

# Changes Proposed For Nebraska Tax-Modernization Panel

BY GRANT SCHULTE  
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — A 12-member panel would travel Nebraska for input on ways to improve the state tax code and its members might even stage a “tax summit” at the State Fair, under a new plan taking shape in the Legislature.

The proposal was unveiled Thursday, one day after a legislative panel killed two major tax bills that were introduced on behalf of Gov. Dave Heineman. Heineman and the bill’s sponsors agreed over the weekend to shelve both measures, following a wave of opposition from farm groups and others who could have lost billions of dollars in sales-tax exemptions.

The new proposal is a joint venture between the Legislature’s Revenue Committee, which focuses on

tax policy, and the Executive Board, which is reviewing a bill to create a “tax modernization committee.”

The proposal would require at least five public hearings throughout Nebraska, online questionnaires for the public, and a state tax summit. Committee members would also review previous tax-policy studies and issue a report to lawmakers and the governor by Dec. 15. After that, the working group would meet annually to decide if new tax-code changes are needed.

The committee would include all members of the Revenue Committee, as well as the chairs of five other committees and state tax officials. Sen. Galen Hadley, the Revenue Committee chairman, would lead the new tax panel. Its members would focus on ways to make the tax code fairer, simpler, more stable and more competitive.

The bill was introduced by Sen. Paul Schumacher, of Columbus. Sen. Beau McCoy of Omaha has chosen the measure as his “priority bill” for the session, a designation that gives it precedent over other measures.

McCoy said the Revenue Committee has drafted changes to the original bill, which will go to the Executive Board for approval. He said the bill, which would take effect as soon as the governor signs it, would allow the committee to start its review before the legislative session ends.

“This is important enough that we don’t need to wait until after June 5, when we adjourn, to get started,” McCoy said. “We can get started right away. This legislation will likely be on the floor very soon. Our hope is to get it to the governor as quickly as possible.”

McCoy said he hoped to hold the tax summit at the Nebraska State Fair in August.

“You have hundreds of thousands of Nebraskans who are there in Grand Island for the fair,” McCoy said. “What better way to get a lot of Nebraskans to weigh in? It may not happen that way, but that’s my personal view of what I’d like to see happen.”

McCoy said he also planned to keep the tax issue “on the front burner” of the Legislature.

“We may agree to disagree on how we go about it, or what conclusions we arrive at,” McCoy said. “But I’m not sure that we’ve ever had a time when everything really aligns. We have a Legislature that feels a sense of urgency to act. We have an overwhelming number of Nebraskans who are asking us to act. And you have a governor who’s willing to make this a focal point. I think that’s a pretty rare circumstance.”

## Hockey

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“It was quite an advantage to have it last year,” she said. “Jill Sternhagen was the tournament director last year, and she took really good notes. We’re just really going off of her notes and everything is really running smoothly. She made a nice path for us to follow.”

During the past two months, Van Winkle and a group of volunteers, consisting mostly of players’ parents, have tackled a variety of tasks. They submitted a tournament theme and schedule to the state for approval, gathered assorted materials needed for the ice rink, designed and ordered T-shirts and sweatshirts, assembled gift bags and created passes for players and their families.

“We’ve got a great group of people that are helping,” Van Winkle said. “That group of parents, they’ve done everything. They make my job easy.”

Volunteers also spent many hours soliciting advertising for the tournament program, she said, and the group was impressed with the response it received.

“The community has really been supportive considering it’s been two years in a row that they’ve made this donation,” she said. “We’ve really had an outpouring of community support with the businesses.”

While all the preparation is now behind them, Van Winkle said the group’s work is far from over.

“We all signed up for our jobs and plan to be down there working all weekend to support the tournament,” she said.

The volunteers will spend the next three days manning the concession stand, taking tickets, cleaning, driving the Zamboni, announcing games and providing security and medical assistance.

“It’s a lot of people putting in a lot of time,” Van Winkle said.

The tournament coordinator especially wanted to thank volunteers Kelle Loecker and Wendy Eichacker, who have not only donated their time for this tournament, but also have been in charge of the concession stand the entire season.

“Both of those ladies have done a wonderful job making sure everything is ready to go,” she said.

Games take place at 2 p.m., 4 p.m., 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. today; noon, 2 p.m., 4 p.m., 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday; and 8:30 a.m., 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Sunday.

“We hope a lot of people come and watch the tournament. The girls games are fun,” Van Winkle said. “The girls have put in a lot of time, and we hope to have as much community support as we can have enjoying the tournament again this year.”

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## Johnson

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Among Republicans, popular former Gov. Mike Rounds has announced his candidacy. Republican U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem, a tea party favorite, has not ruled out a campaign.

The South Dakota race is a source of worry for Democrats. The party’s prospects of holding the Senate majority have already been shaken by the recent retirement announcements of Sens. Tom Harkin of Iowa and Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, which have thrown presumably safe Democratic seats into the toss-up column.

“If Sen. Johnson decides not to run, we’ll definitely have some top-tier talent, and his son is certainly looking at it,” said South Dakota Democratic Party Chairman Ben Nesselhuf.

A spate of appearances, including local media interviews to discuss child prostitution cases and his tenure on a Native American task force, have raised Brendan Johnson’s public profile recently. Chatter about his plans has spilled onto the Facebook pages of South Dakota Democratic activists.

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