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(Neb.)-State Lawmakers Wade Into Debate Over Guns

By: Roxie Graham-Marski Posted at: 03/21/2013 07:20 AM



By GRANT SCHULTE

Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) - Lawmakers waded into an intense gun debate Wednesday during a hearing on several bills, including two that would try to prevent the federal government from enforcing new firearms restrictions in Nebraska.

Supporters filled a hearing room at the Capitol to speak in favor of the measures, while each bill faced a heavy grilling from the Legislature's longest-serving member, Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha.

Sen. Charlie Janssen of Fremont said he modeled his bill after legislation introduced in Wyoming. Janssen, a Republican candidate for governor, pointed to other states that have defied federal laws, including Colorado, where voters recently legalized marijuana.

Nebraska lawmakers already have considered several proposed gun restrictions aimed at juveniles, introduced in the wake of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. The 20-year-old shooter killed 20 students and six faculty members before committing suicide.

"These tragedies cannot and should be not be used to abridge the rights of responsible Nebraskans," Janssen said.

Chambers called several of the bills "preposterous," saying the bills focused on nonexistent problems and were a futile attempt to trump federal law. Chambers said the measures could create a scenario in which a local sheriff would have to arrest federal agents who were confiscating illegal guns.

Chambers said the bills were introduced to exploit "naive, fearful" residents who falsely believe that Nebraska can trump federal law.

"To put it on the books doesn't mean anything except that the Legislature is foolish," Chambers said.

The bill drew support from two rural Nebraska sheriffs, Jerome Kramer of Lincoln County and Shawn Hebbert of Grant County.

The bill "at least tells the federal government how we feel in Nebraska," said Kramer. "We need to make our feelings known, and that's what I'm doing here today."

A third measure by Sen. Mark Christensen would require the Nebraska State Patrol to design a standard sign to be used in places where guns are prohibited.

A fourth bill would ban public disclosure of gun permit information. The measure came in response to a New York newspaper that published an online map of all gun-permit holders.

The sponsor, Sen. Bill Kintner of Papillion, said he was planning to introduce an amendment that would exempt the news media in cases where a crime was committed. Gun-rights groups argued that revealing gun ownership information could lead to invasions of privacy.

Kintner acknowledged under questioning that gun-permit disclosure hasn't been a problem in Nebraska but said he introduced the bill as a preventative measure.

"I think this is a measured, reasonable way to head (off) any problems," he said.

The bill is opposed by several news media groups, which argued that it denies access to public records based on isolated cases from other states.

"It's a record of our government, and it's bought and paid for by taxpayers," said Dave Bundy, editor-in-chief of the Lincoln Journal Star newspaper. The bill "isn't about keeping information from the news media. It's about keeping information from the public."