

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee  
March 23, 2011

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[CONFIRMATION]

The Committee on Education met at 8:30 a.m. on Wednesday, March 23, 2011, in Room 1525 of the State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska, for the purpose of conducting a public hearing on three gubernatorial appointments. Senators present: Greg Adams, Chairperson; Gwen Howard, Vice Chairperson; Bill Avery; Kate Sullivan; and Ken Schilz. Senators absent: Abbie Cornett; Brenda Council; and Ken Haar.

SENATOR ADAMS: We need to begin, because we have one of our candidates calling in at 8:40 this morning. Welcome, everyone who's here, to this public hearing on some gubernatorial appointments. We have three this morning. I better get my glasses on, so I can read these folks's names: Steve Seline, Bob Engles, and Dennis Baack. We will begin with Steve Seline. Is Steve available? Steve if you could come forward to the testifier's seat. Thank you for being here early this morning. We appreciate it. And Steve has been appointed to the Nebraska Educational Telecommunications Commission, and I would ask that Steve, if you would, give the committee a little background. I apologize--we don't have more committee members here, but I have a feeling--here they come. They keep filtering in. But to respect your time, if you would give us just a little bit of background on yourself and field some questions, that would be very much appreciated. [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: Be glad to. First of all, thanks for being here this morning and listening to my story. I am a refugee from the private practice of law. I was a lawyer for 20 years at Kutak Rock in Omaha, and then left to work for one of my clients--a guy named Norm Waitt, and he was one of the founders of Gateway Computers, so Norm had me working on diversifying his investment pool, and I did a lot of that, spent a lot of time buying and selling radio stations and TV stations and billboards, and things like that. We diversified into media, what is now NRG Media in the state of Nebraska and pretty much all over the Midwest, and then did a...we did a lot of different investments for him, and then I broke off and formed a private equity firm with Norm as my main partner, starting in 2007, and that's what I've been doing ever since. And the private equity business is not exactly a rip-roaring business during the recession, so we've been doing a lot of consulting, too, and having a lot of fun doing that. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: All right, great. Thank you, Steve. Steve, is this a reappointment? [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: No, this is my first appointment and my first time being appointed to anything where I needed Legislature confirmation. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: All right. Committee, what questions do we have for Steve? Senator Avery. [CONFIRMATION]

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
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March 23, 2011

---

SENATOR AVERY: I asked this question of the last person who came before this committee to be appointed to this commission. We hear a lot of talk out of Washington these days that they're going to cut funding for the corporation for public broadcasting. Where do you stand on that issue? [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: It's a difficult issue, and I haven't been on the commission, so I haven't heard all sides of it. I'm a long-time NPR listener, a long-time NET television watcher, a beneficiary of the largesse of the federal government to that extent, so I need to hear more as I become involved "deeperly". But, for me, why I shouldn't be paying more for the services that I'm receiving is something I want to understand better. I don't know why some of the people in the community who are less fortunate than I am are paying their taxes to support my, you know, my listening habits. So, I feel like it's important for me to make a personal contribution to the foundations that support NET and NPR and, frankly, it's something that I do on a regular basis...I mean, that I use on a regular basis, I should be supporting on a regular basis. Sometimes their politics aren't exactly the politics that I have, but, you know,... [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: Well, isn't that what's behind this move to cut the public funding? There's some people in Washington who think, oh, this is too liberal. [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: Yeah. I'm not sure. I haven't gotten too deeply into the situation, but there is definitely a...I can tell that my biases are not being matched up with the biases of NPR. But I have a radio, and I can punch the button and go to someplace else if I don't feel comfortable with what's going on at NPR. The question of whether the government should be funding that is a more difficult question, I think, and I know that I will hear a lot more about that on the commission if I'm appointed. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: A lot of times factual information is interpreted as a bias if you don't like the facts. [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: I agree, I agree. I was editor of my high school newspaper, and the one thing that my journalism teacher, who was kind of a renowned journalism teacher, a guy named Gunnar Horn, taught us was that objectivity was the key to journalism...to good journalism, so the whole...my bias is for things to be as subjective as possible. I'm not really that interested in people's opinions as much as I'm interested in what they can tell me. And, frankly, one of the things that I appreciate the most about the...NET and the Nebraska system is when we get into local stories, and we hear local news, and if there's anything that I have a bias for, that would probably be the bias that I would have to hear more local stories and local TV programming, if you will. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Other questions? Senator Sullivan. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR SULLIVAN: Thank you, Senator Adams. Thank you for your comments thus

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
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March 23, 2011

---

far. Just wonder if...since this will be a new appointment, what particular things aside from your avid viewership and listenership...why are you interested in being on the commission, and also, what do you think are your unique things that you bring to the table? [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: I think the Governor has known me for awhile, and knows that I was pretty deeply involved in broadcasting. I've been...our group had 62 radio stations and five TV stations and 700 billboards at one point in time when I was still at Waitt Media. And I was vice chairman of the group, and my job was to be the chief strategic officer, so I did a lot of the strategy in terms of building a network, and we had a farm network, and we had a serious attempt to provide Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota with a one-stop place where they could do, you know, come for the news and come for good radio broadcasting. And, frankly, I assume that that's one of the things that he sees in me. I do have a pretty good level of experience in that particular area. I don't know that I'm a great radio programmer, for goodness sakes, but I've sat in on a lot of discussions about radio programming and a lot of discussions about TV programming. So I have a pretty good background in those areas, and especially in the news. I was lucky enough to marry a former broadcaster, and her opinions are whispered in my ear on a regular basis, and she was really lobbying very hard at one point in time for us to establish a mom radio, so that we would be broadcasting directly to all the mothers in the metro area, so that they would have a feel for...she thought that was a great target market for us. But she has opinions about everything, and she's pretty bright about this stuff. So I'm not sure whether the Governor was thinking of me or my wife when he was making the appointment, but someplace in the middle. We have some knowledge of both from the strategic standpoint and from the operating standpoint of what it's like to do broadcasting in both radio and TV. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR SULLIVAN: Then also, considering your background in the world of finance and also, based on some of the comments you made with respect to Senator Avery's questions--will you be focusing, perhaps, in part, on more private support for educational television and NPR? [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: The capital needs that are out there for the radio stations and the TV stations, because technology changes so much is a constant situation where we need, and I know very well that you guys are facing some serious issues with regards to putting more capital or more funds into anything, let alone the kinds of needs that telecommunications have. So, if my expertise in that area is helpful or if somebody has some questions as to that, I certainly would be more than happy to offer up my expertise in that particular area. In fact, who knows? I might even have an idea on it or two, but I'm a long way from there right now, but that's one of my jobs in private equity is to basically create new funding paths and new ways to get capital into things that need capital. [CONFIRMATION]

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee  
March 23, 2011

---

SENATOR SULLIVAN: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Other questions? Steve, thank you for your willingness to serve the state, and your willingness to come down here early this morning and talk to us. Appreciate it. [CONFIRMATION]

STEVE SELINE: Thank you, appreciate your time. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Yep. [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Hi. This is Bob Engler calling from Auburn. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Good morning, Bob. This is Senator Adams. How are you this morning? [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Fine, Senator. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Your timing is perfect. [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Good (laugh). [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: We're just ready to talk with you a little bit. We have most of our committee here this morning, and, Bob, if you would, we do have some of the material that was forwarded here to the Capitol in front of us. But maybe you could give us just a quick background on yourself and then answer some questions of the committee, if you would. [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: I'd be glad to, Senator. Thank you, I appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts with you this morning. My name is Bob Engler. I'm originally from Auburn, Nebraska. I have lived for a time period when my wife and I were in college away from here, but we've also lived in Nebraska City and Falls City. We have lived in Auburn for the past 30 years. During that time period, my brother and I were in the gas station business together, and about 20 years ago, I made a career change and got in the insurance and real estate business. Currently, I operate a small insurance agency and a real estate business in downtown Auburn. Some of my public service includes the usual small town involvement. In addition to that, I've served for 12 years on the Auburn public schools board of education, and I just completed eight years as mayor of the city of Auburn. And with the committee's recommendation and approval, I hope to be able to provide some service to greater Nebraska through the Nebraska state college system. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Thank you. Now I'm going to open it up for questions. Committee, what questions do you have? Well, Bob, let me begin as they're sorting through some of

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee  
March 23, 2011

---

the materials. This is an appointment to the Board of Trustees of the State Colleges. Given the rather dramatic growth in community colleges and, certainly, we know the university is holding its own, where do you see the state colleges fitting into the higher ed scheme here in Nebraska? [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Well, I think one of the biggest things that you've seen change in the last 10, 20, or 30 years has been the growth and development of community colleges. I strongly support the community colleges. I think they serve a very valuable role. In fact, I think our state colleges, I know, I'm pretty sure Peru has been involved in working with the state colleges on shared curriculum ideas and approaches to education, and I know there's a number of kids that graduate from schools in southeast Nebraska who are seriously looking at the community college system with the opportunity that when they get an associate's degree, some of that degree could transfer into the state college system and provide them an opportunity to go on and get their bachelor's degree. So I strongly support the involvement of the state colleges with the community colleges working together for the kids and for the young people in the state of Nebraska. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Thank you. Senator Sullivan, did you have a question? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR SULLIVAN: Thank you, Senator Adams. This will be a new appointment, Mr. Engler? [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Yes, ma'am, that's correct. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR SULLIVAN: So, aside from your belief in the role of state colleges and the education of your young people, what particular attributes do you think you bring to the table? [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Oh, boy, that's a tough question. (Laugh) Maybe none. I don't know. No, I think I bring a pretty fresh approach. When I was on the Auburn public schools board of education, one of the reasons I did not run after my third term with the local school board is, I got very frustrated with the bureaucracy of public education, secondary education in the state of Nebraska. You know, innovative ideas were not real well received. I would hope that maybe what I could bring is an approach to the state college system will be possible Outreach programs. I would love to see Peru, Chadron, and Wayne extend their Outreach programs into the communities. My area of interest particularly is business and economic development, and community development. I think there's a lot that Chadron and Wayne and Peru colleges could do to reach out into the communities in their service areas and provide a great service for economic development, community development, and Main Street business development. And I've got a lot of experience in doing that, and I'm anxious to share that with my fellow

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee  
March 23, 2011

---

board members if approved by the Legislature. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR SULLIVAN: And you know, Mr. Engles, sometime when you bring nothing to the table, that means you've got an open mind for ideas, so thank you.  
[CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Well, I presume that's the case here. Thank you for that (laugh).  
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Are there any other questions? Bob, seeing none, thank you for joining us this morning, and we appreciate your willingness to serve. [CONFIRMATION]

BOB ENGLER: Thank you very much, Senators. I appreciate the work that you all are doing for the state of Nebraska. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Stan, did you have something you'd like to contribute?  
[CONFIRMATION]

STAN CARPENTER: Senator Adams, thank you. My name is Stan Carpenter, S-t-a-n C-a-r-p-e-n-t-e-r. I'm the chancellor of the Nebraska state college system. I just want to indicate to the committee that I know Bob. I met him when I was serving as president at Peru. He was somebody that I reached out to, to help us build some bridges back into the communities that had been not so well tended to in the administration before that, and he was extremely helpful in that regard. He knows Peru State College very well, but what also impressed me when I first got to know Bob was his understanding of the system, and how we worked together, and what it is we try to do together, and how we are a system of small colleges that really do collaborate and work collegially together. So I think he would be a terrific board member, and I hope that you will reflect positively on his nomination. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Thank you, Stan. Are there questions for Stan, anyone?  
[CONFIRMATION]

STAN CARPENTER: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Thank you. Our next appointment is Dennis Baack to Nebraska Educational Telecommunications Commission. [CONFIRMATION]

STAN CARPENTER: I could testify about him, too, if you'd like (laughter).  
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Do you want that to be public, Stan? [CONFIRMATION]

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee  
March 23, 2011

---

DENNIS BAACK: I think there's a lot of people that could. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Dennis, could you give us just a little bit of background, and then we'll question away? [CONFIRMATION]

DENNIS BAACK: Sure. I'm originally from western Nebraska, born in Sidney, Nebraska, grew up in that area, did my...graduated from Dix High School, long, long time ago. And then I went to Colorado State University, got a bachelor's degree in history from Colorado State University, went on to Loyola University in downtown Chicago, and worked on my master's degree in urban planning, joined the Peace Corps, was in the Peace Corps in Brazil working with the Brazilian extension service, came back, and bought a farm, and farmed there south of Dix for a number of years, served on the school board at Dix for eight years. And then I was in the Nebraska LEAD program which is the Leadership, Education, Action, Development program for ag leaders across the state. And as I graduated from that, I ran for the Legislature, was elected in 1984, and served from '85 to '93, and I resigned as...I was Speaker of the Legislature in '93 when I resigned to take the job that I have today, so I've been on this job for about 19 years now. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Thank you, Dennis. And this would be a first-time appointment to the board, would it not? [CONFIRMATION]

DENNIS BAACK: Yes. It's the very first time I've ever had to come before a legislative committee to be approved for an appointment (laughter). I've tried to avoid that over the years, and I've been very successful at that, but this is the first time. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Are there questions for Dennis? Yes, Senator. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: I'll ask you the same question I asked Mr. Seline about public funding for the corporation for public broadcasting. What's your position on that? [CONFIRMATION]

DENNIS BAACK: Well, I mean, I see a role for government in funding for public radio. Quite frankly, I was one of the cosponsors of the bill that expanded public radio in Nebraska when we got it expanded out to the other parts of the state. It was something that I felt that this state needed really badly. When I used to farm, I used to have it on public radio. I used to listen to public radio all the time, but it was Colorado public radio, because I couldn't get it in Nebraska, and I felt like, you know, the citizens of this state deserve to have that. And so we got that done...Senator Rod Johnson and I really worked hard on that and got that pushed out for the rest of the state to have public radio. So I think there's a role there to be played. I think it's going to be a challenge for public radio, quite frankly, if the federal government does drop the funding for that. I think we receive about \$220,000 or so from the federal government for public radio in

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee  
March 23, 2011

---

this state. I think the real challenge is going to be is making sure that we can keep all of those satellite stations open. Those are the ones that are probably going to suffer the most, the ones in the more rural parts of the state if we start to lose some of that funding. So I think we've got some challenges ahead of us there, and trying to make sure we can maintain a good statewide public network of public radio.

[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: My perception is that western residents and western senators support public funding for NET than perhaps, people in the urban areas, because we always were able to get Iowa or the Union College station here, but outstate it was very different. [CONFIRMATION]

DENNIS BAACK: Yeah, it was very different, and that was part of the argument when we had the discussion about it. The Omaha and Lincoln ones were saying, well, we already get that. I mean, what's the problem here? Well, but they were also very supportive. As we worked our way through it, and we did get the support from the Omaha and Lincoln senators to get it done for the rest of the state. And I think it's been very positive for the state to have it. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: Oh, I agree. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Other questions for Dennis? Dennis, just off the top of my head, do you see a connection between your job now as executive director of the community colleges and, in addition now, this possible new position. Is there a link there or are they just two separate things, two separate jobs and? [CONFIRMATION]

DENNIS BAACK: Oh, no, I think there's definitely a link there. You know, for a long period of time, we were very dependent on NET and stuff for satellite transmission for classes and stuff. We used to use them, you know, all the time for...as we put classes from...that were maybe going on in metro, putting them out to western Nebraska. I mean, we did all those kinds of things. We don't do so much of that anymore because of the Internet and stuff, and they're Web-based. So we don't use that for that purpose anymore. We use their ability to have meetings across the state and stuff. We still use that capability, do conferencing stuff capabilities. But I think in my discussions with Rod, I've had some discussions with him already, and we need to be looking at other ways that we might partner as, you know, and help us in providing more and more of the distance learning and stuff that we do. And there may be ways that we can partner yet with the NETC to get that done, and they can help us with that. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Good. Any final questions? Dennis, thank you for joining us this morning. As always, your continued support and commitment to the state, and we appreciate it. [CONFIRMATION]



Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature  
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee  
March 23, 2011

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DENNIS BAACK: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: That will end our hearings for today, and I guess we go upstairs.  
[CONFIRMATION]