

Improving Our Water Infrastructure

Deb Fischer

U.S. Senator, Nebraska

Water is vital to life. It flows to our farms and ranches, to small businesses and large companies, and to our rural areas and urban cities. We rely on it every day to stay healthy, care for our families, and feed the world.

When Nebraskans think about infrastructure, they usually think of highways and bridges. But improving our water infrastructure across the state is also critical because it ensures our water stays clean and safe.

While my Senate colleagues and I may disagree on a variety of different issues, providing clean water for families at home is something we can work on together. This week, I'd like to report on a big legislative win for Nebraskans where we were able to do just that.

In December, I championed the passage of the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act. This was bipartisan, bicameral legislation I worked on for several years as a member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. I'm happy we were able to move it across the finish line.

With a strong coalition of members from both sides of the aisle, we built consensus in the Senate and House of Representatives and sent this legislation to President Trump for his signature. Importantly, this bill breaks through red tape to enable communities in Nebraska and across the nation to prioritize storm and wastewater projects with integrated planning approaches that are more effective and affordable for ratepayers.

Many communities face aging water infrastructure systems. Inflexible government mandates make it financially impossible for communities to meet all their obligations. For years, this one-size-fits-all approach demands that communities update their water infrastructure projects without analyzing local budgets, ongoing projects, or costs to ratepayers. As a result, families in these communities are often stuck with more expensive utility bills to fund unrealistic compliance costs. According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, municipalities on average spend six to seven cents from every tax dollar on water and sewer systems. Behind education and emergency personnel, water infrastructure is the third-largest expense for cities across the nation.

To ensure that cities have the assistance they need to comply with these federal regulations, the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act establishes an Office of Municipal Ombudsman at the EPA. It will also encourage the EPA to promote the option of "green infrastructure." This will allow communities to use their natural processes to infiltrate and reuse storm water runoff to their benefit.

This bill is particularly a legislative victory for residents in the Omaha area who understand this issue all too well. It is going to provide communities with flexibility to comply with CWA mandates in ways that are more effective, affordable, and better suited for communities like Omaha.

By working together in this way, we can be sure that our water infrastructure remains reliable.

We take great pride in protecting our environment and the abundant water systems. It's the Nebraska way. I'll keep working to ensure families stay healthy and safe, so they can keep living the good life. I will also continue to find areas where I can reach across the aisle and achieve good results for Nebraskans.

Thank you for your participation in our democratic process. I look forward to visiting with you again next week.

STRAIGHT TALK: State Spending Problems Bring Bad News

Steve Erdman

Senator, Nebraska District 47

On the last day of 2018 the Legislature's Planning Committee released its Final Report covering the 2017-2018 Biennium. The report received the unanimous support of its committee members, but contained some very bad news about the State's financial status. In short, the report warned that the State's cash reserves, also known as the Rainy-Day Fund, have been depleted down to a dangerous level. The conclusion of the report was that the Legislature needs to restore the Rainy-Day Fund to two times an average month's revenue over the course of the next two biennial budgets.

According to the Planning Committee's report: "During the past two biennial budgets cash reserves were approximately halved, from approximately \$700,000,000 to \$300,000,000. Although the reserves are intended to serve the function of a shock absorber smoothing out the fiscal road in tough times, this dramatic halving occurred during a time of reasonably normal economic conditions. Simply put, the draw down on reserves meant expenses were not cut enough or revenues were not raised enough. In either case, the trend is most disturbing, and should it be permitted to continue, a fiscal crisis will ensue."

The Planning Committee's Final Report did not tell me anything I did not already know. In May of 2017 I held a press conference where I suggested that the Legislature cut

\$250,000,000 from its budget in order to make ends meet. The Appropriations Committee did not take my advice, and State revenues fell short of their projected goal by 232,000,000. Had the Appropriations Committee made the appropriate adjustments to the budget, the Final Report of the Legislature's Planning Committee would not have contained such a dire warning of a looming fiscal crisis.

The State Legislature will now have to begin the new legislative session in a huge financial bind. Because voters approved Medicaid Expansion in November, legislators will be searching for a way to pay for it without dipping into the State's Rainy-Day Fund. Moreover, the most pressing need facing Nebraskans is the need for property tax relief, which can only result in lower revenues for the State. We can now add to this financial burden the Final Report of the Legislature's Planning Committee which directs the State to replenish its cash reserves by some \$450,000,000 over the course of the next four years.

Make no mistake about it, there will be some in the Legislature who will want to raise your taxes. They will look at raising your sales taxes (including taxes on Internet sales), your gasoline taxes, your cigarette taxes and even your State

income taxes as a way to generate more revenue for the State. However, I have said many times before, and so I will say it again: Nebraska does not have a revenue problem; we have a spending problem. We got into this mess by spending too much money, so the only way out of it will be to reduce spending. Because very few Nebraskans can actually afford a tax hike, why should we raise taxes to pay for the past mistakes of the Legislature? As long as the Legislature continues to spend money like a drunken sailor, I will find it difficult to support any bill which comes with a hefty fiscal note.

Unless State revenues can somehow magically increase, the next two years should be about reducing the size of our state government, not increasing it. Unfortunately, the make-up of the Legislature continues to slide in the direction of fiscal irresponsibility. As the population of socialists from Eastern Nebraska continues to increase in the Legislature over and against the fiscal conservatives from Western and Central Nebraska, the prospects of ever restoring our cash reserves or balancing our budget without dipping into our Rainy-Day fund becomes ever-increasingly hopeless. Unless the Legislature can somehow figure things out, the Planning Committee's stern warning of a looming fiscal crisis remains an approaching reality for the State. In fact, many, including me, would say that day has already arrived.

Beginning the 116th Congress

Adrian Smith

U.S. Congressman, Nebraska

It's a new year and a new Congress. While I would have preferred to retain Republican control of the House for the 116th Congress, I believe there are many things we can accomplish in Washington to serve the best interests of the American people.

Chief among my priorities will be to improve market access for our agricultural producers who have been hurt by our current trade disputes with China and other countries. I was happy to see negotiations over the United States Mexico Canada Agreement (USMCA) conclude successfully and I hope the details are worked out in a way which allows Congress to approve it.

Another such improvement would be the negotiation of a trade agreement with Japan, which has the world's third largest economy, to expand the sale of American goods and services there. As the new co-Chair of the U.S.-Japan Congressional Caucus, I hope to continue to build positive relationships with our Japanese counterparts and support further strengthening our trade ties.

Our national debt continues to be a very serious problem which has yet to be reined in. Given our current level of economic growth, tax revenue is higher than it has ever been. However, growth

alone will not overcome our current level of deficit spending. We have serious problems with both discretionary and mandatory spending which Congress must address as soon as possible.

An area where I hope to work with my Democrat colleagues is by continuing the work I began as Chairman of the Human Resources Subcommittee to connect unemployed Americans with the many open jobs across the country. Our current unemployment rate is a strong sign the economy has improved, but many Americans are not counted in these numbers as they have long since stopped looking for work.

Another subject of bipartisan agreement is Medicare, namely two bills I introduced during the last Congress with broad bipartisan support. One of them would abolish Medicare's 96-hour rule, which arbitrarily forces healthcare providers to discharge or transfer patients within four days of entering the hospital. The other would empower healthcare professionals at skilled nursing facilities to render urgent care with the support of doctors through telehealth agreements.

These are just a few of the initiatives I hope to advance in the 116th Congress. I will continue to support President Trump's agenda of securing our nation's borders, rolling back burdensome regulations, and ensuring our producers are treated fairly around the world.

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