

## Neb. Dems To See Change In Leadership

BY MARGERY A. BECK  
 Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — The chairman of the Nebraska Democratic Party said Tuesday that he's stepping down when his second term ends in November, and he endorsed the party's finance chairman to replace him.

An election for a new chairman will be held at the party's state convention this summer.

Chairman Vic Covalt said he believes he is leaving a better organized party with a solid staff and improved communication system. But he said it was time for change in leadership.

"I have my limits," he said. "The next guy needs to come on."

Covalt endorsed Joe Higgins, a former high school government teacher from Omaha, as his replacement. Along with his long service in the party, Higgins has been president of the Nebraska State Education Association and served two terms on the Nebraska Board of Education.

"He knows about elected office, he knows about candidacy; he knows about organization," Covalt said. "And he's smart."

Higgins did not immediately return calls Tuesday by The Associated Press, but he said

in a recent letter to the party's state executive committee that one of his top reasons for seeking the post is the "need for continuity within party leadership."

Higgins is competing for the post with 2010 gubernatorial candidate and attorney Mike Meister, of Scottsbluff. He said he wants Democrats to "get back to electing candidates and finding candidates statewide" after running a succession of sacrificial lambs in high profile races in the past dozen years.

Meister would know. In July 2010, he was nominated from the floor of the state Democratic Party convention after the primary winner dropped out of the race. That gave Meister only three months to mount a gubernatorial challenge against Republican Gov. Dave Heineman, who won by a 3-to-1 ratio.

"For years, the state party has found one person to run, and then they sit back, and that person doesn't get elected," he said, noting that he's tired of reading reporters' "obituary of the Democratic Party."

Meister said he recently angered some in the party when he jokingly referred to the state party as the RML0 Party, which stands for the

"Re-elect the Mayors of Lincoln and Omaha Party."

"That's kind of a standard joke, but the folks in Lincoln and Omaha take that as a slap," he said. "And actually, I think, what they should take it as, 'Congratulations on doing it right, but the rest of us would like to play.'"

The party leadership needs to lose the notion that the state's Democrats reside only in Omaha and Lincoln, he said.

"Douglas County has 123,000 registered Democrats, Lancaster County has 65,000 registered Democrats, and the other 91 counties have 179,000 registered Democrats," Meister said. "So this notion that Democrats only exist on the islands of Lincoln and Omaha has become very, very frustrating."

Covalt said he has nothing against Meister but he is obligated to endorse someone he trusts.

"Mike saved our party, and he's been a real good soldier," Covalt said. "He wants to run the party, too. That's fine. But ... in these kind of jobs, you have to have your successor. That's the obligation to the organization."

The Nebraska Democratic Party state convention will be held June 22-24 in Omaha.

## Santorum Stays On S.D. Primary Ballot

PIERRE (AP) — Secretary of State Jason Gant says Rick Santorum will remain on South Dakota's presidential primary ballot, even though Santorum has quit his bid for the Republican presidential nomination.

Gant says March 29 was the final day for candidates to withdraw from South Dakota's primary, so Santorum's slate of delegates will still appear on the June 5 ballot. If Santorum gets at least 20 percent of the vote in the primary, some of his delegates would go to the Republican National Convention in August and would be bound to vote for Santorum on the first nominating vote.

Gant is a Santorum supporter and is listed as the top delegate on Santorum's primary slate. Gant says Santorum had a good run in earlier primaries and will likely endorse Mitt Romney for the nomination.

## Neb. Inmate Lawsuit Bill Heading To Governor

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A bill that would limit the number of frivolous lawsuits prisoners can file at public expense has won final approval from Nebraska lawmakers.

Lawmakers voted 47-1 Tuesday to send the bill to Gov. Dave Heineman.

The proposal by Omaha Sen. Scott Lautenbaugh would prohibit prison inmates from filing lawsuits at public expense, once a judge has found that three of their previous claims were frivolous. It would only apply to lawsuits filed after the law has taken effect.

## Penalties To Increase For Negligent Child Abuse

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Gov. Dave Heineman has signed into law a measure that will increase penalties for negligent child abuse in Nebraska.

The measure by Bellevue Sen. Abbie Cornett will make negligent child abuse a felony if it results in serious bodily injury or death. Current law classifies negligent child abuse as a misdemeanor.

The bill will apply to anyone who acts recklessly with respect to the safety or health of a child, when they should have known about the danger.

The Attorney General's office says Nebraska will become the 14th state to treat negligent child abuse as a felony when it involves serious bodily injury or death.

## S.D. Dems Ask Judge To Put 2 On Ballot

PIERRE (AP) — The South Dakota Democratic Party has asked a judge to overrule Secretary of State Jason Gant and put two legislative candidates on the ballot.

The lawsuit says Gant was wrong to reject nominating petitions from the two candidates because of technical problems in the way the documents were filled out.

The lawsuit seeks to put Charles Johnson of Madison on the ballot as a Senate candidate in District 8, where he would challenge Republican Senate Leader Russell Olson of Wentworth.

The Democrats also want to put Dave Mitchell of Mitchell on the ballot as a House candidate in District 20. If he gets on the ballot, Mitchell would join fellow Democrat James Schorzmann in a race against incumbent Republican House members Tona Rozum and Lance Carson, both of Mitchell.

## Otter Tail Seeks S.D. Rate Boost For Plant Upgrade

BY CHET BROKAW  
 Associated Press

PIERRE — Otter Tail Power Co. has asked South Dakota regulators for a rate increase to help pay for a \$490 million environmental upgrade at the Big Stone Power plant on the South Dakota-Minnesota border.

The coal-fired plant is jointly owned by Otter Tail, Montana-Dakota Utilities Co. and Northwestern Energy, which serve customers in parts of South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota. The companies will share the cost of reducing pollution that causes haze.

Otter Tail, which is based inergus Falls, Minn., wants to boost rates by 2 percent in South Dakota beginning Oct. 1 to cover first-year construction expenses, a change that would cost its average residential customer an additional \$1.56 a month. The eventual rate increase could reach 15 percent by the time construction is completed in 2016, according to the company, which also has customers in North Dakota and Minnesota.

The environmental upgrade is required by state and federal regulations, and it could eventually lead to higher rates for all three utility companies' customers in South Dakota and the other two states.

The South Dakota Public Utilities held its first public hearing on the Otter Tail request Tuesday, when commissioners assessed the company a filing fee and authorized its staff to hire consultants.

PUC Chairman Chris Nelson said the commission expects to make a decision in the case within

six months to a year. The commission may decide to grant a much different increase than Otter Tail has requested, he said.

"What they want and what they're eventually going to get are two different things," Nelson said.

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission voted in December to endorse the Big Stone environmental upgrade as prudent. Environmental groups, which wanted to replace the coal-fired plant with natural gas and renewable energy such as wind power, had argued that extending the plant's life would be a mistake because of rising coal prices and probable future regulation of greenhouse gases.

The South Dakota Environment Department's plan for reducing haze requires the plant, located near Big Stone City, S.D., to cut emissions of sulfur dioxide and ni-

trogen oxide, according to Otter Tail.

Otter Tail and Montana-Dakota Utilities officials have asked the North Dakota Public Service Commission for advance approval of the environmental upgrade as justified and prudent. If the commission approves the plan, that would make it easier for both utilities to get rate increases later to help cover the cost.

Otter Tail spokesman Cris Kling said both South Dakota and North Dakota allow rate "riders" that would permit recovery of the cost of environmental upgrades at Big Stone. The company is exploring how to seek a rate increase in Minnesota, she said.

Otter Tail has about 129,300 electricity customers in eastern Minnesota, northeastern South Dakota and eastern North Dakota,

but only 11,700 are in South Dakota.

MDU spokesman Mark Hanson said the Bismarck, N.D.-based company, which has about 75,000 electricity customers in North Dakota and about 8,700 in South Dakota, is likely to seek rate increases in the two states later to recover the cost of upgrading the Big Stone plant.

"We'll eventually do something," Hanson said. "We don't have anything pending or ready to file."

Claudia Rapkoch of Northwestern said the company, based in Sioux Falls, plans to seek a rate increase for its 61,000 electricity in South Dakota next year. That would be the first general rate increase sought by the company in 30 years, though the company has increased charges to customers without formal rate cases as the cost of power has risen, she said.

## Neb. Gov. Signs Tax Cuts Into Law

BY GRANT SCHULTE  
 Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman signed his signature tax cut package into law Tuesday and said he will likely push again next year for an inheritance tax repeal stripped from his original proposal.

The Republican governor maintained that county inheritance taxes are bad policy, despite arguments from county governments that eliminating them would lead to property tax increases or service cuts.

"I'm not done with tax relief," Heineman told a standing-room audience in the governor's hearing room. "I've still got a couple years left (in office), and if there's any way to continue to reduce the tax burden on Nebraska, I'm going to try to do it."

But Heineman warned that taxpayers might not see much relief because many of the tax cuts could be offset by a city sales tax proposal heading to his desk. He has vowed to veto the measure, which lawmakers passed with the minimum support needed to override. The bill would let cities increase their sales tax rates to up to 2 percent, with voter approval and 70 percent support from the local city council. The current sales tax ceiling is 1.5 percent.

"It doesn't make sense to lower taxes this morning and increase them this afternoon," Heineman said.

One bill Heineman signed will lower the rates of the three lowest income tax brackets in 2013. In 2014, the law expands the brackets so that more income is taxed at the lower rate.

The bill's sponsor, Bellevue Sen. Abbie Cornett, said the plan represents "a down payment toward real tax relief for working Nebraskans."

Lawmakers approved the governor's tax plan last week, 39-9, following a long debate over whether it would weaken the state financially.

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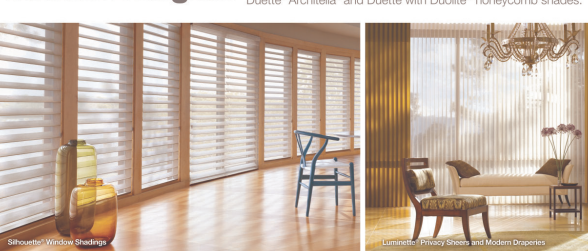
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