

By Dave Vrbas

The Wauneta Breeze

Aside from District 44's water woes, State Senator Mark Christensen will be busy again for the next several days as the legislature goes into its seventh week.

Three major bills were on the agenda for the legislature's 26th day on Tuesday. On the slate for Tuesday morning were LB 258, which would change and provide penalties for minors in possession of alcoholic liquor; LB 987, requiring the Department of Veterans' Affairs to contract for a study of lung cancer in veterans; and LB 686, changing fees received by clerks and registers of deeds.

Also on the general file for Tuesday was LR 277CA, a constitutional amendment to allow for parimutuel wagering on horseraces at satellite facilities.

Christensen touched upon those bills, as well as several other items of interest during his weekly teleconference to the district on Tuesday morning.

The senator made his stance on an amendment introduced to LB 258 very clear during the call to constituents, saying he will very likely oppose the amendment to that bill, as well as all of LR 277CA.

The bill, introduced by John Harms of District 48 and given his priority bill designation, calls for a first offense minor in possession (MIP) violation to be classified as a Class III misdemeanor.

As part of a court conviction of the first offense charge, any minor between the ages of 16 and 21 would have their driver's licenses or permits revoked for a period of 60 to 90 days, be

required to attend an alcohol education class, Alcoholics Anonymous meeting or a victim impact panel conducted by Mothers Against Drunk Driving or similar organization.

For a second MIP offense, the violation remains a Class III misdemeanor, but automatic revocation of their license or learner's permit would be for a period of no less than six months.

For that second offense, the convicted minor would be required to complete no fewer than 20 and no more than 40 hours of community service and to attend the classes required in the first offense once again.

A three-time MIP offender, under the bill, would be convicted of a Class II misdemeanor, their licenses or permits revoked for no less than a full year, no fewer than 60 hours of community service and would then submit to an alcohol assessment by a licensed alcohol and drug counselor.

For fourth and subsequent offenses, the minor would be guilty of a Class I misdemeanor and the court would impound their licenses or permits for no less than two years, sentence them to no fewer than five and no less than 15 days in jail, and require another alcohol assessment.

If younger than 16, the law would limit eligibility for obtaining permits and licenses, including placing six-month holds on getting permits and licenses from regular eligibility dates for first offenses, up to two years for a third or subsequent offenses.

The amendment (1803; proposed by the judiciary committee), Christensen said, probably won't get his support because he feels as though leaving the offense as a Class III misdemeanor for those between the ages of 18 and 21, instead of increasing the severity of the offense with subsequent convictions, is not fair just because they are legal adults.

"Underage drinking is a problem. It's definitely a problem in Imperial," Christensen said, explaining his stance during the call. "I think the biggest problem is parents bailing kids out."

In addition to his strong feelings about underage drinking, Christensen voiced his concerns about LR 277CA, saying satellite wagering for horse racing would not be a good thing for the state.

Citing a figure of \$12 million spent by Nebraskans gambling at horse racing facilities already and a potential increase of \$6 million if the satellite gambling was approved, Christensen explained his absolute opposition to the resolution.

“That’s definitely gambling and I will definitely oppose it,” Christensen said. “When you look at the people who do the bulk of the gambling in our state, they’re the ones who can afford it the least.”

Christensen shared his concerns that the state’s citizens were already spending a great deal of their money on gambling — money that could be used elsewhere.

LB 987, co-introduced by Christensen and 13 other senators and the priority bill of Bob Krist of District 10, would create a contract between the Department of Veterans’ Affairs and the University of Nebraska Medical Center Eppley Institute for Cancer Research and Allied Diseases for a study validating diagnostic technology for the early detection of lung cancer.

The inexpensive, noninvasive testing would be conducted on approximately 500 Nebraska veterans and would report the results to the Legislature before July 2011.

LB 686 would change clerks and registers of deed charges from \$5 per page to \$10 for the first page and \$6 for additional pages. To file the same paperwork with the Secretary of State, fees are exactly double the uniform county fees set forth in the amendment.

Planning to attend Bureau of Reclamation meeting in

McCook on Thursday evening

Christensen plans to be in McCook Thursday night for a meeting regarding the Red Willow Dam. A number of reclamation officials will be on hand to provide information and address questions about the dam that the public may have.

According to an article in the McCook Gazette regarding the meeting, the lake was drained after officials discovered cracking in the embankment near the spillway.

From the Gazette's article: Blocking Red Willow Creek about 11 miles north of McCook, the dam is an earthfill embankment with a structural height of 126 feet that forms a reservoir of 85,070 acre-feet. An ungated concrete spillway is located in the right abutment. An outlet works through the base of the dam and provides for river and irrigation releases for downstream diversions.

Priority bill designations

due Friday

As priority bill designations come due on Friday, Christensen said he probably won't know until Friday which bill will get his priority designation.

If LB 862, which would change provisions relating to issuance and repayment of river-flow enhancement bonds, doesn't get the committee priority designation, he'll likely tag his priority designation to that bill. If it does receive that designation, he'll be able to choose another bill.

Citing last year's nightmare with his priority bill, LB 681, which failed to get out of committee, Christensen said he's playing it careful this year.

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