

Neb. Sales Tax Bill For Cities Returns In A New Form

BY GRANT SCHULTE
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — A bill introduced Wednesday in the Legislature would allow Nebraska cities to temporarily increase their sales tax authority with voter approval to pay for roads and public safety needs, or to offset other taxes.

Omaha Sen. Brad Ashford's measure would allow cities to raise their sales tax rates by one-quarter or one-half of a percent. Current law sets a maximum 1.5 percent sales tax rate for cities, in addition to the 5.5 percent sales tax imposed by the state.

Ashford said his bill seeks to address a statewide problem of cities needing the revenue and encourages partnerships in which cities, counties and school districts would share services.

The measure, LB 956, seeks to revive an issue that advanced through a voter-round vote last year but fell short of the veto-proof majority it likely will need. Republican Gov. Dave Heineman has said he will veto a bill that could lead to tax increases, and called on cities to trim their budgets.

The new bill would impose a 10-year sunset for any tax increases beyond the 1.5 percent, unless the revenue is used to repay bonds for a specific project. The proposal also would require cities to partner with school districts or counties to address long-term needs.

"You can't just promise something that isn't going to happen," Ashford said. "It has to set forth exactly what you plan to do, and then you have a debate within a community. The plan itself becomes the engine."

Nebraska cities that want to upgrade roads, build swimming pools and pay their rising employee costs are preparing for a legislative fight this session with conservative state lawmakers who want to restrict their power to tax.

"If the state's interest is in keeping property taxes down, why can't we use sales tax to do that?" Ashford said. "I think that's a fundamental point."

Leaders in Lincoln, Kearney, Omaha and some of its suburbs, and other cities want the Legislature to give them authority to seek a higher sales tax with voter approval, but Heineman and many lawmakers remain opposed. A version of a bill introduced last year won the first of three required votes in the Legislature, but fell short of the 30 needed to overcome Heineman's threatened veto.

Supporters said cities should have the power to seek voter approval of tax increases, but opponents said the need to restrain government spending takes precedence over calls for local control.

Besides opposing the proposed sales tax change, some lawmakers have introduced a bill this session that would limit municipal powers to impose so-called occupation taxes on restaurants, car rental companies and hotels. And another proposal introduced last week would prevent the city of Omaha from imposing taxes or fees on residents who live outside the city's zoning jurisdiction, but are still close enough to enjoy the benefits of the metropolitan area.

Supporters of such efforts said limits on city taxing authority are needed to protect lower- and middle-class Nebraskans who are already struggling through the nation's sluggish economy.

Lynn Rex, executive director of the League of Nebraska Municipalities, has said her group plans to push for the sales tax measure. It would allow cities to seek voter approval of a 2 percent sales tax, up from the current 1.5 percent maximum. City officials said the taxing power is vital given the Legislature's decision last year to cut financial aid, a move expected to save the state \$44 million over the next two years.

Neb. Bill Would Require Photo ID For Voters

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — No photo ID, no vote.

That's the aim of a proposal to require Nebraska voters to produce a government-issued photo ID before casting their votes at the ballot box.

The controversial measure (LB 239) had the state Capitol buzzing on Wednesday as nearly 70 people gathered in the Rotunda to protest.

Opponents say the ID requirement would be an undue burden for voters, especially low-income and minority people.

Supporters say the move is intended to reduce voter fraud and is not restrictive.

The bill moved through the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee last year, but no final action was taken. So far this legislative session, several senators have filed amendments aimed at prolonging debate.

Discussion on the bill could come as early as Thursday.

Chief Justice Says S.D. Trails In Drug Courts

BY CHET BROKAW
Associated Press

PIERRE — South Dakota trails all other states in creating courts aimed at keeping drug and alcohol offenders out of prison, but work is being done to set up more of the special programs, Supreme Court Chief Justice David Gilbertson said Wednesday.

"Sadly, we do not fare very well when compared to other states," the head of South Dakota's highest court said during his annual state of the judiciary speech to lawmakers.

The two special courts in the northern Black Hills and Pierre have a 90 percent success rate, saving the state a lot of money by keeping convicted felons with drug problems out of prison, Gilbertson said. The court system has reported that the drug court in the Black Hills saved South Dakota more than \$250,000 last year.

"This method of dealing with substance abuse felons is an absolute bargain," the chief justice said to a joint session of the state Legislature.

He added that the court system eventually will need to add more staff to supervise the 10,000 people on probation throughout the state. He did not specifically ask the Legislature for more money to run the state's courts.

Drug and alcohol courts take offenders



Gilbertson

who would otherwise go to prison and place them in programs that include treatment, intensive supervision, drug testing and frequent court appearances.

Gilbertson said the Northern Hills Drug Court, which has operated in Sturgis since 2007, expanded last year to include the Rapid City area. A program in Pierre that focuses on drunken driving started in 2009, and a similar program in Sioux Falls started last year. Federal grants are being used to train people who can run similar programs in the Mitchell and Aberdeen areas, the chief justice said.

He said the U.S. Justice Department reported that in 2009, Montana had 23 drug courts, Wyoming 20, Nebraska 25, Iowa 29, Minnesota 41 and North Dakota 12.

The Northern Hills Drug Court has served 50 people, including the 18 currently in its programs. Gilbertson said those in the program now have a total of 91 years of prison time hanging over their heads, but the state will not have to pay to keep them behind bars if they complete the program. They also have 19 children who would become wards of the state if the offenders went to prison, he

said.

House Republican Leader David Lust, a Rapid City lawyer, said he was intrigued to learn that the Black Hills drug court helps offenders avoid serving so much time in prison. He said there's strong evidence that drug courts save taxpayers' money, help people break addictions and keep families together.

Gilbertson also said the number of offenders on probation has risen by 500 in the past two years, so the court system will need to hire more court service officers to supervise them.

"At some point we will either have to suffer a decline in the quality of services provided, with a corresponding threat to the public order, or increase the number of court service officers," he said.

Probation costs \$3 a day, while prison costs nearly \$64 a day, Gilbertson said.

The court system also is continuing its study of the extent of elderly abuse, seeking ways to ease a shortage of lawyers in rural areas, and working to provide legal services to people who cannot afford to hire lawyers in divorce and child custody cases, he said.

Gilbertson noted that the Unified Judicial System joined the rest of state government last year in a 10 percent budget cut, but the court system was able to make adjustments that prevented layoffs or closing any offices.

Group Urges Broad Approach To Nebraska Child Welfare

BY JOSH FUNK
Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — A children's advocacy group hopes Nebraska lawmakers will take a broad look at the health of the state's children and not focus just on whether privatization of the state's troubled child welfare system should continue.

The ongoing reform of Nebraska's child welfare system is shaping up to be one of the biggest issues this year's Legislature will face, and Thursday's release of the annual Kids Count report from Voices for Children in Nebraska will likely add to the debate.

The effort to privatize child welfare system has had problems since it began in 2009, and a recent report recommended returning to state-run management of services for children who suffer from abuse or neglect or have behavioral and mental health problems.

"We know that we need to fix the problems of our child welfare system, but we also need to take a broader view of the lives of Nebraska's kids and find solutions to the barriers in health, education and economic stability that kids face every day," said Melissa Breazile, research coordinator at Voices for Children in Nebraska.

One of the main concerns highlighted in the report released Thursday is the lack of affordable

early childhood education programs that would help prepare children to start school. That's especially important in poorer areas because low-income children often start school less prepared than their more affluent peers.

"We continue to see persistent disparities when children enter school," said Sarah Ann Kotchian, of the Building Bright Futures group that's working to improve education in the Omaha area.

The Kids Count report also includes child welfare statistics, such as the fact that the number of Nebraska children in out of home care stood at 8,257 in 2010. That was down from the previous year's 8,677.

The group said it's troubling that more than one-quarter of the kids in state care were shuffled in and out of four or more foster-care placements.

"This legislative session is critical for Nebraska's kids," Breazile said.

The Legislature's previous child welfare report highlighted complaints about unmanageable workloads and high turnover among case workers, poor training and communication, a lack of oversight, inflated costs and few signs of improvement.

The state initially hired five private agencies to offer and coordinate child services statewide. But three of the five providers have

dropped out because of financial concerns, so the state and the remaining agencies had to take over their cases.

The gaps in Nebraska's child-welfare system were also on display in 2008 when three dozen children — most of them adolescents — were dropped off at hospitals. During an emergency legislative session that year lawmakers put an age limit of 30 days into the safe-haven law because the measure had been meant to prevent infants from being abandoned in trash bins or worse.



AM 1450

MORNING COFFEE

WEEKDAYS MONDAY-FRIDAY

Thursday, January 12

7:40 a.m. Yankton Chamber (Carmen Schramm)

8:20 a.m. Yankton Conv/Visitors (Lisa Scheve)

Friday, January 13

7:40 a.m. YAPG (Mike Dellinger)

8:20 a.m. Gayville FD (Deb Buckman)

Beautiful Baby Contest 2012



Attention Parents, Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, Godparents and Friends!

We are featuring our annual

Beautiful Baby Contest

In print and online on Wednesday, February 22, 2012

Only this time our online readers will determine the winners!

If you or someone you know has a beautiful child, we would love to include them in our feature and they might even have a chance to win prizes from local businesses and a framed winners print!

To enter, simply log online by going to:

<http://play2win.upickem.net/>

Register to submit your photos: 1 entry per email address

Upload your photo to one of the following categories:

0-6 months • 7-12 months • 13 months-2 years • 3-4 years

You have until February 3rd to submit your photos. They will then be voted on by the public. You can help promote your child to win through Facebook and email! People will be able to vote once per day per registered email address. Voting will take place from February 4th-19th. Winning photos will be published in the Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan on February 22nd. First place winners will receive a framed winners print and gift certificates to local businesses. Employees and family members of Yankton Media Inc. and any of its subsidiaries are ineligible to win. Your online submission authorizes the publication of this photo in this contest in print and online at <http://www.yankton.net> and <http://play2win.upickem.net>



If you have any questions please email us at classifieds@yankton.net and we will help you with your online submissions.

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Wedding Planner & Bridal Fest

Sunday, January 29

Bridal Registration Starts at Noon

Exhibits Open Noon-4:00pm

Fashion Show 3:30pm

Riverfront Events Center, Downtown Yankton

