

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee February 19, 2026
Rough Draft

SANDERS: Good afternoon and welcome to the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee. I am Senator Rita Sanders, from Bellevue, representing District 45. I serve as the chair of this committee. The purpose of the public hearing is an information gathering endeavor in which senators on the committee are seeking information about the proposed legislation that we do not know or have enough thought-- or have thought about. It allows individuals representing themselves or a group to share their unique perspective on a proposed measure. It also serves as a record about the proposal for future historical and legal purposes. A key component of the process is the ability for senators to engage directly with testifiers to ask questions and elicit clarification on information provided. The committee will take up bills in order that is posted. If you are planning to testify today, please fill out one of the green testifier sheets for each of the bills that you are testifying on. These are on the back of the table in the back of the room. Be sure to print clearly and fill it out completely. When it is your turn to come forward to testify, please give the testifier sheet to one of the pages or the committee clerk. If you do not wish to testify but you would like to indicate your position on a bill, there are also yellow sign-in sheets in the back of the room on the table. These sheets will be included as an exhibit in the official hearing record. When you come up to testify, please speak clearly into the microphone. Tell us your name, and spell your first and last name to ensure we get an accurate record. We will begin each bill hearing today with the introducer's opening statement, followed by the proponents of the bill, then opponents, and finally, by anyone speaking in the neutral capacity. We will finish with a closing statement by the introducer, if they wish to give one. We will be using a three-minute light system for all testifiers. When you begin your testimony, the light on the table will be green. When the yellow light comes on, you have one minute remaining, and the red light indicates your time has ended, and an audible alarm will sound. Questions from the committee may follow. Also, committee members may come and go during the hearing. This has nothing to do with the importance of the bills being heard. It's just part of the process, as senators may have bills to introduce in other committees. A final item to facilitate today's hearing. If you have handouts or copies of your testimony, please bring up at least 12 copies and give them to the page. If you do not have enough copies, the page will make sufficient copies for you. Please note that thumb drives, CDs, DVDs, oversized documents, lists, books, books, signatures, and similar will not be accepted as exhibits for the record. Please silence or turn off your

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cell phones. You may see committee members using their electronic devices to access more information. Verbal outbursts or applause are not permitted in the hearing room. Such behavior may be cause for you to be asked to leave the hearing. Finally, committee procedures for all committees state that written positions on bills to be included in the record must be submitted by 8 a.m. the day of the hearing. The only accepted-- acceptable method of submission via the Legislature's website at legislature.nebraska.gov. Written position letters will be included in the official hearing record but only those testifying in person before the committee will be included in the committee statement. Due to the potential for inclement weather today, this afternoon for Legislature, extended today's hearing, online comments for the record, the deadline is 5 p.m. I will now have committee members with us today introduce themselves, starting on my are far right.

HUNT: Hi, everyone. I'm Megan Hunt and I represent District 8.

GUERECA: Good afternoon. Dunixi Guereca. I represent Legislative District 7, which is downtown and south Omaha.

LONOWSKI: Hello, I am Dan Lonowski. I represent District 33, which is Adams County, Kearney County, and rural Phelps County.

WORDEKEMPER: Dave Wordekemper, District 15, Dodge County, western Douglas County.

F. MEYER: Fred Meyer, District 41, all or part of 7 counties north of Grand Island.

SANDERS: Thank you. Also assisting the committee today, to my right is our legal counsel, Dick Clark, and to my far left is our committee clerk, Julie Cash. We also have two pages for the committee today. They are Luke Perry, from Gretna, who is a freshman at UNO, and majoring in history and political science. We also have Grace Harper with us today, from Loveland, Colorado, who is a junior at UNL, and majoring in political science. We also have a visitor with us today, Riley Wallace [PHONETIC]. He's a junior at North Star High School in Lincoln, and he's doing the job shadow of the legal counsel here at the Capitol. Welcome. And that-- with that, we will begin our hearing for today, for today. It will be LB919.

LONOWSKI: Oh, I shouldn't need that. Thank you, Senator Sanders, as we open on LB919.

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SANDERS: Thank you, Vice Vice Chair Lonowski and fellow members of the Government Committee. My name is Senator Rita Sanders, R-i-t-a S-a-n-d-e-r-s. I introduced LB919 at the request of the Nebraska Association of County Official. Managing public record is a regular topic of conversation in this committee. Usually, our discussions are about public records that have to do with, when, and how we disclose them to members of the public. This bill is about how we preserve public records. Nearly 60 years ago, the Legislature was trying to figure out how to save space in public buildings while still keeping up all the public records that accumulate over time. Since statehood, Nebraska public records had kept-- were kept in bound books, carefully updated and organized by clerks and other public servants. In 1969, the Legislature authorized the use of microfilm as a way to preserve and store these important records in a more efficient way. In 2026, microfilm is no longer the best way. Searching through microfilm is not, is not much faster than searching through physical books. And beyond the inefficiency of the office processors, processing for searching microfilm records, the microfilm itself is getting harder to come by. That is because the demand for microfilm has mostly dried up, just like the demand for camera film. This bill would allow our government official to use other means for preserving and storing records. These other means would still have to be durable, accurate, complete, and clear, just like our laws already require. And we have the chance to move to technologies that make record-searching quicker and easier. This will save tax dollars while giving members of the public better access to the government records they have a right to inspect. A representative, representative of the Nebraska Association of County Official, known as NACO, will follow me to explain the need for this bill in greater detail. Thank you for your time.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Senator Sanders. Are there any questions? I see none. Will you be here for closing?

SANDERS: I will.

LONOWSKI: Thank you.

SANDERS: Thank you.

LONOWSKI: Any proponents?

CANDACE MEREDITH: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for having me. My name is Candice Meredith, C-a-n-d-a-c-e M-e-r-e-d-i-t-h, and I am with the Nebraska Association of County Officials, otherwise known as

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NACO, in support of LB9-- LB919. Thank you to Senator Sanders for bringing this very important, practical legislation to have the discussion today. Nebraska's-- you know, the, the-- we're going to be really talking about the permanent record, and we have a, a system right now, where microfilming still does exist, and our statutes really guide our permanent records to have a secured method, which is microfilming. As you can imagine, microfilm is quite hard to come by. Just recently, we were going through the process of going through some more orders, and we were really struggling to find a company that still exists in America that's selling microfilm because it's just becoming nonexistent. Just to give you an idea, we were able to order 100 rolls, which was hard to do. The cost was \$67.50 for one roll, and that's not going to last very long when we're talking about permanent record for all the things that counties do. So, it is becoming increasingly obsolete. You know, the cost has risen. Obviously, back when we had these conversations when microfilming was included as a durable medium, the cost was much more reasonable and, and a safe option. The other piece of this is how people view these-- this microfilm. A lot of times, a lot of the next generation, they don't know what the scanners are or if scanners are still currently available. We have scanners, but trying to find someone to repair a scanner is, again, hard to find and very costly. So with that, you know, and having conversations with History Nebraska, the Secretary of State about moving towards what we're calling an accessible durable medium. And accessible, just meaning that it's something that we can easily access through-- that the citizens can access the data, more user-friendly. We think this is the first step towards converting that permanent record in the most cost-effective way while preserving the intent behind the current retention laws. I did include for you a primer on what record retention is and how it impacts counties, for your-- for you to view. And I also included in here is the record retention schedules for counties. And you can see that that security, that second method of making sure that we keep the permanent record, which is often held at History Nebraska, is microfilm. And what this change in legislation will do will help us determine what is the best means forward, to make sure that we are protecting the permanent records going forward in the most user-friendly, accessible way. With that, I'll be happy to answer any questions.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Ms. Meredith. Are there any questions? Yes, Senator Cavanaugh.

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J. CAVANAUGH: Thank you, Vice Vice Chair. Thanks for being here, Ms. Meredith. What-- like, what's an example of what this type of storage would be, going forward?

CANDACE MEREDITH: So in, in having conversations that, that-- and what we've been hearing across the nation is a lot of folks are going to a PDF/A, which is-- has an ADA accessibility. And how it's stored, you know, there's been conversations of, you know, what, what are the-- what's the security around storing it in a cloud versus on a server, so those conversations are still to be had. And I know the courts are working through a lot of their, their conversations about what they're going to do in their new JUSTICE system and how that storage is going to look for the courts, which again, this legislation is separate from the courts, just to make that clear. But again, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done for safekeeping in two separate places. So right now, we're-- you know, we've been having conversations of, you know, keeping it in the programming on server, but also looking at proper cloud storage.

J. CAVANAUGH: And what-- this may be a silly question, but is there a difference between microfilm and microfiche? Are those two different things?

CANDACE MEREDITH: I wouldn't be able to confidently answer that question. Definitely not an expert in that area as well.

J. CAVANAUGH: I just remember that from my youth.

CANDACE MEREDITH: Microfiche.

J. CAVANAUGH: Yeah, I don't know if there were different things. Thanks.

LONOWSKI: Thank you. Yes, Senator Hunt.

HUNT: Thank you, Senator Lonowski. I have an ignorant question, too-- not too, because his was good. I just mean I have a question, too. So if the statute says, record means any book, document, paper, photograph, microfilm, sound recording, magnetic storage medium, optical storage medium, or other material, regardless of physical form or characteristics created and received pursuant to a law, charter, or ordinance in connection with any other activity relating to or having an effect upon the transaction of public-- so how it says, regardless of physical form or characteristics, would that not include things like PDFs or modern technological, archival methods?

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CANDACE MEREDITH: Yeah. And I think it comes down to the security level of the microfilm, where it's that second component that we're a little bit concerned of. And so, that's why we wanted to, in-- on page 2, on line 12, it said, "copies shall be maintained and filed," and remove that "silver negative microfilm in roll," for that security portion.

HUNT: OK.

CANDACE MEREDITH: So we're already doing a PDF/A mechanism for the first round that we store in our programming, but the second round for the security piece of it, was retained at the History Nebraska, that's where we're kind-- we want to make sure that we're confident and we're following the legislation that's proposed here, that we are able to use some other form in another location. And that did bring up another-- I did forget to mention this. We were informed that in the-- this legislation, towards the end, the, the conversation was always about accessible durable medium. And in-- later on in the bill, it-- that-- seems like the words got flipped. And it should be it says accessible durable-- durable accessible medium. We would just like to make sure that the language is accessible durable medium, just to not create any confusion throughout the bill. So [INAUDIBLE]--

HUNT: OK. For consistency.

CANDACE MEREDITH: [INAUDIBLE] remind me of that, so thank you.

HUNT: Yeah. Thank you, ma'am.

LONOWSKI: Thank you. Are there any other questions? I see no other questions. Thank you for your testimony.

CANDACE MEREDITH: Thank you so much.

LONOWSKI: Any other proponents for LB919? Good afternoon.

MATT HANSEN: Good afternoon. Good afternoon, Vice Vice Chair and members of the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee. My name is Matt Hansen, M-a-t-t H-a-n-s-e-n, and I serve as the Lancaster County Clerk. I'm here in support of LB919. I've also been authorized to speak on behalf of the Lancashire County Board of Commissioners and express their support. The requirement to microfilm certain records in our statutes has simply become outdated and redundant. This is especially true given our current electronic systems and options for storing data. Microfilm depends on specialized

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materials and reader equipment, and those resources are becoming less available over time. Currently our office maintains a microfilm reader which is capable of scanning and reprinting historical documents. Other city and county offices come to our office to use our microfilm reader to review their own records because of the machine's size and cost is burdensome for those offices to maintain on their own. In contrast to microfilm, for more recent records, we use a secure electronic records management system. This is a database of mostly PDFs that allows staff to store and locate needed documents within seconds, using keyword searches and entered metadata. The system is secure, creates audit trails of who has accessed documents, and automatically keeps track of retention schedules, so that records can be disposed of according to the Secretary of State guidelines. The data we have is stored in two separate servers in different locations and is backed up several times a week. Allowing us to break away from microfilm requirements to move to more modern accessible durable medium will ultimately provide a better product at a lower cost. LB919 recognizes how government actually manages records today and allows counties to use secure modern systems while maintaining the integrity of public records. With that, thank you for your consideration. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Mr. Hansen. Are there any questions? I see none.

MATT HANSEN: Thank you.

LONOWSKI: Thank you for your testimony. Are there any other proponents for LB919? Any opponents for LB919? Is there anyone in the neutral for LB919? Thank you, Senator Sanders. Senator Sanders waives her close. This concludes the hearing on LB919. Position comments, there were 4 o-- excuse me-- proponents, zero opponents, zero in the neutral, and that's what we've received so far, as we're keeping that open until 5 p.m.

SANDERS: We'll now open for the-- on the hearing for LB923. Welcome.

CLOUSE: Thank you, Chairwoman Sanders. And Senator Meyer, I thought District 41 was north of Kearney, not north of Grand Island. For the record, my name is Senator Stan Clouse, S-t-a-n C-l-o-u-s-e, and I represent District 37, which includes much of Buffalo County, including Kearney, Shelton, and Gibbon. The bill concept that was brought to me by NACO, who you just heard from, the Nebraska Association of County Officials, is to clean up antiquated statutes related to functions performed by county clerks. Every year, NACO asks

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county officials to bring forward issues that they see in their office that are obsolete or don't reflect current practices or best practices. This bill, LB923, contains four cleanup issues related to county clerks in Chapter 23. I'm going to-- I'll go through each of those. Section 1 would repeal requirements for county clerks to annually prepare estimates of the supplies, materials, equipment, and machinery required for the coming year. This requirement was enacted in 1879 to assist counties with annual bidding for supplies. It was amended over years to apply only to counties over 200,000 population, and then changed in 1974 to apply to counties over 150,000 when purchasing agent language was enacted. It's unnecessary now because counties have more sophisticated tools to track inventories and anticipate needs. In addition, the County Purchasing Act sets out procedures for competitive bidding, bidding for counties as needed. Section 2 would give specific authority to counties to combine multiple funds in a summary warrant. Most counties now use an imprest system of accounting to process claims and pay bills, but some still use a traditional warrant system. In that system, county clerks issue warrants to request the payment of claims from the county treasurer. Since there isn't specific authority for the clerk to combine all of the warrants into a single spreadsheet, some counties are most comfortable issuing warrants for each fund individually. Authorizing summary warrants would modernize the process and make it more efficient. Section 3 would allow military discharge records to be transferred to the Nebraska State Historical Society, in accordance with federal military archive record guidelines or 62 years of age, which is-- whichever is later. Persons who entered the service from Nebraska or reside in Nebraska can register their discharge records, commonly called DD-214s, with a county clerk. County clerks are required to keep a book called the discharge record with this information. Counties maintain a lot of very old records for veterans who have passed away. This section would allow, but not require, those older records to eventually be transferred to the Nebraska State Historical Society. This proposal is similar to the transfer of records retained at the federal level. In 2004, the Department of Defense developed a schedule to transfer veterans' records to the National Archives so that they could be permanently preserved. Like the federal transfer, under LB923, this transfer would only occur 62 years after the service member's separation from service. The records would still be available to service members through federal channels or through county veteran service officers. The final change is an outright repeal of Section 23-1313. This section allows the owner of a farm, ranch, or home to register the name of their farm, ranch, or

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home with the county clerk. For a \$1 fee, they receive a certificate with a seal from the clerk's office that sets out the name, description from the U.S. Survey, and the name of the owner. This was enacted in 1911 for the same \$1 fee. When the state was being-- when the state-- let's see. When the state was being settled, it was important that they name a property as a way to establish identification when farmers were homesteading and acquiring property from railroads. Now, property ownership is documented by filings of section, township, and range with the county register of deeds office. So registering names is a relic that is rarely used and not relevant to property ownership. So if you'd like more details, we do have a representative from NACO that will follow me. It's not meant, meant to make any policy changes, just to clean up and streamline some of the county laws. So with that, I'll answer any questions.

SANDERS: Thank you, Senator Clouse. Are there any questions from the committee? I see none. That was easy.

CLOUSE: Thank you.

SANDERS: Thank you. You'll stay for closing?

CLOUSE: Yes.

SANDERS: Thank you. Any proponents?

CANDACE MEREDITH: Good afternoon.

SANDERS: Welcome.

CANDACE MEREDITH: My name is Candice Meredith, C-a-n-d-a-c-e M-e-r-e-d-i-t-h. I am here on behalf of Nebraska Association of County Officials, otherwise known as NACO, and here in support of LB923. Thank you to Senator Clouse for bringing this county clerk's cleanup bill for consideration. Again, I'm just going to highlight a couple of the, the overview that Senator Clouse just gave. Again, they're removing the outdated annual estimating requirements for the inventory. Again, there's more sophisticated programming that's involved there, so just really streamlining that provision. The other one, streamlining the county financial documentation by combining warrants. So what's happening right now in the system, we're currently going through a best practice review with several clerks from across the state. And one thing that was mentioned several times over is, so say we're going to pay their health insurance claims, they will write two checks or do two CHs, one for the general fund, one for the roads.

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And so, instead of having to have two separate items, being able to put those into a combined check or ACH is going to be very helpful. The, the accounting systems are sufficient enough to be able to document what funds those come out of now. The other one was the obsolete process of repealing-- to repeal the farm, ranch, and home name registration. That's just something that's just not occurring anymore, so being able just to remove that, and then, again, modernizing the handling of the military discharge records for the DD214s. Again, just ways that we can help our county clerks streamline their processes as we get-- and more modernized in our offices. And with that, I'll be happy to answer any questions.

SANDERS: Thank you, Ms. Meredith. Are there any questions from the committee? Senator Wordekemper.

WORDEKEMPER: I do have one, and I don't know if you can answer this. And mine's with regards to Section 3 and the DD214s. So I was reading through Section 3 (1), and it talks about the records are confidential and only available to the veteran and county officers. And then, in (2), it says they can-- forward those to the Nebraska State Historical Society. Do they still remain confidential and secure at that point? Or does the, does the county still keep record of that?

CANDACE MEREDITH: I am not able to answer that question, but if County Clerk Hansen can't answer it, I'll make sure I get an answer for you.

WORDEKEMPER: OK. Thank you.

SANDERS: Any other questions from the committee? Seeing none, thank you very much, Ms. Meredith.

CANDACE MEREDITH: Thank you so much.

SANDERS: Are there any other proponents on LB923? Welcome back, Senator Hansen.

MATT HANSEN: Thank you, Chair Sanders, and members of the committee. Again, my name is Matt Hansen, M-a-t-t H-a-n-s-e-n, and I serve as the Lancaster County Clerk. I've also been authorized to testify in support on behalf of the Lancaster County Board of Commissioners. You're getting my written testimony. I'll stop myself from being just the third person to explain the bill, line by line. Going to, specifically, the veterans discharge records, I do want to point out, my office has about 15,000 records, going back around to World War I era. And at this point, as you noted, it's confidential, and

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functionally, nobody's allowed to look at these records that we're preserving, at this point, indefinitely. So the goal was to then transfer them over to the State Archives, where the State Archives could be-- make the decision on who, what, when, and how they should be, they should be accessed. I think your point, Senator Wordekemper, about how confidential are they, that something probably could be clarified in legislation, I'd leave it up to the, the introducing senator and the committee to work on that. But if the State Archives has a preference on how confidential, how public they would be, that would be something I'd be interested in finding out, too.

SANDERS: Are there any other questions from the committee? Senator Wordekemper.

WORDEKEMPER: Thank you for that. And I, I, I just-- I'm not familiar with the system and how it works. And, and when I read through that, I was just curious if it remains that confidential, and then it says, you know, until it becomes public archival record. So at what point does that happen now?

MATT HANSEN: Yeah, so at the, at the point now, they don't become public anywhere in-- in Nebraska law, to my understanding, is we just keep them indefinitely, and they're always confidential to everybody except for the veteran service officer, essentially at this point. At the federal record-- level, it's my understanding that the National Archives makes most documents public after 62 years. And that was the intent was to line it up that, you know, if the document is available through the National Archives publicly, there's not necessarily a lot of sense in keeping it in our office confidential.

WORDEKEMPER: OK. Thank you.

SANDERS: Any other questions from the committee? I see none. Thank you, Senator Hansen--

MATT HANSEN: Thank you.

SANDERS: --for your written testimony. Thanks for being here. Any other proponents on LB923? Any opponents on LB923? Any testimony in the neutral on LB923? Senator Clouse, would you like to close?

CLOUSE: I kind of got ahead of myself. Sorry. No, that issue that Senator Wordekemper brought was online comments, talking about identity theft. So I think that's something that we will take a look at and see how we can-- peop-- identity theft-- they're going to find

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ways, but if we can help solidify that, I think that's a good, good point.

WORDEKEMPER: Thank you.

CLOUSE: With that, any questions?

SANDERS: Any other questions for Senator Clouse? See none.

CLOUSE: OK. Thank you.

SANDERS: Thank you very much.

CLOUSE: Have a great day.

SANDERS: This closes the hearing on LB923. For the online comments, we have zero proponents, zero opponents, and one in the neutral, so far. We'll now open on LB896. Welcome, Senator Lonowski.

LONOWSKI: Good afternoon, Chair Sanders and members of the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee. Thank you for this hearing. For the record, my name is Dan Lonowski, D-a-n L-o-n-o-w-s-k-i, and I represent the 33rd Legislative District. I introduced LB896 at the request of Nebraska Association of County Officials, also known as NACO. This bill is part of an effort brought by NACO to have fees reflect the cost of providing county services. This bill would increase marriage license fees from \$25 to \$50. Marriage licenses are issued by county clerks. The couple must present satisfactory documentary proof of their full name, residence, and the place, date, and year of their birth in the application. If either is a minor, they must have the written consent under oath of their parent or guardian. The clerk enters the information into the records. After the ceremony, the officiant returns the signat-- the signed license to the county clerk, who records the returned document. That sounds straightforward, but according to testimony from county clerks, the last time the fee was increased from \$15 to \$25 in 2015, about one-third of licenses returned to the Lancaster County Clerk Office, requiring followup by staff to obtain missing information. Taking staff wages, supplies, postage into account, as well as the overall increase in associated costs due to inflation, the estimated actual cost to issue a marriage license in 2024, was \$50. This isn't intended to generate excess revenue, but it would help match actual costs with the service. Increasing marriage license fees was proposed last year in LB468 as part of the right-sizing of fees, which is Senator Clements' bill to reduce inheritance taxes and provide replacement revenue to counties.

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To be clear, however, this is a rate change which should have happened regardless, to cover the cost of government. We all know the cost of doing business over the years has risen enough that we must raise these fees to ensure that the property owners are not the ones incurring the costs. LB896 will help keep property taxes down, which is one of the primary reasons I introduced this bill for NACO. I will be followed by NACO representatives who may be able to answer any other questions. That concludes my opening, and I respectfully ask the committee's consideration for the advancement of LB896.

SANDERS: Thank you, Senator Lonowski. See if there are any questions from the committee. I see none. Will you stay to close?

LONOWSKI: Yes, ma'am.

SANDERS: Thank you. Any proponents on LB896? You have a busy day today. Welcome back.

CANDACE MEREDITH: Good afternoon. My name is Candace Meredith, C-a-n-d-a-c-e M-e-r-e-d-i-t-h, and I am with the Nebraska Association of County Officials, here in support of LB896. Again, thank you to Senator, for bringing this legislation for consideration. As mentioned, the county clerks do issue and record marriage licenses and the fees for the marriage license is collected to cover the cost of that administrative process. So today, the, the county fee is \$25 for the marriage license and \$9 for a certified copy, but the cost for providing these services, the staff time, administrative work, the followups included, and technology, has increased since the last fee update in 2015. Because these fees are deposited into the county general fund to support the work of issuing and recording marriage licenses, updating them to better reflect actual costs helps ensure the service is paid for by the users of the service, rather than being subsidized by other county rev-- revenue sources, which we've been notably talking a lot about property taxes. LB896 updates fees to better match the cost of the service by increasing the marriage license fee from \$25 to \$50, and the certified copy fee from \$9 to \$16, which aligns the certified copy fee what the state vital records currently charges. As shown in the handout that I provided you, we, we have another primer here that we worked on. It provides you the data on approximately how many marriage licenses are issued each year in Nebraska counties, along with a comparison of surrounding states' marriage license fees for your, your consideration. And again, appreciate the conversation about increasing marriage license fees to

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cover the cost of the service. And with that, I'll be happy to answer any questions if I can. Thank you.

SANDERS: Thank you very much for your testimony. Are there any questions from the committee? I see none. Thank you--

CANDACE MEREDITH: Thank you.

SANDERS: --for your testimony. Are there any other proponents on LB896? Any opponents on LB896? Any in the neutral on LB896? Senator Lonowski, for close.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Chair Sanders. And I would like to thank the committee and those who testified for their time today, to discuss LB896. And I ask the committee for support of LB896 and respectfully ask to-- for you to advance this to General File.

SANDERS: Thank you. I'd like to also add, for the online comment, we had 7 proponents, 1 opponent, and zero in the neutral. Are there any questions for Senator Lonowski? I see none, we'll go ahead and close the hearing on LB896. OK. It looks like we might need to stand at ease for Senator Hallstrom, for LB1058. If you have a-- he is on his way. We'll now begin the hearing on LB1058. Welcome, Senator Hallstrom.

HALLSTROM: Welcome. I understand I'm the last? Chairwoman Sanders, members of the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee, my name is Bob Hallstrom, B-o-b H-a-l-l-s-t-r-o-m. I serve as Senator for Legislative District 1, appearing before you today to present LB1058 for your consideration. LB1058 would direct the Nebraska Tourism Commission to develop a program to provide a tourism and visitor promotion grant to an organization that provides tourism and visitor promotion services in the state through exhibits and trails and that is located along the Missouri River and within five miles of the city of the first class. Organizations in the communities of Bellevue, Blair, Nebraska City, Plattsmouth, and Sioux City could qualify for the program grant authorized under LB1058. Funding for the grant under LB1058, as introduced, would result from a \$150,000 General Fund appropriation for fiscal year '26-27. One of the organizations eligible to apply for the program grant established under LB1058 would be the Missouri River Basin Lewis and Clark Interpretive Trail and Visitor Center. It is a key interpretive site for the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, featuring exhibits, hiking trails, live reenactments, and educational programs about the expedition. In the mid-2000s, federal legislation authorized the

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transfer of certain federal land to the Lewis and Clark Foundation. In 2007, federal legislation authorized up to \$150,000 in federal funding per year for 10 years to assist operations. While the annual federal funding was extended beyond the initial 2017 expiration date, the federal funding was not extended in 2025. It is important to note that there should-- that should the use of the Visitors Center be discontinued, pursuant to federal law, ownership of the land upon which the Visitor Center is located, which was conveyed by the Secretary of the Interior to the Lewis and Clark Foundation, which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, will revert back to the Secretary of the Interior. Efforts are underway to reinstate the \$150,000 annual funding received from the federal government, which lapsed in 2025. The funding request under LB1058 would bridge the funding gap for a temporary one-year period. The Visitors Center relies heavily on volunteer services and operates on a relatively modest budget. As a result, the annual \$150,000 federal funding previously received by the foundation is a significant portion of its operating budget. National Park Service officials have indicated that should the foundation fail to continue operating the property, it would cost the NSP between \$100,000 to \$150,000-- and that's annually-- to simply shut the doors and mothball the facility. The Visitors Center averages almost 10,000 visitors annually, with visitors from all 50 states each year. The Visitors Center serves as the gateway to tourists from other states, with 85% of the visitors from out of the area, including tourists from over 132 foreign countries, since opening 21 years ago. The Visitors Center serves as an ambassador for the balance of the historic and tourism sites throughout the state for those who enter from the southeast corner of the state. In recognition of the budget woes we are currently facing, I have distributed AM2050, which would switch the funding source from General Funds to the State Visitors Commission Cash Fund. I had visited with Andy Pollack who represents the tourism industry as well as some of my district constituents who are very supportive of the Tourism Commission and indicated to them in advance of the hearing that we probably would not be able to get a general appropriation for this purpose. And that we would hopefully be able to tap into the Tourism Promotion Cash Fund for that purpose. I believe they are going to support the bill, but will express some concerns over setting a precedent of tapping into those funds for this purpose. But I think, in my opinion, the Lewis and Clark Center and what is at risk, given the fact how they've operated, the fact that they've had federal funding, they've operated efficiently, and the gem that they are in our state is well worth the investment on a one-year temporary period, to make sure that we keep them alive and vibrant. And working

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with Congressman Smith and the others of the federal delegation, we hope to reinstate the, the funding at the federal level shortly hereafter. My hope would be that we could advance the bill with the amendment. We most likely will be looking to get some approval from the Appropriations Committee, so we may actually hitch a ride on the Appropriations budget bill, but we need-- to do that, we need to advance the bill with the amendment out to General File, if that's the will of the committee, and I certainly hope it is.

SANDERS: Thank you, Senator Hallstrom. Are there any questions from the committee? Senator Hunt.

HUNT: Thank you, Chair Sanders. So is it the case that the Trump administration cut the funding and the state has to find it?

HALLSTROM: I don't know that the Trump Administration-- I don't know that there was anything specific. I can check into that, Senator Hunt.

HUNT: Well, when did they-- when was the funding cut?

HALLSTROM: It was, it was cut for, I believe, the '25-26 year, and I think it, it's probably a, a mechanism more of the inability to adopt all of the funding mechanisms, rather than any particular cut. The reconciliation packages and the various appropriations bills that have not completely been adopted by the feds would be required to reinstate the money, as I understand it.

HUNT: What's the timeline for-- is, is Congressman Smith introducing, or what, what is the timeline?

HALLSTROM: What he has told us, Senator, is that he, he doesn't think, in the environment, that he's going to be able to do something before the next fiscal year starts, for the, for the Foundation, so that's why we're looking to a one-year temporary bridge gap here. But I think he will be introducing legislation to try and get that done in the, in the next year of Congress or the-- the current year, but later in the year. It's going be-- it's going to come too late for us to have for this year's operating budget.

HUNT: Would you be open to a sunset on the amendment, to-- for the contingency of federal funding to be reinstated?

HALLSTROM: Certainly. You know, our, our intention is to just have this for one year, and that's no, no further, from our perspective. We're, we're realizing even-- you know, even if a-- particularly if it

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was a General Fund appropriation and, and tapping into the Tourism Commission funds, we don't want to do anything more than just this one year to bridge the gap.

HUNT: Thank you.

HALLSTROM: Thank you.

SANDERS: Any other questions from the committee? Senator Lonowski.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Chair Sanders. Thank you, Senator Hallstrom, for being here. Did, did I hear you say that it would cost \$150,000 to close the doors?

HALLSTROM: That's, that's what some of the volunteers with the Foundation have, have indicated. If they actually-- I don't think there's a ghost of a chance that the feds would come back and continue to operate it. But if they came back to operate it, whereas I think their budget-- and some people will testify after me-- is, is relatively modest. I think the figures, if I remember correctly, were that if the federal government was to run it, it would cost at least \$750,000, annually.

LONOWSKI: OK.

HALLSTROM: Your government at work.

LONOWSKI: So either-- we're in a conundrum. Either way, we, we, we have to pay.

HALLSTROM: Well, I think, you know, i-- ideally, over time, and, and rest assured that the Foundation is making efforts. You know, if the, if the federal government were so inclined to, to maybe put \$3 or \$4 or \$5 million into an endowment, they could live off the interest and operate from here to perpetuity. Getting that amount of money may be a tougher road to hoe. But for the moment, you know, we're confident that Congressman Smith is going to move forward with legislation that will come for the next budget year, to make sure that we continue to get that supplement. The original funding was only supposed to go for 10 years, but they renewed it, renewed it, renewed it, and then this year it just isn't going to happen.

LONOWSKI: I had a female soldier that played Sacagawea when they did the reenactments, and she, she informed me that it was Sacagawea, that we had always mispronounced it. So.

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HALLSTROM: Well, they have, they have wonderful reenactments down at Lewis and Clark.

LONOWSKI: Yeah. Thank you for this bill.

HALLSTROM: It's, it's a a great facility

SANDERS: Any other questions for Senator Hallstrom? See none. You will stay for close?

HALLSTROM: Yes. Thank you.

SANDERS: Thank you very much. Any proponents on LB1058? Good afternoon. Welcome.

SARA CROOK: Good afternoon. My name is Sara Crook, S-a-r-a C-r-o-o-k. I'm the current chair on the board of directors of the Foundation for the Missouri River Basin Lewis and Clark Interpretive Trail and Visitor Center in Nebraska City, and I'm here to speak in favor of LB1058. Again, thank you to Senator Hallstrom for introducing the bill. We opened this Visitor Center in July of 2004, exactly 200 years after Lewis and Clark walked on our property. Our mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the history of Lewis and Clark's observations and discoveries, to talk about the 57 Native American tribes that they interacted with, show the 300 new plants and animals that they described in their journals, and host reenactors, who demonstrate the daily experiences of the core members. School visits to our center are very popular and the children are very much enamored with the wide-open spaces that they see and enjoy, and the step back in time that they are able to participate in. As you heard, we have had over 290,000 visitors in our 22 years, again, drawing from foreign countries and every-- 50 states, every year, we get. Our beautifully designed center, if you haven't seen it, you need to come. It majestically overlooks the Missouri River. It's the second most traveled entrance into the eastern part of the state, following just behind I-80-- Highway 2, obviously. It goes right past our center. We were named an official Nebraska welcome center in 2021, and we take that responsibility seriously. Our experienced staff is most enthusiastic in encouraging our visitors to seek out other sites of interest across the state of Nebraska. And in fact, just last week, we were one of the three finalists for the Nebraska Tourism Commission's Best Tourist Site. And we have been a stop on the Nebraska Passport Program twice. Now, just as we began to share the important part that Lewis and Clark played in the U.S.'s 250th year history, we have

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received bad news. Due to ongoing reductions in the budget, the federal partner, the National Park Service, has notified us that they will no longer be able to give us the previous level of funding necessary to continue our operations, and they contributed nearly half of our operational budget. We have benefited from their support for the past 25 years. We are working on-- actively working on a permanent optional endowment from local supporters, and-- but again, we haven't achieved that \$3 million base that we would need to be able to do that, although we do have some restricted endowed funds already. Our Congressman, Adrian Smith, due in large part to Senator-- efforts of Senator Hallstrom, is very aware of our unique circumstances, and he has promised to work with us to find federal funding in the future. Therefore, we need to raise \$150,000 by July 1 of this year to cover our operating expenses. Again, if we don't reach that short-term goal, we have no other option but to shut down this fall. Uniquely, in accordance with the stipulations outlined in the real-estate transfer deed from the Department of Interior--

SANDERS: Please continue.

SARA CROOK: OK. We will-- if we fail to continue to operate the 79 acres on which the center sits, will revert back to the National Park Service, which they estimate it would cost them at least three times as much money to run our center if they even would open it, than what we are able to run it at our efficient rate. Again, thank you for your consideration of LB1058, and I'm available to answer any questions you might have.

SANDERS: Thank you, Ms. Crook, for your testimony. See if there are any questions from the committee. Senator Guereca.

GUERECA: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Ms. Crook, for being here. So what, in your time with the Lewis and Clark Center, has been the most off-the-beaten-track country, the most interesting country that you've seen come-- like a visitor come?

SARA CROOK: Oh, come through there. Well, I'm not on staff, obviously. But I would have to defer to our executive director, but from far away, over 129, 130 countries, so.

GUERECA: Right.

SARA CROOK: And it-- it's interesting, because we are kind of right there on the edge of the state, and people are amazed at what it looks

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like there. And then we encourage them that the state has much to offer as you go across, because it doesn't all look like it does along the Missouri River.

GUERECA: Thank you.

SANDERS: Thank you. Any other questions? Senator Lonowski.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Chair Sanders. Thank you for being here, and for your testimony. How many people does this employ? I mean, I get it's probably part-time for a lot of it, but.

SARA CROOK: A lot of it. There's an executive director, who is here with me today. And then, there's the operations person, and then there's a maintenance person, and then there's staff, who are all part-time. In fact, most of them are all part-time, and no benefits. We don't give any full-time benefits at this point, so just people at the front desk, so. And I will also indicate, we get a ton of people from the community who do volunteer work-- labeling the trees, clearing the trails. We just recently built a reenactment of Fort Wood, which is the fort that's-- they built just outside of St. Louis, on the Illinois side, the winter of 1804. Tons of volunteer effort went into the building of that fort.

LONOWSKI: What community are you--

SARA CROOK: And it's a great resource.

LONOWSKI: What community are you closest to?

SARA CROOK: Nebraska City.

LONOWSKI: OK. Thank you.

SANDERS: Any other questions from the committee? I just had something to add. I, I toured the center a couple years ago in the middle of winter. And leaving the site, there was a big tree, covered with endless amount of eagles that was spectacular. I hear it happens often.

SARA CROOK: It is. It's got a beautiful view of the river and lots of walking trails on the property.

SANDERS: Just beautiful. Thank you for your testimony, and thank you for being here today.

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SARA CROOK: Thank you very much.

SANDERS: Are there any other proponents on LB1058? Good afternoon. Welcome.

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: Good afternoon. How are you?

SANDERS: The floor is yours.

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: Good afternoon, Chair Sanders and members of the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee. My name is Jeffrey Owusu-Ansah, spelled J-e-f-f-r-e-y O-w-u-s-u-A-n-s-a-h, and I am an attorney with Nebraska's law firm, Rembolt Ludtke, and I appear before you as a registered lobbyist for the Nebraska Travel Association, or NETA. NETA consists of tourist attractions and travel centers across the state. NETA supports LB1058, which would appropriate \$150,000 from the General Fund to allow for needed funding-- needed funding for the Lewis and Clark Visitor Center in Nebraska City. We urge you to advance the bill. Senator Hallstrom explained the importance of the legislation and funding in this opening. I want to try to add to what he said. I would simply say that NETA agrees with him wholeheartedly. You have also heard about the importance of the Lewis and Clark Center from our friends in Nebraska City. Again, NETA agrees. Nebraska City and the Lewis and Clark Visitor Center form a wonderful and important first impression for many visitors to our state. Tourists from all 50 states and more than 100 foreign countries visit the center each year. We cannot afford to lose this important gateway into Nebraska. NETA understands that budget times are tough. General funding may not be a realistic option for this critical need. In the past, NETA opposed legislation that would direct the commission to make grants for specific projects. The question is not the importance of the project. Without question, the sustainability of the Lewis and Clark Center is critical. Rather, NETA's concern is the sustainability of the grant process. In the past, for example, NETA opposed legislation that would have directed tourism innovation grants to help with a project in Red Cloud related to Willa Cather Center-- the Willa Cather Center. NETA would be the last to argue about the significance of Cather, not only as a literary great, but also as an economic attraction. Many would call it cultural tourism. Yet, in the recent past, NETA opposed legislation to direct funding for a Cather project in Red Cloud. Our logic was and still is this: if we open up a very small chest of state tourism innovation funding to legislative angling, we will create an unsustainable feeding frenzy. You have 49 senators with 49 good ideas for how to

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spend a small amount of money. That's the job of the travel, tourism, and economic development experts that the Governor has appointed to the Nebraska Tourism Commission. We should not allow this process to become politicized. The Nebraska Travel Association appreciates the gravity and urgency of the situation Senator Hallstrom is seeking to address. We are committed to working expeditious-- expeditiously with the Senator, his staff, and the committee to find a solution.

SANDERS: Thank you very much for your testimony. Are there any questions for Mr. Owusu-Ansah?

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: Yeah. You got it right.

SANDERS: Senator Andersen.

ANDERSEN: Thank you, Chairwoman. Thank you, Mr. Owusu-Ansah.

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: Thanks.

ANDERSEN: That was close. How long have you been a lobbyist for the Nebraska Tourism Association?

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: This is my first session being a lobbyist.

ANDERSEN: It's your what?

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: My first session being a lobbyist so, I guess, eight weeks.

ANDERSEN: Eight weeks?

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: Yeah.

ANDERSEN: Thank you.

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: But Rembolt Ludtke has a longer relationship with the tra-- the Travel Association, generally.

ANDERSEN: OK. Thank you.

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: Yeah.

SANDERS: Any other questions from the committee? I see none. Thank you very much for your testimony.

JEFFREY OWUSU-ANSAH: Thanks. Thanks.

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SANDERS: Are there any other proponents on LB1058? Any opponents on LB1058? Anyone in the neutral on .LB1058? Senator Hallstrom, it's yours to close. And online comments, 1 proponent, 8 opponents, and zero neutral, so far.

HALLSTROM: Yes. Thank you. Just briefly to address, first, the online comments. I think if you look at those closely, most of them are related to the use of general funds, which my amendment will address. So I would think that we can avoid most of that opposition by making that change. I do appreciate greatly the tourism folks coming in in a support position. They have expressed their concerns over setting the precedent, but I think we have a situation here, where making a short-term investment is going to pay off with long-term dividends. I could envision where the Tourism Commission could have \$150,000 more in the kitty to spend on a much less robust tourism and visitor center and historic places system and process in Nebraska, if Lewis and Clark Center is gone. We'd lose that gateway at the southeast corner, which, as Mrs. Crook noted, is, is-- and I suggested, as an ambassador, that they are really referring folks to start here and make your way-- spread your wings and get across the state, and go to all the other great sites that Nebraska has to offer. I would also indicate-- I'm going to try my best to find some sources that may minimize the amount that we have to take out of the Tourism Promotion Fund. There's some other avenues that I'm exploring. I can't guarantee that, so I don't want to misrepresent, but I'm at least going to do a, a good faith diligent effort to try and find that. And Senator Hunt, I appreciate your question. I thought a little bit more when I had some time. We probably won't have to worry about a sunset because our objective here, at least in the long run, is move this bill out so it's advanced from committee with the amendment, and when it gets packaged in the budget bill, it will only be for a one-year funding. So I think that will address your issue and your concern.

HUNT: Just a question, not a concern.

SANDERS: You bet. Thank you.

SANDERS: Further questions from the committee? Senator Wordekemper.

WORDEKEMPER: Thanks for being here, Senator Hallstrom. Just so I can follow-- when we receive money from the federal government, did it still go through the Nebraska Tourism Association to go to this or did it go directly to this?

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HALLSTROM: It went dire-- my understanding is it went directly to the Foundation, that they-- it was part of the original federal legislation. Senator Hagel, from way back when, and, and the Nebraska delegation, as you might expect, were the leaders in introducing legislation at the federal level in both the Senate and the Congress, and they parlayed both the, the donation of the land to the Foundation, as well as what, again, was initially intended to be a 10-year grant. But they have, have re-upped through-- and I, and I can't tell you the history as to whether it was an annual renewal. But they, they effectively went another 10 years without skipping a beat, until we got the legs cut out from under us.

WORDEKEMPER: OK. Thank you.

HALLSTROM: Thank you

SANDERS: Any other questions for Senator Hallstrom? Senator Andersen.

ANDERSEN: Thank you, Chairwoman. Thank you, Senator Hallstrom, for being here. Sorry. I, I was in a different committee, and so I apologize for walking in late. So currently, they're-- they have previously been funded 150 cotton-- 150 K from the federal government, right?

HALLSTROM: Correct.

ANDERSEN: That has been sunsetted. And, and now, you're looking to bridge it until a different source can be found. Is that correct?

HALLSTROM: Right. And, and, and, and the, the, the source that we're looking at is exclusively federal. We're looking for one year at the state level, initially from General Funds, with the amendment from the tourism funds. And Congressman Smith has indicated to us that he will be introducing federal legislation to find another source of funding on an ongoing, futuristic basis.

ANDERSEN: Thanks. The Visitor Promotion Fund, has that been appropriated? I mean, is that an ongoing appropriation every year? Do you know?

HALLSTROM: They get-- I think they get 1% of the lodging tax, I believe. So they have a, they have a constant source of funding and they have funds available, not earmarked for this purpose. But if we make these changes, we could use the \$150,000 for that directed purpose.

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ANDERSEN: Do you know how much they get every year?

HALLSTROM: I do not know. I will find that out.

ANDERSEN: Do you know, has it been swept? In the current environment we're in, you know, that--

HALLSTROM: I think the last two budget years--l and I'd have to go back and, and firm my memory up, but I think, I think they took some out last year or the year before. One year, they did not take anything out. The next year, they took some money out for our budget issues.

ANDERSEN: OK. Because that would be kind of the concern, is that we say, yeah, it's coming out of this fund. Oh, it's been swept and there's nothing in it. Do you know what the, the total budget is of the Nebraska Travel Association? Do you have any idea?

HALLSTROM: Of the Nebraska Travel Association? That I do not know. I thought you were going to ask me about the Foundation.

ANDERSEN: What's the difference?

HALLSTROM: The Foundation is who runs-- that's the nonprofit that runs Lewis and Clark.

ANDERSEN: OK.

And their budget for 2-- 2025 is 400-- roughly \$400,000. And they have admission fees, they have a gift shop, they have different things like that. They have donations and things that, that make up the difference between the 150 that they've gotten year after year from the federal government.

ANDERSEN: OK. Yeah. I'm just kind of surprised that a grassroots operation and effort like this-- I was really surprised they have a lobbyist. And that's--

HALLSTROM: Well.

ANDERSEN: It struck me that--

HALLSTROM: Yeah. The, the, the lobbyist is on behalf of the tourism industry.

ANDERSEN: OK.

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HALLSTROM: Yeah. The, the Foundation does not have, does not a lobbyist.

ANDERSEN: Thank you.

HALLSTROM: They have, they have a senator from Legislative District 1.

ANDERSEN: They were cheap, obviously.

SANDERS: Any other questions from the committee? See none.

HALLSTROM: Thank you for your time.

SANDERS: Thank you for bringing LB1058, and this closes the hearing on LB1058, and the hearings for today. Thank you very much.

ANDERSEN: Thank you.