

## Omaha World Herald Section B

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### Cities speak up on water

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A push for Gov. Dave Heineman to reduce the influence of irrigators on the State Water Policy Task Force is spreading to more Nebraska communities.

"The deck is stacked," said McCook City Manager John Bingham. "Cities, towns and villages must absolutely have representation on that task force."

Sidney's City Council started the campaign two weeks ago, approving a resolution that called on Heineman to restructure the board by allowing proportional representation for people who live in municipalities.

Kimball's City Council approved a similar resolution last week. Gering's City Council is to vote on the issue tonight.

Governing boards in Bridgeport, Gordon, McCook and Ogallala also are expected to consider the question in coming weeks, according to city officials.

Irrigators or those with irrigation interests control 38 of the 49 seats on the task force that developed Nebraska's new water law, the city officials say. That includes two of the five seats that represent municipalities, the officials said.

Irrigators represent less than 1 percent of the state's population, and 80 percent of all Nebraskans live in a municipality, the cities say. Nebraska irrigators use about 97 percent of the state's groundwater.

The communities raise legitimate concerns, said Aaron Sanderford, the governor's spokesman.

"But at this point," he said, "the governor thinks those issues are better resolved between the Department of Natural Resources and the League of Nebraska Municipalities."

The water task force was created by the Legislature to gather information and develop policies that last year became Legislative Bill 962, the state's new water law. The makeup of the panel was determined by the Legislature, and its members were appointed by then-Gov. Mike Johanns.

Kimball's resolution asked Heineman to grant proportional representation on the task force for city dwellers, especially those from areas that face water shortages or contamination.

"We want to keep Nebraska strong as an agricultural state, but we need room for municipalities to grow," said Kimball City Administrator John Goodell.

Gering's resolution asks Heineman to remove appointees who occupy seats on the task force reserved for city representatives but who have "an overwhelming conflict of interest" in farm irrigation.

Gordon City Manager Fred Hlava said the task force should equally represent all business sectors of the state.

"If the state is going to have economic stability and growth," he said, "it will be based on the success of business and economic development in the rural and urban centers - and this growth will be based on the availability and use of water."

Hlava said agricultural manufacturing and Main Street business jobs would help stop the population decline in rural parts of the Great Plains.

"Ag-related manufacturing and business can be part of this growth, but . . . they're going to need water," he said.

Finley deGraffenried, city administrator in Bridgeport, said he is not convinced that municipalities can rely on the current task force to help communities solve water problems.

"We're out here screaming at the top of our lungs, and nobody's listening," he said.

DeGraffenried said his community has a good relationship with its natural resources district, which regulates groundwater, the source of Bridgeport's water. "But it's an untested relationship."

A City Council committee in South Sioux City decided against asking at today's council meeting for a task force shake-up, but it will vote on a resolution in support of LB 708. That bill would exempt communities from well-drilling regulations for domestic water.

Lance Hedquist, the city administrator of South Sioux City, said city leaders don't want to create conflict with the local natural resources district.

Bingham, the McCook city manager, said he hears some colleagues say that the task force question is a "Sidney issue" without wider concern.

"Their time is coming," he said. "If the makeup of the task force doesn't change, a lot of people in this state will learn that this is not a Sidney issue."

Sidney has wrestled with a combination of water quantity and water quality problems, including public disputes with its natural resources district.

Sidney led an unsuccessful effort to win approval of LB 708 this year. Legislators didn't advance the bill, saying the issue should be taken up with the water policy task force.

"It makes us nervous to take it to the task force," Bingham said. "We'd like to have some representation. We have people on the task force who sell (irrigation) pivots or raise irrigated corn for a living.

"That's wonderful, but how about a McDonald's or Wal-Mart manager, or a baker or, heaven forbid, a city manager?"

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