

MIDWEST DIGEST

Economic Forecast Mutes Optimism

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The Nebraska Business Forecast Council remains optimistic about Nebraska's economy over the next 2 1/2 years.

The council's report, released Tuesday through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Bureau of Business Research, muted its positive outlook for job growth.

In January, the council expected statewide job growth of 0.9 percent by the end of this year. Its revised forecast is 0.3 percent growth this year, in part because the final 2009 employment figures showed higher job losses than reported earlier.

The council expects increases of 2.7 percent in non-farm personal incomes this year, 3.8 percent next year. It foresees farm income jumps of 11.9 percent this year, 3.3 percent in 2011.

The council includes economists from utilities and colleges.

Marijuana Imitation Could Be Banned

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska could become one of the growing number of states to ban a substance that mimics the effects of marijuana.

State Sen. Beau McCoy of Omaha released a statement Monday saying he would introduce a bill to the Legislature that would ban so-called K2. It is a mixture of herbs and spices sprayed with a synthetic compound chemically similar to tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana.

Users roll it up in cigarettes or inhale it from pipes, just like marijuana. Several states have banned the substance, including Kansas and Missouri.

The Nebraska Legislature will convene in January.

Neb. Gets \$17.4M To Help Schools

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Federal officials say Nebraska will receive more than \$17.4 million to help the state's persistently lowest-achieving schools.

The grant is part of \$3.5 billion set aside in federal stimulus funding to help states with their problem schools.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said in a news release Monday that turning around the schools "is difficult for everyone, but it is critical that we show the courage to do the right thing by kids."

The money being given to Nebraska will be awarded after applications by the schools and districts.

State education officials used a combination of graduation-rate data and math and reading test scores to identify the 52 schools that needed the most help.

Change In Boat Licensing Proposed

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — The state is changing how boat licenses are renewed in South Dakota.

Agencies are shifting license renewals to the same month that the licenses for the trailer or a vehicle have to be renewed. That way the owner can do it all at once and online.

Some boats already are licensed under the same-month renewal system because of a change made last year, but others will have to be cycled in as their license expires.

The change to same-month renewals will eliminate what now is the option of getting a three-year license.

Favorable Weather Helping S.D. Crops

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — Another week of warm, sunny weather is helping South Dakota crops grow.

The Agriculture Department says in its weekly crop and weather report that the average corn height is an inch above the five-year average, and soybeans and spring wheat are developing at an average pace. Winter wheat is slightly behind average.

Field pests continue to increase in parts of the state, with grasshoppers, weevils and other bugs taking a toll on some crops.

But tospoil moisture in South Dakota is rated 91 percent adequate to surplus, and the conditions of pastures, cattle and sheep all are rated mostly good to excellent.

States Represented At Meeting In N.D.

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Hundreds of transportation officials from 18 states are in Bismarck through Wednesday.

The North Dakota Department of Transportation is hosting the 2010 Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials annual meeting.

Officials are talking about a variety of topics, from highway safety to funding.

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Neb. Council OKs Ban On Hiring Illegal Immigrants

BY MARGERY A. BECK
Associated Press Writer

FREMONT, Neb. — The Fremont City Council approved a voter-backed ban on Tuesday that bars residents from hiring or renting homes to illegal immigrants in the eastern Nebraska city.

Council members didn't discuss the ban before unanimously approving it during a meeting packed with supporters and opponents. The ban requires city officials and employers to ensure that job and housing applicants are legally in the country.

The ban could take effect in about two

weeks, but the American Civil Liberties Union has promised to challenge it in court. Residents approved the ordinance last month in a vote certified by election officials, but it needed council approval before it could take effect.

Miriam Berganza, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Mexico, said she was disappointed with the city council's vote. Echoing other opponents' concerns, the Fremont resident said she believed the ordinance was about race and has led to her children being taunted at school.

"Just the other day, I was faced with a question I couldn't answer. My daughter

asked me, 'Why, if I'm a U.S. citizen, why do I get treated different?'" Berganza said of her 15-year-old daughter.

Supporters said the ban wasn't about race.

"I can't control how they (opponents) feel. All I can say is this ordinance has to do with people who are here illegally," said Jerry Hart, a Fremont resident who petitioned for the vote.

The ban was modeled after an ordinance in Hazleton, Pa., where the law has been tied up in legal challenges since it was approved in 2006. It was one of the first cities in the U.S. to pass an ordinance that

targeted illegal immigrants.

The Nebraska ACLU has said it would file a lawsuit and seek an injunction to block the ordinance from taking effect.

Fremont officials are aware of the potential price tag of a court battle. Before voters approved the ban in June, the city distributed a list of estimated legal costs that other towns have incurred over immigration ordinances.

The list included about \$5 million for Hazleton, more than \$3 million for Farmers Branch, Texas, and close to \$300,000 for Valley Park, Mo.

'Barefoot Bandit' Returns To The US

BY TONY WINTON AND
JUAN MCCARTNEY
Associated Press Writers

MIAMI — The American teenager who police call the "Barefoot Bandit" was deported to the United States on Tuesday, just hours after he pleaded guilty to a minor offense in the Bahamas.

Law enforcement officials escorted Colton Harris-Moore on a commercial flight to Miami to face prosecution for a two-year string of break-ins and plane thefts across the United States. The FBI took him off the plane and put him into a waiting car. Officials said the 19-year-old convict was taken to a federal jail in Miami, where he is scheduled to have an initial court appearance Wednesday. It's likely he will eventually be taken to Seattle, where he was indicted.

Harris-Moore was on the plane with Bahamian authorities as well as FBI agents, but he did not know FBI agents were aboard, said John Gillies, FBI special agent in charge of the Miami office. The FBI did not have any authority to arrest Harris-Moore in the Bahamas and waited until he reached Miami to take him into custody,

Gillies said. Earlier Tuesday, Harris-Moore pleaded guilty in the Bahamas to illegally entering the country. He had been arrested in the island country Sunday following a high-speed boat chase.

The charge stemming from his alleged crash of a stolen plane on Great Abaco Island carried a \$300 fine. His lawyer, Monique Gomez, said the U.S. Embassy would pay it. Gomez said Harris-Moore wanted to go home.

The shackled teen smiled after the judge read the sentence. Bahamian police had earlier said that he would face other charges including illegal weapons possession and thefts during his week-long hideout in the country.

Harris-Moore wore white sneakers without laces and kept his head down as armed officers escorted him to the courthouse. A police SWAT team stood by as authorities put up street barricades ahead of the hearing for the celebrity suspect.

Authorities say he earned the "Barefoot Bandit" nickname by committing some crimes while shoeless, and in February he allegedly drew chalk-outline feet all over the floor of a grocery store during a burglary in Washington's San Juan Islands.

Harris-Moore is suspected in about 70 property crimes across eight states and British Columbia, many of them in the bucolic islands of Washington state. He is accused of stealing a plane from an Indiana airport to fly to the Bahamas.

His mother, Pam Kohler, seemed relieved. "I'm really tired," Kohler said from her home on Camano Island, Wash. "Yes, I look forward to seeing him."

Asked what she planned to do to her son when she saw him, she said angrily, "What kind of question is that?" and hung up the phone.

His arrest came as a relief to people across rural Camano Island, Wash., where authorities say he learned to dodge police.

"There's a lot of relief throughout the community," said real estate agent Mark Williams. "I think the man's luck just wore out. You run through the woods long enough, you're going to trip over a log."

Residents of the island also lashed out at the teen's mother this week, saying her decision to hire a well-known Seattle lawyer suggests she's trying to profit from a crime spree that police say took her son from the cedar trees in Washington to the bright beaches of the Bahamas.

Judge Hears Arguments On Neb. Abortion Law

BY NATE JENKINS
Associated Press Writer

OMAHA, Neb. — A federal judge is expected to rule Wednesday on whether a new Nebraska law requiring health screenings for women seeking abortions can go into effect on Thursday as planned.

U.S. District Judge Laurie Smith Camp peppered attorneys with questions about the law on Tuesday during a hearing on a request to issue a preliminary injunction that would keep the state from enforcing the law while a lawsuit moves through the courts. Planned Parenthood of the Heartland is challenging the law and wants the injunction.

Most of the questions were directed at the state attorney defending the law.

The measure would require women wanting abortions to be screened by doctors or other health professionals to determine whether they were pressured into having the procedure. Women also would have to be screened for risk factors indicating if they could have mental or physical problems after an abortion.

The risks could be "physical, psychological, emotional, demographic, or situational," according to the law.

Smith Camp asked what the purpose of the law was if, as supporters of it have said, it would require abortion providers to use the same type of medical judgment that doctors performing other procedures use. The law requires doctors to screen women for risk factors cited in peer-reviewed journals indexed by two major medical and scientific listing services — something not required before other medical procedures are done.

Assistant Attorney General Katherine Spohn said the requirement is needed because there are "perceived inadequacies" in the amount of information women get from abortion providers.

Smith Camp also asked why the same types of requirements don't exist for other medical procedures that are potential threats to women if the intent of the law is to protect them. Spohn said there is a "perceived lack of clarity" provided to women about the risks of abortions.

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