

News-Register

Dubas: Child welfare reform a major issue for 2012

■ Dist. 34 senator to begin 6th year in Lincoln

by Nick Benes

The state budget doesn't appear to be in nearly as dire of straits as it was two years ago. Controversy surrounding the proposed TransCanada Keystone XL oil pipeline route was silenced in the special session, so this time around it appears

the big issue for the Nebraska Legislature will be reforming the state's child welfare program, Dist. 34 Sen. Annette Dubas predicted as the 2012 was about to begin.

When the Nebraska Legislature convenes for its regular session starting today (Wednesday), there will be a different kind of

urgency in the air, as Dubas and company have only 60 days to tackle child welfare and other issues.

"You don't have a lot of time," Dubas said. "There's all of the carryover legislation



Sen. Dubas

from last year that senators will want to move forward... but again, with 60 days, that's not a lot of time. I think the child welfare reform will be huge and will take up a lot of time."

The Fullerton senator admitted that with the oil pipeline legislation passed in the special session, her load is much lighter.

"I don't have a lot on my agenda for this session," Dubas

admitted. "When the session was over this (last) year, the pipeline issue was something I was going to work on and bring my bill up again at this session."

"The special session took care of that. So as I told some of my colleagues this last week, my work is done and I don't have to come back," she joked. "That was so much of my focus that there was nothing else I was really devoting my time on."

Dubas appeared to be more relaxed, and for good reason. She battled health issues in addition to the highly-contested debates regarding oil pipelines during the special session. Now that she is feeling better, the senator said she has a renewed vigor.

"I had some health issues during the special session and

(See **DUBAS**, A14)

Holiday 'lock-in'

News-Register/

Kurt Johnson New Year's Eve came a day early for a group of teenagers who signed up for a holiday "lock-in" at The Leadership Center. About 30 teens showed up Friday from 7 p.m. to midnight in an event coordinated by The Leadership Center and the United Methodist Church of Aurora. They went swimming, sang Karaoke, played ping pong, dodgeball Texas Hold'em Poker and a number of other games. Pictured here, Sierra Hoselton, left, uses her shoe while partner Kayleigh Knudsen returns a shot in a game of ping pong.



Gallup CEO to speak at AACD event

■ Annual awards banquet scheduled for Jan. 12

Gallup CEO Jim Clifton will be the keynote speaker Jan. 12 at the Aurora Area Chamber & Development's annual banquet.

Since 1988, Clifton has served as CEO of Gallup, a leader in organizational consulting and public opinion research. His most recent innovation, the Gallup World Poll, is designed to give the world's 7 billion citizens a voice in virtually all key global issues. Clifton has pledged to continue this effort to collect world opinion for 100 years in 150 countries.

Under Clifton's leadership, Gallup has achieved a fifteen-fold increase in its billing volume and expanded Gallup from a predominantly U.S.-based company to a worldwide organization with 40 offices in 30 countries and regions.

Clifton is the creator of The Gallup Path, a metric-based economic model that establishes the linkages among human nature in the workplace, customer engagement, and business outcomes. This model is used in performance management systems in more than 500 companies worldwide. He is also the author of many articles and of the book *The Coming Jobs War*.

Clifton serves on several boards and is chairman of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund. He has received honorary degrees from Jackson State, Medgar Evers, and Bellevue universities.

He is married to Aurora native Susan (Hansen), the daughter of Norm and JoAnn Luthy and the late Bob Hansen.

The AACD banquet begins at 6:30 p.m. at the Middle School Commons area and theater. Tickets are available to the public.

Winners of eight annual awards will also be announced during the banquet, including the Gold Award, Agriculture Award, Community Service Award, Map Maker Award, Humanitarian Award, Outstanding Educator Award, AACD Member of the Year Award and Entrepreneur Award.

Amy Jones will serve as master of ceremonies and Chad Carlson will be the awards presenter. Remarks will be given by AACD president, Audrey Vaught.

For ticket information, contact the AACD office.



Jim Clifton

NTSB: Cell phones, driving not a good mix

■ Proposed ban of popular technology stirs local reaction

by Kurt Johnson & Nick Benes

The new year could bring with it new restrictions on how, or if, Americans are allowed to talk on their ever-popular cell phones while they drive.

The National Transportation Safety Board prompted what is sure to be a fiery debate, calling last month for a nationwide ban on the use of cell phones and text messaging devices while driving. The NTSB recommends bans for novice drivers, school bus drivers and commercial truckers, reporting that more than 3,000 roadway fatalities last year involved distracted

drivers. The recommendations, if adopted by states, would outlaw non-emergency phone calls and texting by operators of every vehicle on the road, though the rules would not affect passengers' rights to use such devices.

There are far more questions than answers at this point regarding the proposed recommendations. Among them:

Who should implement such restrictions? How would they be enforced? And would or should those restrictions apply to hands-free as well as hand-held devices?

The *News-Register* will be looking into this issue in depth, seeking input from a variety of sources. This week's focus begins with local businesses, asking what they think of the NTSB recommendations and what, if any, policies they have regarding cell phone use while driving.

John Nelson, president of Hamilton Telecom-

munications, said his company implemented a ban on texting in company-owned vehicles two years ago, though he believes there is a huge difference between talking on the phone and sending a text message.

"I recognize that texting while driving is a problem, but I don't think a hands-free voice call is any more distracting than talking to a passenger or listening to NPR," he said. "I think your brain is wired differently. We are used to listening while we pay attention to someone else, but not so much texting and writing and reading (while driving)."

Nelson said explosive growth of smart phone use, as well as applications on those devices, has added to the problem.

"When a message comes in it's tempting to

(See **CELL PHONES**, A14)

Health challenge 2012 to feature new approach

Are you ready for another health challenge Hamilton County?

It's that time of year again, but 2012 begins with a twist in terms of what has become an annual community weight-loss competition.

A hopefully happy New Year's Eve brought with it a renewed pledge to eat better, feel better and in general pay more attention to our collective wastelands. That's a good thing, though research has proven time and again that it's easier to make that pledge in early January than it is to create new eating and exercise habits that last.

This year, the strategy will be different.

The *News-Register* has teamed up with Memorial Community Health Inc. and several local sponsors for the past three years to sponsor a weight-loss competition. The



Kurt Johnson

200 people sign on for a program designed to help improve the community's health, one person at a time. As we head into a new year, however, we have decided to step back and take a broader look at how we might have an even bigger impact.

That effort will include input this year from the Central District Health Department, which conduct-

ed an in-depth study last summer to assess health trends and concerns in Hamilton, Hall and Merrick counties. The conclusion, announced last fall, was that weight gain is indeed a growing concern (no pun intended).

Based on that study, the CDHD has launched a new Healthy Works initiative and hired Amy Wiczorek as its full-time coordinator. Wiczorek has spoken to several groups here in Aurora already, hoping to explain her mission and begin building a baseline of health-related data.

"We know that in the three-county region, 67.5 percent of people are overweight or obese," Wiczorek explained in a November interview. "We did some research and though some of it points to genetics, a lot of it says the environment we're in determines the choices we do or

don't make."

If there is a table full of sweet snacks in the break room, for example, employees are more apt to indulge, Wiczorek noted. And if we routinely feed our children fried food a la carte and pre-packed, high-fat goodies, they are more likely to develop poor eating habits they may battle for the rest of their lives.

So, with that in mind, we have asked Wiczorek to share the results of a Healthy Works survey she conducted late in the year. That survey asked a number of local individuals, families, businesses and corporations to share information on health-related issues. There were questions about daily eating habits, exercise routines and if there were any policies or practices in the workplace that emphasized and/or encouraged healthier living.

"People spend a third of their time at work and we want to meet people where they are," Wiczorek explained. "We also want to meet them where they are at mentally."

The plan at this stage of the game is to meet within the next few weeks to review the survey results and discuss how that information could be put to good use. We're not sure what this year's "Health Challenge" will look like, or what it will be called, but we invite you to stay tuned for a program that will hopefully have a long and lasting impact on people's lives.

If anyone is interested in being part of this effort, please contact me for more information.

KURT JOHNSON can be reached at kjohnson@hamilton.net

DUBAS

(Continued from A1)

after, so my focus has not been on legislative things," she admitted. "I battled a couple of kidney stones all through the special session, so by the time that got over with I was not feeling very good."

Dubas hinted that as of last week a bill she introduced last year dealing with foster care payments as part of the child welfare reform could be her priority bill, though she's not sure yet.

"We will be devoting a lot of our time on child welfare reform," she explained. "I am a member of the Performance and Audit Committee and we did an audit of the reform and came up with some recommendations. The health committee spent the whole interim with a report this thick," she added, holding two fingers about two inches apart.

"No idea at this point and time (on a priority bill for this session)," she noted. "I've got a few bills I'm working on, but I'm not ready to talk about them yet because they're not in final form. One of our committee's recommendations deals with foster care payments, and that was something I introduced last session. If that's a stand-alone bill, I'll probably prioritize it, but if it's in committee, I don't need to do that."



News-Register/Kurt Johnson

Winter golf

Temperatures in the 40s and low 50s made last week felt more like fall than early winter. From right, Roger Chambers, T.J. Jones and Hoot Gibson took advantage of the opportunity to get out and swing the clubs at Poco Creek Golf Course.

State budget

While the Legislature does have to approve the budget this year, the state doesn't have nearly the deficit issues it did the past two years.

"We just have to keep the budget balanced and so there might be some deficit issues we have to deal with, but we're definitely keeping our eyes very close to the revenues as they come in," she said. "So far, it sounds like everything is coming in relatively close to what the (revenue forecasting board) projected, but our fiscal office continues to tell us to proceed with a great deal of caution."

With revenues coming close to the projected levels means that those who received state funding cuts last time around will likely begin to ask for that money again.

"I know there are different groups who are seeing those additional revenues coming in and saying, 'you've cut us and we've made cuts,'" the senator stated. "There's going to start to be a line forming. I think we have to approach any increased spending in a very cautious manner because the fiscal office continues to tell us that we aren't out of the woods yet."

"It is nice to be coming back this session without asking 'who are we going to cut?'" Dubas said. "That pressure is off as far as wondering who is going to take a hit this time, and I bet it is a relief to the different agencies rather than worrying about what we might do to them."

One entity which should not expect changes is public schools. Dubas explained after a meeting with the Legislature's Education Committee chairman, Sen. Greg Adams of York, that he does not foresee revisions to the current state aid model.

"He's hoping to let things simmer this session. We've made some major changes to state aid in the last session and many of the school districts are saying leave us alone right now and we'll see what happens after this session," she said.

Prior to all of the focus on oil pipelines, Dubas said the Natural Resources Committee had planned to study all of the state's water policies to see what, if any, changes need to be made.

"The focus this interim was going to be on water and conducting an interim study on water and water funding, but that got sidetracked by the special session on the pipeline," she said.

What specifically was the committee going to study?

"Everything and anything," she answered. "We broke it up into different categories... and worked with the different agencies and groups who are concerned about water, historically where we are with water policies, and historically how we are funding water policies. We have never really made that commitment to fund water issues."

After this session, Dubas has just two more years left in her four-year term and will have to step aside after the 2014 election. At that point, she could sit out four years and run again, but admits it's too far out to consider life after the Legislature.

"I'm not sure what will happen. That's a long ways off," she said.

CELL PHONES

(Continued from A1)

respond to it right away," he said. "But from an enforcement standpoint, I don't know how a state trooper could tell if someone is talking on a speaker phone or singing along with the radio."

Kurt Mitchell, president of fontel, an Aurora-based international distributor of communications products, said he believes the NTSB's initial recommendation goes too far.

"With some of the new technology you can receive texts, answer texts, go through your email inbox and dictate email responses all with voice recognition in the cloud," Mitchell noted. "You can say 'Call home' or whoever is in your phone book and it's all done through voice recognition in conjunction with bluetooth technology."

The increased use of hands-free speaker phones and mobile headsets should be a factor if state or federal lawmakers consider any restrictive changes, he said.

"As long as you're not looking away from the road and you're able to stay focused on your driving, it should be allowed," he said.

Con-Way policy

Gary Frantz, director of corporate communications for Con-way, Freight, Inc., said

company employees are not allowed to use hand-held phones or other mobile communication while driving, with the exception of taking a call with the phone in hands-free mode.

"Employees are prohibited from texting in any manner while driving. Receiving calls is permitted with phone in hands-free mode under (our) guidelines," Frantz explained. "As a matter of safety we instruct our drivers to manage their need for outbound calls so that they are made only when the vehicle is stopped, such as when making a shipment delivery or pickup at a customer."

He added that Con-Way has had a ban in place prohibiting drivers from texting and hand-held mobile phone use "for many years."

The NTSB recommendation has no immediate effect on Con-Way and Frantz noted that U.S.

Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has indicated he would not support a ban of hands-free mobile phone use.

"That having been said, safety is our first priority and we will evaluate the NTSB's recommendation in the context of our current policy and make adjustments where appropriate," Frantz added.

He went on to explain that drivers must remain focused on travelling safely when behind

the wheel.

"Professional truck drivers see motorists every day -- multiple times each day -- who put themselves and others on the highway at risk by texting or using a cell phone not hands free while driving," Frantz said. "It is a patently unsafe behavior. Our drivers have been sensitized to this issue. Their No. 1 focus every day is safety so if there is any question of even hands-free use of a cell phone presenting a safety issue, the driver errs on the side of caution and common sense, and will wait until stopped to answer or return a call."

Jim Brokaw, safety manager for the Aurora Cooperative, said their company policy reflects current laws and regulations in regard to cell phone use. Employees are not permitted to read or type text messages while driving, and truckers are not allowed to answer phone calls.

"We don't have a specific restriction, as long as it can be done safely," he said about employees operating other motor vehicles. "Regarding texts, the driver is supposed to ignore those until they're parked and can respond appropriately. With trucks, federal regulations apply and they have to let it go to voicemail. With other vehicles, I would hope the driver uses common sense. It's not illegal to answer the phone, but consider the conditions before you answer that call."

Brokaw, who used to commute from Aurora to Lincoln daily, said he saw people doing all sorts of tasks while driving, including eating, drinking, reading and even shaving.

"It is possible to talk on the phone and drive, but you

'It is possible to talk on the phone and drive, but you have to keep in mind that the primary thing you're doing is driving. I've seen people eating, drinking coffee, reading the newspaper or shaving while they're driving.'

Jim Brokaw, Aurora Cooperative safety manager

have to keep in mind that the primary thing you're doing is driving," he noted. "I've seen people eating, drinking coffee, reading the newspaper or shaving while they're driving. I had a guy pass me one time and he was talking on the phone with a newspaper draped across him and also trying to write notes. He had a notepad on the dash of his car. If you take the cell phone away, he still would have been reading the newspaper and taking notes."

Brokaw noted that the NTSB was only issuing a recommendation.

"I'd be more concerned with what the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation has," he said. "Honestly, there are quite a few different distractions."

"I think they're missing the boat by focusing strictly on cell phones," he added. "One of the comments I saw said the recommendation made it appear no one on the NTSB has travelled anywhere with four pre-teenager children in a car. Really, from the safety aspect, they should be eliminating all distractions from the driving compartment, rather than just cell phones."

Brokaw, formerly with the Nebraska State Patrol, recalled

that the training he received was geared specifically toward driving and communicating at simultaneously.

"We trained to communicate using two-way radio and driving at the same time," he said. "I look at cell phones as another technology in that aspect."

He admitted he wouldn't be surprised if a law was passed someday, but believes hands-free technology installed by vehicle manufacturers will become the norm.

"I really think that's what we'll see," Brokaw said. "It'll get away from being a hand-held device."

Nelson said before the NTSB announced its far-reaching recommendations, it should have tested the policy on its own employees.

"I think if the NTSB thinks wireless voice calls are dangerous, they should start with their own employees and see if it makes a difference," he said. "If they get to a point where a ban on all government employees is in place and can demonstrate it has made a noticeable difference, then we can talk about doing it for the general population, but I kind of doubt they are going to take that approach."

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