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**Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt
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**Slama Bowing Out, Chambers Launches Comeback**

There are a lot of ins and outs in party politics during an election year.

Who's in the race and who's out? All eyes have been on the Legislature where the big surprise came from Republican Julie Slama – rhymes with drama – announced she wouldn’t seek a second term representing southeast Nebraska’s District One because she was going to take her recently earned law degree another direction.

But before the appointee of then Governor Pete Ricketts could relish the attention one more time, the venerable Ernie Chambers of Omaha threw his hat in the ring for Omaha’s District 11 seat which he held for 46 years before being term limited a second time. That means he’ll run against incumbent Terrell McKinney whom he endorsed four years ago.

"I can be aware of what other people are doing, but the obligation I have is to my own conscience," he told the Lincoln Journal Star. "And I tell people, always, I'm not running against somebody. I'm running because of things that I think need to be handled differently."

I couldn’t agree more. There are things about the nation’s only one-house legislature that would benefit from a fresh dose of Ernie, but we’ll get back to that.

Ricketts appointed Slama, who most recently lists Sterling as home after stints in Peru and Dunbar, in 2018. She ran for election in 2020 in a race tainted by smear tactics against her opponent, fellow Republican Janet Palmtag of Nebraska City. Slama, the state Republican Party and some unknown resources mounted personal attacks on Palmtag in baseless mailings painting her as a failed real estate businesswoman and, horrors, as being friends with non- Republicans or non- conservative Republicans. Palmtag chose not to run for the seat this time.

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Dennis Schaardt of Steinauer, a Republican who owns Den’s Country Meats in Table Rock, filed shortly after Slama made her announcement that she planned to step down. Schaardt is a former county commissioner, city council member and volunteer fire chief.

There are three other hopefuls in the May primary. Syracuse attorney Bob Hallstrom, a registered Republican whose law firm does government relations at the Legislature in addition to other legal work. Bob Holman of Auburn, a Republican, and Glenda Willnerd of Unadilla, a registered Democrat, also filed for the seat. District 1 includes Otoe, Johnson, Nemaha, Pawnee and Richardson counties.

Meanwhile, the Chambers race could make an otherwise predictable election year something to get excited about. Chambers, Nebraska's longest-serving state senator, plays the Legislature’s rulebook like a piano. The 86-year-old (he’ll be 87 in July) said he has no reservations over his decision to challenge incumbent McKinney for the North Omaha seat. Chambers, who has long listed his occupation as “defender of the downtrodden” faces the 33-year-old McKinney who has emerged as a champion of Omaha and the most vocal critic of mass incarceration.

Chambers says the race shouldn’t be about age in a time when many Americans are doubting the age and acuity of President Joe Biden, 81. I agree that Chambers is a better physical specimen than a lot of guys half his age. He was the only senator I ever knew who lifted weights in his office during the lunch break when most of his colleagues were headed off to meals provided offsite by lobbyists.

His institutional memory alone is worth the price of admission. His understanding of the rules, daily reading of the agenda and strategizing are worthy of awe. Don’t even mention filibustering, he has a master’s degree in that.

People either love him or hate him. I have long respected him and his status as a truly politically independent individual in a Legislature that is technically nonpartisan but has played along party lines for years.

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Nebraska Democratic Party Chair Jane Kleeb said she worries that if Chambers couldn’t finish his term a replacement would be appointed by Republican Governor Jim Pillen and the appointee would be a Republican in a district that has 63.6 percent registered Democrats. Party Executive Director Precious McKesson of Omaha said it’s time to pass the torch and let the younger generation lead. Imagine Democrats being ageist.

Chambers acknowledges the concerns but told the Journal Star that he hasn’t “had any of the kind of ailments that would give me a warning that the grim reaper is right around the corner or knocking at my door.

"And I do believe there are things that I could do in the Legislature to diminish the negative impact that will be felt in the kind of things that are being introduced — and I look at the governor — somebody needs to be there who can kind of be a check or a brake on that wheel on this runaway train."

I rest my case.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 25 years.*