.

I’m not grinding an ax here, but I am concerned that a lot of people voted for this guy and are still waiting to see something gubernatorial out of him. Much as I loathed Ricketts fast-talking and oft-condescending air, it was nice to see him doing something.

Some government watchdogs are concerned about what looks like reduced public access and accountability.

Common Cause Nebraska Executive Director Gavin Geis said he believes “government transparency and accountability are not just enshrined in state law but are what Nebraskans expect from elected leaders.” He said the governor’s schedule gives us insight into his priorities and helps keep the public informed about the work he’s doing on our behalf.

In a statement, the Nebraska Freedom Coalition Board of Directors compared the administration’s new practice to Pillen’s decision to skip debates and candidate forums while running for governor.

“As was customary on the campaign trail, Jim Pillen only appears in settings his team knows are entirely friendly,” the board said, calling that behavior “completely insulting to constituents and the citizens of Nebraska.” The statement said “it’s high past time that

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politicians quit hiding from the public, stop running from tough questions and are held accountable for their record.”

Strimple takes issue with the idea that her boss is not accountable or accessible, saying that he “provides ample opportunity for citizens to hear from him on a variety of issues, through his testimony to the Legislature, at events the media attends and one-on-one conversations with reporters.”

But, without notification, citizens and journalists have limited chances to ask questions because Pillen’s office doesn’t provide advance notice that he’ll be available.

Come on Governor. Given the millions of dollars spent to buy the office for you, the least you could do is put on a public face and let folks know when that’s going to happen.

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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*.