

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Agriculture Committee March 4, 2025
Rough Draft

DeKAY: Welcome to the Agriculture Committee. I am Senator Barry DeKay of Niobrara, Nebraska. I represent the 40th Legislative District. I serve as chair of this committee. The committee will take up bills and confirmations in the order posted on the agenda at the door. Our hearing today is your public part of the legislative process. This is your opportunity to explain your position on proposed legislation before us today to offer insights and information for our consideration. The committee members might come and go during the hearing. This is just part of the process, as members can have bills to introduce in other committees. I ask that you abide by the following procedures to better facilitate today's proceedings. Please silence or turn off your cell phones. Introducers will make initial statements, followed by proponents, opponents, and neutral testimony. Closing remarks are reserved for the introducing senator only. If you're planning to testify, please fill out a green sign-in sheet that is on a table at the back of the room before you come up to testify. Please print and it is important to complete the form in its entirety. When it is your turn to testify, hand the sign-in sheet to a page or to the committee clerk. This will help us to make a more accurate public record. If you do not wish to testify today, but would like to indicate your position on a bill, there are yellow sign-in sheets at the back of the room. These sheets will be included in the hearing record. If you have a written statement or other handouts, please have 12 copies and hand them to a page when you come up to testify and they will distribute those to the committee. If you do not have enough copies, a page will make sufficient copies for you. Please speak clearly into the microphone. Tell us your name and please spell your first and last name to ensure we get an accurate record. We will be using the light system for all testifiers. You will have 5 minutes to make initial remarks to the committee. When you begin, the green light will be on. When you see the yellow light, that means you have 1 minute remaining, and a red light indicates your time has ended and you should conclude your remarks. Questions from the committee that follow will provide an opportunity to further explain your position. No displays of support or opposition to a bill, everybody, focus--vocal or otherwise, are allowed at a public hearing. Offenders may be asked to leave. The committee members will-- with us today will introduce themselves, starting with my far left.

McKEON: Dan McKeon, District 41, central Nebraska, eight counties.

HOLDCROFT: Rick Holdcroft, District 36, west and south Sarpy County.

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RAYBOULD: Jane Raybould, Legislative District 28, central Lincoln.

IBACH: Teresa Ibach, District 44, eight counties in southwest Nebraska.

DeKAY: And Senator Ibach serves as vice chair of this committee.

HANSEN: Senator Ben Hansen, District 16: Washington, Burt, Cuming, and part of Stanton Counties.

KAUTH: Kathleen Kauth, LD 31, Millard area.

STORM: Good afternoon. Jared Storm, District 23: Saunders, Butler, Colfax County.

DeKAY: To my immediate right is the committee research analyst, Rick Leonard. And our committee clerk, Linda Schmidt is seated at the far left. Our pages for today will introduce themselves.

TATE SMITH: I'm Tate Smith. I'm a third-year student at UNL. I'm from Columbus, Nebraska.

LAUREN NITTLER: I'm Lauren. I'm from Aurora, Colorado. I'm in my second year at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and I'm studying agricultural econ.

DeKAY: With that, we will open the hearing for the first item on the agenda, agenda. Appointee Dawn Caldwell, you're welcome to come up.

DAWN CALDWELL: All right. Good afternoon, Senator DeKay and Ag Committee. I thank you for gathering for your robust agenda today. I'm here today to tell you a little bit about my experience and my life with Nebraska State Fair Board. Governor Pillen has asked me to serve my third and final term. You can serve up to three 3-year terms consecutively on the Nebraska State Fair Board. And this would be my, my last. My family has been involved in showing or exhibiting at Nebraska State Fair for 6 generations, almost 7. We have a 5-year-old grandson that is well on his way to thinking he is going to be part of it as well, and I am certain, certain he will. Our families have been involved in 4-H, FFA, an open class livestock showing for all of those generations. And I guess what I would share with you regarding my position on Nebraska State Fair Board representing the 3rd Congressional District, is that my first term was incredibly hard. The State Fair was not in a good financial state. There was a lot of turmoil among staff and board members, and we had a really, really

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tough situation with flooding on the fairgrounds. And from that time, a handful of us stepped up to make the positive differences that, that were needed to make to preserve what is, I believe, one of, one of the biggest and best agriculture celebrations in Nebraska. So we have had a change in executive leadership at the Nebraska State Fair. We now have an excellent executive director who has been at the Fair for nearly her entire career since high school. We have staff with her that, that executes in each of their specific areas extremely well. A few years ago, we were awarded one of the ARPA grants to take care of that rainwater flooding problem. So no more kayaks going through, through corndog row, as we call it. And that project is well underway. So we are, we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel for the ARPA project. I started out with that project as vice president or vice chair of the Nebraska State Fair Board and chair of the Facilities Planning Committee, and so spent a lot of time with DEE and, and the state working and securing those funds and making sure they would be utilized properly. I served in, in the vice chair of State Fair Board role for 3 years, chairman for 1 year, and have been in past term. And now I'm past, past as the chairman of the Agriculture Committee currently. So the Agriculture Committee has special interest in not only all of the animal shows and livestock shows, but also competitive exhibits. So the things that you see when you go on the 4-H and FFA building or open class, as well as agriculture or educational opportunities like the birthing pavilion. So it's been really fun to see the Fair thrive, become much more comfortable financially, and that we were able to secure ownership of a very important parking lot across the road from us this year, and now have a vet clinic for sale, if any of you would be interested. And, and I look forward to this, this last term of mine to continue to, to bolster those areas, look at what new buildings we may be able to secure in the future working with the city of Grand Island, finalizing that ARPA work and continuing to grow our attendance with fun events for, for everyone that comes to the Fair. So with that, I would be glad to answer any questions.

DeKAY: Thank you. Are there any questions from the committee?

IBACH: Yes.

DeKAY: Senator Ibach.

IBACH: Thank you very much. Welcome. Thank you again for going for a third term, because I know how important it is to secure effective members of that Board. And so thank you for doing that. Can you just

talk about, a little bit about maybe some of the State Fair priorities? Over the last 6 years, you've been really engaged with changes and maybe some updates with the Fair. Can you talk a little bit about maybe a few of the priorities that you see in the next few years?

DAWN CALDWELL: Yes. So, so where we've been and where I anticipate we will be and continue to grow, is celebrating our youth and agriculture in Nebraska and really, really focusing on that guest experience. So not only the people that come to the Fair to spend the day going to the carnival or attending a concert, but also the exhibitors and competitors at the Fair. And so working to make sure everything flows seamlessly, it is relatively affordable. Food, food has gone up, but having new and different things. And, and that's a really key aspect is the new and different things. So one thing you all may have noticed if you have attended, and hopefully you have, the east end of the fairgrounds was nearly desolate for a period of time. And that was when I first started on the Fair Board. We're slowly but surely bringing back equine experiences. We're putting the avenue of breeds out in that part of the fairgrounds, and we're getting other activities located out there, whether it's chain saw carving or we've had memorial-- like veterans memorial displays, traveling displays out there, any number of things, plus TD Landing, which is what we call the, the concert, outdoor concert area. We have totally revamped the inside of the training track for the, the race horses, and it's now set up specifically for us to be able to hold our concerts, outdoor concerts out there and have a better venue for everybody that comes to that. In addition, the dirt events that are held out that way. So whether it's in the arena and bull riding or bullfighting or the equine events or if it's tractor pulls, demo derby, those kinds of things that get held in that part. So we utilize more of the property more effectively. And, and that's how, that's how we've strategized growing attendance, growing participation. And one last area I would highlight that for several years we've been doing now is celebrating the Hispanic heritage in, in Grand Island and offering-- they, they do dances. They have their own whole day. And so we highlight their culture on a specific day, as well, with a band, them doing their performances and other things. So a lot of ways to keep growing and added-- and for competition, increasing premiums has been really important. Something that seems basic but is really real for the families involved.

IBACH: Can I follow up?

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DeKAY: Yep.

IBACH: Can you just speak a little bit to your partnership with the extension and the university in actually building and growing the State Fair?

DAWN CALDWELL: Sure. So when I first joined the State Fair Board, a former Board member mentored me, and she said, Dawn, if you take care of the kids, the rest will take care of itself. And she has been right. So Extension and 4-H is a key component. And during COVID was when we split 4-H and FFA to separate weekends. So Extension takes care of all of the 4-H competition portion of the Fair, as well as any other contests they may be hosting. And so there are demonstration contests and other things that Extension hosts as well. Additionally, if you have ever set foot in the Raising Nebraska building, which is where the State Fair office resides, and there's kind of a museum-type setup in there that highlights all of Nebraska agriculture from, from soil to plate and Extension is in charge of that building as well and is housed inside there. So that's an incredible, important partnership. Kathleen Lodl sits on the Board of Directors with us as an ex-officio member. And then equally for youth competitions on the 4-H-- or on the FFA side, we have folks from FFA that, that focus on that, and those two youth components work together and help each other, especially on the livestock shows that are so labor intense.

IBACH: OK. Can I ask one more question?

DeKAY: Yes.

IBACH: So I feel like the State Fair is always kind of been a partner with the Legislature because we allocate lottery funds [INAUDIBLE].

DAWN CALDWELL: Which is so important. Yes.

IBACH: Can you speak to how maybe we can continue to support the State Fair's efforts?

DAWN CALDWELL: So a couple of ways. One is to, to maintain that-- and, and it's in the constitution right now that we get that portion of the lottery funds and those funds that come to the State Fair are utilized specifically for maintenance operations, capital expenditures, those kind-- things we need to make the Fair happen. If I were to be really selfish, and if we were back to bushel baskets and bushel baskets of money and there could be a direct allocation to Nebraska State Fair, we could overcome a space challenge that we have right now with

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buildings. So we're working very hard to raise private funds and donations to add at least one more building. Our master plan would suggest at least three more buildings, and ideally a fourth for equine. But if we could have another expo building-- we were displaced from the concourse. The race-- the racing concourse for all of our open class exhibits. And like the honeybees and all those kinds of things that people love to see. So we had to move that over to where the 4-H exhibits are, the static exhibits, which meant that we lost some vendors. So we're short vendor space or competitive exhibit space, however you want to consider that. We, we sell out of vendor space easily every year. And we could have more, which brings more people because they want to buy those things, whatever they are, pots and pans and knives and all the stuff you can't live without. So selfishly, if there was a direct allocation to Nebraska State Fair for structure, that would be a big, big deal. Generally, please keep intact the, the statute or the constitutional situation as it is that we get those lottery funds. We don't know what will happen to the lottery in the future if it will go up or down. We're always a little unsure within \$100,000 or \$200,000 of how much we'll receive. And, and it makes it challenging to budget anything extra. So thank you for that question.

IBACH: Well, I hope that your seventh-generation grandson can encourage my seventh-generation granddaughter to show cattle, too.

DAWN CALDWELL: Amen. We'll get them there.

IBACH: Thank you.

DeKAY: Senator Raybould.

RAYBOULD: This is a very tough question, Dawn. You may know that I have been a cinnamon roll judge for the Lancaster County Fair for a number of years. And, you know, I'm just curious. I don't recall seeing that at the State Fair. Is that-- you know--

DAWN CALDWELL: Are there cinnamon rolls in the baking?

RAYBOULD: Yeah.

DAWN CALDWELL: Yes. So here's, here's what I would say. One, you should sign up to be a food judge. One other way a senator can support the State Fair. We welcome additional different judges. Number two, I will tell you my very first food exhibit that got to go to the State Fair that got a purple ribbon was cinnamon rolls.

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RAYBOULD: Well, sign me up. Thank you.

DeKAY: Senator Hansen.

HANSEN: Thank you. Is it better to have the State Fair back in Lincoln or where it's at now?

DAWN CALDWELL: So I don't know where we would put it.

HANSEN: This is a, this is a common question I get asked by my constituents--

DAWN CALDWELL: You get asked often.

HANSEN: --whenever it comes to the State Fair.

DAWN CALDWELL: Yeah. So we do crazy things like look at license plates in the parking lots, and, and I would suggest that we're so far into Grand Island right now, and the support that we get from a nice radius around Grand Island to host the Fair there is better. And when I say better, unfortunately, Lincoln didn't maintain the buildings, such that they would be conducive to a long, sure future for the Fair when it was here. Grand Island, we, we have wonderful facilities. It's nice for the folks in the western part of the state to not have to travel quite as far. We're getting new hotels in Grand Island. I-- every observation I have is that Grand Island supports it incredibly well. And one, one really specific aspect I would point out is the number of volunteers. So my understanding is those last years in Lincoln, it was very difficult to get the number of volunteers that were needed. And we have as many as 700 volunteers per year in Grand Island to help host the Fair.

HANSEN: And so attendance has been going up?

DAWN CALDWELL: Attendance has been-- yes, ever-- so COVID, not counting COVID year. Our highest attendance, and Jaime may answer this more accurately when she comes up behind me as executive director, but 2018 or '19, I-- there's, there's a year in there that was a celebration year, a special. We've accomplished this many fairs year, that was a very, very high attendance year. And since then we continue to surpass-- our, our goal is always to, you know, hit and surpass 300,000 people, so.

HANSEN: So it's been going up?

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DAWN CALDWELL: Up. Yes.

HANSEN: OK.

DAWN CALDWELL: Yes, increasing. Yes.

HANSEN: OK. Cool. Thank you.

DeKAY: Any other questions? Senator McKeon.

McKEON: Since you brought that up, what year did it go from Lincoln to Grand Island?

DAWN CALDWELL: So we will be having our-- so 2010, we'll be having our 14th Fair, I believe, in Grand Island this year.

McKEON: And out of the Legislature, the senators that are in here, who has been to Grand Island to the State Fair?

DAWN CALDWELL: Thank you for coming.

KAUTH: In Lincoln or just in general?

RAYBOULD: Who's been to the State Fair?

KAUTH: OK.

DAWN CALDWELL: Yeah.

RAYBOULD: Who hasn't?

HANSEN: You can't ask questions [INAUDIBLE].

DAWN CALDWELL: I know Senator Ibach has.

McKEON: I just thought since you brought it up again.

DAWN CALDWELL: Yeah. And we-- so as, as a Fair Board member, too, we welcome you to give us a heads-up if you're attending. We love to do the back-of-the-house golf cart tours and show you around and let you know all the ins and outs and secret corndog recipes, so. They do exist, I should-- I will tell you.

DeKAY: Any other questions? I do have a couple.

DAWN CALDWELL: Yeah.

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DeKAY: What is the main revenue stream for the State Fair as far as bringing in dollars?

DAWN CALDWELL: Gate admission, entries, and sponsorships as well as the lottery funds.

DeKAY: OK. And when it comes to the equine events, does the governor, is he a proponent of that [INAUDIBLE]?

DAWN CALDWELL: Equine events, is that what you said?

DeKAY: Yeah.

DAWN CALDWELL: That's such a good question, because I'll tell you, Senator Ricketts was driving a pair of draft horses last year. I don't know what we can get Governor Pillen to do after-- yeah, after his experience.

DeKAY: Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you.

DAWN CALDWELL: Thank you, all.

DeKAY: First proponent?

JAIME PARR: My name is Jaime Parr, J-a-i-m-e P-a-r-r. I'm the Executive Director for the Nebraska State Fair. Do I need to wait for questioning, or can I just talk? OK. Thank you. I'm excited to be here. Dawn Caldwell has been integral to my success at the Nebraska State Fair. Like she mentioned, I've been at the Fair for about 26 years. So I got to make that trip from Lincoln. And I worked at the State Fair when we were here in Lincoln. Got to make that trip and set up the grounds in Grand Island. And I, I would say that it has been very successful in Grand Island. And not just measuring by the components of attendance. Attendance is good in Grand Island, very comparable to where we were in Lincoln. But the, the quality of the Fair, the experience of the Fair for our exhibitors and our guests is definitely important to us. And we, we field that feedback from our, from our component-- from our partners regularly. But Dawn serving as facility chair, like she mentioned, helped secure the future of the grounds. Fonner Park is the campus where we hold the Nebraska State Fair and flood water, storm waters, certainly, were a, a challenge for us. If it rained a quarter of an inch or a half an inch, it was hard to approach a building or a facility from the pathways and the walkway. So the work that's being done in the parking lots and in our exhibit space and throughout the campus is very important, necessary,

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and is moving along nicely, I might add. So we just started our second fourth of our progress, and we're looking forward to having all of the ARPA work completed by the end of 2026. It's all contracted and ready to go. So we are in process. Then with Dawn as chair, she certainly helped me right some of the challenges that we were having with our staff team and with the personnel in the office that has come to a more pleasant and quiet level. We have a great team of 18 full-time, year-round employees who produce the Nebraska State Fair, as well as the Aksarben Stock Show. And then we also participate with livestock shows to help keep those buildings that were built in 2009 and 2010, keep them busy in the Grand Island community throughout the year. So we're one-fourth of the partnership that helps with those shows as well. As past chair, Dawn continues to guide and to lead and to create that future direction for the staff team. So definitely support her coming in for a third term. And if it becomes an option to have a fourth term, I am confident I would also request that Dawn be appointed for any, any additional terms beyond that as well. And we look forward to see Tate [PHONETIC] and the other grandkids exhibiting at the State Fair as well, as soon as they're of age to do so. Glad to field any questions if you have some, but my support for Dawn is significant.

DeKAY: Are there any questions from the committee? I have one. Who owns the buildings for the State Fair?

JAIME PARR: Fonner Park is the owner of the facilities at-- yes, at their campus.

DeKAY: And you--

JAIME PARR: I'm sorry.

DeKAY: --you just rent all the facilities from Fonner Park then?

JAIME PARR: We don't actually pay a rental. We do cover the expenses for the facility. So we pay all the utilities, any trash removal, Internet service, insurance. We pay any fee associated with a facility for our 60-day term. We have the full month of August and the full month of September. So we bring out all of our Fair toys and signage and all the things that are necessary to produce the Fair. We host the Fair and then we put our toys back away. But Fonner Park is the owner of the facilities at this time.

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DeKAY: And then any other events that don't happen during State Fair time, that's Fonner Park's projects?

JAIME PARR: Fonner Park really during August and September, their only facilities are their horse racing track. So they do have a restaurant and they do, do keno and simulcast horse racing in that restaurant. But the rest of the facilities and parking-- well, our stakeholders, mostly to the Fair. VenuWorks is the entity that runs the Heartland Events Center, and then Grand Island Casino is a separate component as well. So a couple of-- within a couple of exceptions, the State Fair has occupancy of the full 250 acres of campus. Of course, we have nothing to do with the casino operations. They do support the State Fair, I should say that, but we don't have anything to do with that business.

DeKAY: And I, I missed that. But who owns the Heartland Events Center there?

JAIME PARR: The city of Grand Island actually owns it. And they just contracted with operator VenuWorks as a national company that brings in shows and events to the Heartland Events Center.

DeKAY: OK. Thank you. Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you.

JAIME PARR: Thank you for the easy questions.

DeKAY: Next proponent?

TRACI MENKE: Good afternoon, Chairperson DeKay and members of the Agriculture Committee. My name is Traci Menke, T-r-a-c-i M-e-n-k-e, and I'm here to offer my support for Dawn Caldwell's reappointment to the Nebraska State Fair Board. Dawn isn't just a leader, she's the kind of leader who makes you want to be better, work harder, and enjoy some laughs along the way. She's been an incredible, incredible mentor to me personally and offers so much to the state through her selfless service. Over the past 6 years, she's poured her heart into the State Fair Board, bringing vision, dedication, and probably a few premature gray hairs. She's been a champion of agriculture, a tireless advocate for innovation, and a steady hand in ensuring the Fair remains a showcase for all things Nebraska. Dawn has more than earned another term, and I strongly encourage you to support her reappointment. Thank you.

DeKAY: Thank you. Any questions from the committee?

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HANSEN: I have--

DeKAY: Senator Hansen.

HANSEN: Have you been at the Fair lately?

TRACI MENKE: I have been at the Fair.

HANSEN: If you had to pick one thing that you could improve, what would it be?

TRACI MENKE: Hmm.

_____: [INAUDIBLE]

HANSEN: Improve, yeah.

TRACI MENKE: Well--

HANSEN: Well, one thing you would like to see at the Fair that we don't have.

_____: You.

HANSEN: That's true.

_____: We have to have [INAUDIBLE].

RAYBOULD: Let's take a vote on that.

IBACH: Sorry.

TRACI MENKE: One thing at the Fair that we don't currently have-- I'm a proponent of, you know, outdoor country concerts. So if there's a, a way to have a more robust outdoor concert scene, I think that's kind of the ticket. The Heartland Events Center has been fine in the past, but I think more of the shows have moved outside recently. Correct me if I'm wrong behind me, smile and nod. But, yeah, any-- anything with more concerts outside. But my favorite thing at the Fair is a red Fairbury brand hot dog, corn dog, so. And they do have-- they do offer that.

HANSEN: They are pretty good. All right. Thank you.

TRACI MENKE: You're welcome.

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DeKAY: Thank you. Any questions? One, maybe. You talked about outdoor events and concerts and stuff. Who, who-- is it different entities, like radio stations and that will bring in a busload of people-- who-- or is that part of the program to get people to the outdoor concerts and stuff?

TRACI MENKE: I don't believe the radio stations bring in their own people, but I think sponsorships have the opportunity to have a number of tickets allotted to them that they would bring people in. But that's, that's an excellent idea.

DeKAY: Well, I mean, up where I'm from, I know there's different concerts during the State Fair process where they would charter a bus and-- for \$50 or whatever it takes, you to get a ticket to the Fair, concert, and a meal and a ride to Grand Island and back, so.

TRACI MENKE: That sounds like an excellent grassroot effort for different communities to, to rally themselves or to have a community leader put something like that together to bus people in, I think that, I think that's a fantastic idea.

DeKAY: OK. Any other questions? Thank you.

TRACI MENKE: Thank you.

DeKAY: Next proponent? Seeing none, we will switch to opponents. Charlie, you can bring them in. Any opponents? Seeing no opponents, anybody in the neutral position? Seeing none, Dawn, you're welcome to come up and close.

RICK LEONARD: No closing.

DeKAY: What's that? No closing. We're good. Sorry. I'm in hearing, I'm in hearing mode right now, so. OK. Thank you. That concludes our confirmation hearing.