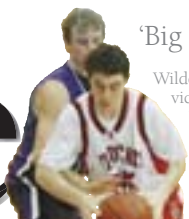


All you need to know for a blissful wedding. Inside



Hastings Tribune



'Big win'

Wildcats notch victory over Deshler.

Page B1

Peace versus more war?

PALESTINIAN ELECTION TO DETERMINE FUTURE WITH ISRAEL

KARIN LAUB

The Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Amid tight security and a sea of green and yellow flags, Palestinians turned out in large numbers Wednesday for their first parliamentary election in a decade — a historic vote integrating Islamic militants into politics and determining the future of peacemaking with Israel.

Both the ruling Fatah Party and its challenger, the Islamic militant group Hamas, said they were confident of victory, but added they were willing to work together if no clear winner emerges.

Long lines formed across the West Bank and Gaza as Palestinians — given a real choice for the first time — eagerly cast their ballots for the 132 parliament seats up for grabs.

Please see ELECTIONS/page A7

Animal groups hope to stop LB885

WILL VRASPIR

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A proposed legislative bill that would change the way animal cruelty cases are handled has local animal rights advocates concerned and traveling to Lincoln today to fight it.

The bill, LB885, would modify animal cruelty statutes to provide procedural safeguards when a government official confiscates an animal from the property of an owner, according to the bill's statement of intent.

State Sen. Deb Fischer of Valentine is sponsoring the legislation.

Please see LB885/page A7

“Once in a while, we’re going to get into the middle of something that doesn’t make people very happy. We need to stand by those people and take whatever heat we’re going to get, and we’re not going to change it.”

- George Anderson



“Bottom line is, we all should have been a little more aware.”

- Chuck Shoemaker



BRENT MCCOWN/Tribune

Above: William A. Harding (center), a Lincoln attorney, explains comparability studies, like those used to determine pay increases for Hastings Utilities employees during a work session Tuesday night with Mayor Matt Rossen (left), the Board of Public Works and the Hastings City Council. Below: Rossen directs a question to Paul Essman, a consultant who conducted the comparability study. Top left: HU board president George Anderson listens to questions. Top right: HU board member Chuck Shoemaker directs questions to Essman.

HU salary issue stirs debate

SHAY GRAVES

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Mayor Matt Rossen and members of the Hastings City Council are unsatisfied with the answers they received at a meeting Tuesday addressing significant salary increases at Hastings Utilities.

Rossen called the special work session between the council and HU's governing body, the Board of Public Works, to discuss the comparability study that the board said led to the pay raises — some of which were as large as 17.5 percent.

The pay increases became an issue after city officials realized earlier this month that several HU administrators received large raises, including Manager Marv Schultes, whose pay increased by 17.5 percent, or \$22,000.

At the end of Tuesday's meeting,

which lasted nearly three hours, HU board president George Anderson said he preferred to follow the laws on comparability studies and planned to stick with the salary increases — even if it upsets some people.

“Once in a while, we’re going to get into the middle of something that doesn’t make people very happy,” he said. “We need to stand by those people and take whatever heat we’re going to get, and we’re not going to change it.”

Rossen said this morning that he disagrees with Anderson's statement and believes the issue needs to be further discussed.

“I think we need to look more at what Grand Island and Fremont are doing that are in Nebraska and just like our entity,” Rossen said.

Please see COUNCIL/page A7



Snowbird Highway
Sen. Joel Johnson of Kearney is discussing his plan for a north-south route through Nebraska. The plan includes a more direct route between Norfolk and Sioux City, and would include already existing roads indicated in blue.

'Snowbird Trail' driving force behind bill

KEVIN O'HANLON

The Associated Press

LINCOLN — While one state senator envisions a new four-lane highway connecting the northeast and southwest corners of the state, it remains to be seen whether his colleagues want to go down that road.

Undaunted, Sen. Joel Johnson of Kearney presented his bill (LB1065) Tuesday to the Legislature's

Transportation Committee for a "Snowbird Trail."

Johnson said his plan would spur economic development across the state, whereas the bulk of highway projects now underway will benefit the state's two largest cities.

"Everything now is set for Omaha and Lincoln to grow," Johnson said. "The question is, how do we grow the rest of the state after

that Nebraska becomes a natural distribution center if we do this. The opportunity is there."

The money for Johnson's plan would come from a half-cent worth of sales tax revenue on motor vehicle sales — about \$15 million a year — that now goes into the state's general fund.

Please see SNOWBIRD/page A7

Weather

Lo: Mostly clear tonight.
30s Cloudy, windy with isolated sprinkles.
Hi:
50s



Art by Anthony Julian, 11, Alcott Elementary

BITING GUEST

SYDNEY, Australia — Talk about unwanted house guests. A 78-year-old Australian woman was rushed to a hospital after she was bitten by a 5-foot snake, a newspaper reported Monday. Valerie Makin, a great-grandmother

Nation

from the southern city of Melbourne, was sitting on her couch knitting and watching television when she saw the unwanted visitor, the Melbourne Sun newspaper reported. As she tried to flick it away, it sank its fangs into her left arm, the paper said. "She never even raised her voice," said Makin's daughter,

Janice Milinkovic, who was in her bedroom when her mother came in and said she had been bitten. Makin was rushed to a nearby hospital, but she did not suffer any poisoning because the snake's fangs only punctured the skin and the venom did not enter her bloodstream. The Associated Press

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Council: HU salary increase stirs debate

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He voiced concern at Tuesday's meeting about the array of entities that were used in the comparability study, which is required by law.

Paul Essman of Lincoln, who performs comparability studies for both the city of Hastings and HU, chose the entities in the HU array when he first conducted a comparability study for HU in 2000.

He compared utilities companies in Beatrice, Columbus, Fremont, Grand Island, Kearney, Norfolk, North Platte, Scottsbluff and Cedar Falls, Iowa. Also included in the study were Loup Power, Southern Public Power District and Nebraska Public Power District.

The city's comparability array includes the same in-state communities, but it does not include Cedar Falls or the public utilities. City Councilman Jim Ruberson asked Essman how he could justify Schultes' 17.5-percent raise. Essman said it is about paying people what they are worth to keep them on the job.

"The increase in wages in the utility side has been tremendous in the last couple of years," Essman said. "We don't want Hastings to get behind and not

be able to attract workers."

Rossen, HU board member Chuck Shoemaker and several council members all questioned why Cedar Falls, which skewed results, was included in the study. Cedar Falls pays its utilities manager a minimum of \$12,500 a month, while Fremont and Grand Island pay between \$5,700 to \$6,400.

Essman said Cedar Falls was an overall municipal match and the only entity other than Fremont that offered all of the same utilities as HU.

HU offers wastewater treatment, water service, electrical distribution, electrical generation and natural gas distribution.

Shoemaker said Cedar Falls could be used to compare pay for gas employees but questioned whether it should be used to compare all positions.

Essman said it was a great match and the first appropriate match he could find outside Nebraska.

Both board and council members also questioned using public power districts in the comparability study, as they offer just one or two services similar to HU and pay much higher wages.

Essman said most compara-

bility studies include adjacent power districts, which Southern Power would be considered, because they are working in overlapping areas and serve as local competition.

Shoemaker also questioned why adjacent South Central Nebraska Public Power District was not included in the array. Essman said he did not include it because he wanted an adjacent district in a city of similar size.

Southern Power is based in Grand Island, while South Central's hub is in Nelson.

Essman argued he could have included both adjacent power districts but didn't believe South Central had a comparable number of customers.

Shoemaker also questioned why Essman used 12 entities in his array, when the norm is to use six to eight.

Essman said he tried finding the highest number of matches for each job, so it would give him more salaries to compare.

Shoemaker questioned whether the wages for a position are compared among all entities in the array or just the most similar ones.

"Generally, if we've gone there and the jobs match, we keep it in," Essman said.

Essman said he suggested the significant increases in order to retain employees, not just to keep in line with the law. And, although he made the suggestion, he said, it was up to the HU board whether it accepted them.

Councilman Greg Sinner questioned whether results could have differed if someone else would have conducted the comparability study.

"If we were to get another person like you at the podium, we could get an absolutely different view?" he said.

"Absolutely," Essman said. Essman said results could differ, because another person might choose a different number of job matches.

Rossen later questioned whether each HU board member was aware of the large pay increases at the time the budget was approved.

Shoemaker said board members did discuss the significant pay increases, but that they did not consider how it would affect the community.

"Bottom line is, we all should have been a little more aware," he said.

Board member Ed Schlachter said he, too, was aware of the increases but said refuting a

study's results is difficult.

"When you commission someone to do a study, and they come back and say you are out of step on these positions, it's pretty hard to refute that," he said.

Schlachter said he was a part of groups in the past that tried to change comparability arrays, and it led to negative consequences.

Board members Bob Poppe and John McCarty did not comment as to whether they were aware of the pay increases.

Rossen said he believes the city owes it to the community to have wages in line with similar communities, like Grand Island or Fremont.

"We have to be competitive with what their salaries are, not only on the low side but also on the high side," he said.

Rossen said Grand Island and Fremont only used certain entities from their comparability studies to determine wages.

Councilman Tom Yilk argued against changing the array.

"Do we mess with the arrays like other communities have, or do we do what is right according to the array?" he said.

"Those with a fixed income in the city don't like to see a \$20,000 raise, but do we change

the array for our own personal reasons?"

Councilwoman Marilyn Will questioned how she should respond to residents upset by the increases.

"So what are we supposed to go out and tell our citizens that are very, very angry?" Will said.

Anderson said all the pay increases were based on the comparability study and questioned whether HU should no longer follow local comparability.

Prior to 2000, he said, HU did not compare salaries, which caused problems among employees who felt their wages were too low.

"We have great people. We went out and did the proper thing with the proper study and the proper job descriptions," Anderson said. "Just because we don't like the answer doesn't mean that it's the right thing to do to change it."

Rossen said he plans to put the topic of HU's comparability array and future wages on the agenda for a future City Council work session.

Anderson also stated that would be discussed at an upcoming HU board meeting. The date for that meeting has yet to be set.

LB885: Animal groups hope to stop bill

Continued from page A1

The proposed safeguards include obtaining a warrant to confiscate an animal, only impounding an animal when its life is endangered, having the animal inspected within 12 hours of confiscation, giving owners a right to appeal in county court, giving owners five days to correct an issued citation and having the government pay costs of an animal owner if a conviction is not upheld.

But Judy Hoch, president of Heartland Pet Connection in Hastings, said the law would make more animals suffer by weakening the ability of law enforcement to provide protection.

"The bill is just wrong," she said. "This law doesn't do any good for the animals. It really just gives more out to the potential abuser."

She and a group of animal advocates went to Lincoln this afternoon to

voice their opinions during a public hearing on the bill conducted by the Legislature's Judiciary Committee.

Hoch listed the reasons the proposed law would cause problems for animal protection.

She said requiring an examination within 12 hours of confiscation would put undue pressure on law enforcement and that the bill doesn't specify who should pay the cost of inspection.

By allowing owners to quickly appeal in county court, Hoch said, the bill could help abusers avoid having to appear in a jury trial.

She said she doesn't like the idea of giving someone who receives a citation five days to correct the problem, especially when the animal is being starved or beaten. She said many of the animals brought to Heartland Pet

Connection would be dead within the five-day period.

"By the time many of these cases are discovered, it's too late," Hoch said. "Would you give a human who was abusing a child five days?"

Hoch said statistics have proven that animal abuse leads to human abuse, and the Legislature should not be condoning animal abuse. Hoch said she thinks the bill will be dismissed.

To that end, Hoch and other animal welfare organizations have mounted an e-mail and letter-writing campaign urging state senators to kill the bill. Members of animal organizations across the state have participated, she said.

"We're thrilled to have people help," Hoch said. "Criminal abuse of an animal is a felony, and that's where it needs to remain."

Elections: Palestinians determine future with Israel

Continued from page A1

Polling stations closed on time at 7 p.m. (11 a.m.) after 12 hours of voting. The Palestinian Central Election Commission announced.

Pollsters said the race was too close to call. The first exit polls were expected about 1 p.m., and unofficial results by early Thursday.

Final turnout figures were not immediately available, but officials said 57.6 percent of 1.3 million eligible voters had cast ballots through the first nine hours of the election. In the 1996 parliamentary election, turnout was about 75 percent.

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas said he is ready to resume peace talks with Israel, even if Hamas joins his

government after the vote.

"We are ready to negotiate," Abbas told Israeli reporters in the West Bank city of Ramallah. "We are partners with the Israelis. They don't have the right to choose their partner. But if they are seeking a Palestinian partner, this partner exists."

Even it doesn't win outright, Hamas is widely expected to make a strong showing that would place the Islamists — responsible for dozens of suicide bombings against Israel — squarely inside the Palestinian political system for the first time.

Hamas' success has alarmed Israel and the West, although Abbas has argued that bringing them into the system will tame them, enabling peace moves to go forward.

Snowbird: Johnson introduces roads plan

Continued from page A1

Johnson hopes that the highway could eventually connect Minneapolis and Chicago with the southwestern United States.

Johnson's proposed diagonal route could take advantage of road building planned or already complete in Iowa and Minnesota. Three four-lane highways already lead out of Sioux City, Iowa, while Minnesota is developing a new four-lane route into Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Johnson's plan would create the Snowbird Trail by:

- ◆ Building a new, four-lane road between South Sioux City and Norfolk.

- ◆ Using the existing four-lane expressway between Norfolk and Columbus.

- ◆ Expanding U.S. Highway 30 to four lanes from Columbus to Grand Island.

- ◆ Using the existing four-lane expressway from Grand Island to Hastings.

- ◆ Expanding U.S. Highway 6 to four lanes from Hastings to McCook.

But Johnson's plan has competition on the priority list.

About \$380 million is expected to be spent widening Interstate 80 to six lanes between Omaha and Lincoln by 2012. And state roads officials are in the early stages of preparing better highway connections between Omaha and Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Also, Omaha's West Dodge

Road construction, totaling about \$102 million, is ongoing.

Meanwhile, several parts of rural expressway system improvements or expansions have fallen by the wayside, due in large part to the lack of promised funding from the state fuel tax.

For example, expressway work on U.S. Highway 81 from Kansas to Norfolk that was supposed to be finished by 2004 now won't be completed until 2012.

U.S. Highway 30 between Columbus and Fremont and the northern portion of U.S. Highway 275 between Scribner and Norfolk also lack the money for improvements.

In 1988, the Legislature promised to increase fuel taxes yearly and set aside money to get the expressway system on track. But there was only one increase in 1989, then the project was dropped.

Some at the hearing said they feared earmarking the money for the project might take away from other projects such as the expressway system, among other things. Johnson said that if his bill were passed, it would be up to state roads officials to determine whether to spend the money on his plan, the expressways or elsewhere.

There also is competition for money for repairs and maintenance on the state's 8,000 miles of two-lane roads away from Omaha and the 455 miles of interstate in Nebraska.

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