

Session means more work for lobbyists

Term limits bring new faces to the Nebraska Legislature.

BY NATE JENKINS
The Associated Press

If Ron Jensen and fellow lobbyists who will gather in the Capitol Rotunda look a bit weary when the Legislature opens a new session today, they'll have good reason.

"This is the busiest summer and fall I've had in this business," Jensen said.

Instead of the normal dozen or so interviews with legislative candidates, Jensen crisscrossed the state to participate in about 45 this year.

"I think we've all spent more time on the road," he said.

For lobbyists such as Jensen, massive turnover in the Legislature caused by term limits — there are 22

new faces, nearly half the 49-member body — has made the business of persuasion and bridge-building with lawmakers more time-consuming than at any time in memory. And they say the work has just begun.

Many experienced lawmakers who lobbyists have worked with for years are gone, replaced by senators who are in most cases making their first forays into elected state politics. Longtime lobbyists say they have been impressed with the quality of the new pool of lawmakers, but that intelligence won't immediately offset deficits in experience.

"It'll be a lot more work" during the session, said lobbyist Bill Mueller. "The challenge with term limits has nothing to do with competence; it has to do with experience.

"There will be much more educating, because they are starting with little knowledge or little back-

ground."

Normally by this time, lobbyists already have picked senators they want to introduce bills that may benefit their clients. Not so this year, because it's unclear what committees the new senators will sit on.

That will create "a lot of scrambling" in the opening days of the session, Mueller said.

Leadership changes in different tiers of the Legislature caused by the exodus of senior senators will turn the Capitol into a zoo the first couple of days, Barry Kennedy said. But he expects the pace to change.

"With 22 new senators, things will move a little bit slower," said Kennedy, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce.

Some political observers speculate that lobbyists will have more power in the age of term limits because they will be able to mold inexperienced senators in ways that suit their agendas. The groundwork lob-

byists have set in the months leading up to the session, in other words, could pay big dividends for their clients.

"I don't think that's true," Kennedy said. "I think the balance of power shifts to the executive branch. As bills are introduced and issues come up and they need more information, where are they going to go? Probably to the department that deals with it."

New senators will walk into the Capitol bursting with energy and new ideas, said lobbyist Jack Moors, who added that there was no doubt lobbyists would work extra hard this year to bend the ears of state senators.

"At some point, they're going to run into a wall," because of the complexity of the issues they face, Moors said of lawmakers. "We're going to be showing them how to get through the maze. It's going to be a really, really interesting session."