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FLOOR DEBATE

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making our state an even better place in which to live, work and raise a family. Ladies and gentlemen, that journey begins here, with you. The state of the economy offers reason for both optimism and caution. Our state's growing economic strength is reflected in the fact that we closed the books on fiscal year 2004 more than \$100 million ahead of projections, and revenues continue to exceed projections this fiscal year. Yet, I submit to you that caution is in order. I am mindful of the projected \$233 million budget gap, the low-level waste obligation, and other significant financial obligations that we face. The budget proposal before you reflects both optimism and caution. It is a balanced budget with no tax increases and yet it funds important priorities. It addresses the low-level waste obligation in the most cost-effective manner possible, to ensure this burden is not passed on to future policymakers. It is remarkable that we can financially satisfy this debt in one payment, considering the economic struggles of recent years. You've certainly demonstrated a willingness to make difficult, forward-looking decisions during the last legislative session. Despite the difficult economic times, you passed three historic reforms. I propose continuing this state's commitment to those endeavors. My budget provides funding to build upon the very impressive progress that has already been made towards expanding behavioral health services across our state and bringing treatment closer to home. You've brought new meaning to the lives and futures of thousands of Nebraskans who view your passage of LB 1083 as a declaration of their value and an invitation to contribute to their communities. The budget continues to finance the most comprehensive reform of our child protection system in state history, and it supports the continuing efforts to ensure the wise stewardship of water for the sake of generations to come. You revealed a vision for the future in all three areas, and set aside individual interests to put positive change in motion. I, too, have a vision for the future. It is based on four priorities that will guide my decision as Governor. I believe education is the great equalizer. Our children are our hope for the future, so we have an obligation to provide them with the tools to succeed. There is no more powerful tool than knowledge. Second, I believe economic vitality must be a central focus of our leadership. The population of our state shows only modest growth while the