

# Legislative slog nears end

The North Dakota Constitution allows the Legislature to meet for 80 days every two years.

Every session, it seems, especially as a session inches closer to the 80th day, legislative nerds and pundits and, yes, even some legislators themselves dust off an old saw: “Maybe it should be two days every 80 years.”

The funniest jokes, they say, are those that cut closest to home. Like the old George Carlin yarn about making a sandwich: “Do you reach into the middle of the loaf to get the really good bread and leave the rotten stuff for your family?”

Of course, no one really believes the exaggeration of limiting the Legislature to two days every eight decades. The truth, though, is that many develop legislative fatigue and wouldn’t mind at all if the annoying drama and pontification would end a little bit sooner.

Tuesday was Day 72 of the 65th biennial session of the North Dakota Legislature. In Bismarck, you can almost feel a collective sigh of relief at the realization that the end is near. The 80th day is Friday next week, May 9, but everyone knows legislators like to save a handful of days in case they decide to call themselves back into a special session sometime this year or next.

Scuttlebutt suggests that with all the extended drama coming out of Washington, D.C., these days, legislative leaders would like to bank six or seven days for possible use later. Under that scenario, legislators would be out of town Thursday or Friday this week.

State employees at the Capitol will be the first to rejoice. Legislators, after all, get the choice parking spots at the Capitol, and when they leave town those spots are available to whoever gets there first.

Plus, the Capitol cafeteria, corridors and comfort stations won’t be clogged by legislative crowds.

The reality, though, is that lawmakers themselves will be just as happy as anyone else to adjourn “sine die,” which means they’re not coming back for 20 months -- unless they have reason to schedule those banked days.

A legislative session is a long slog for the 141 citizens who serve in the legislative branch of North Dakota government. Days often start early and end late; evenings are for studying bills, writing comments or testimony and returning calls and emails; and weekends are for driving back to wherever the heart is, so lawmakers can rub shoulders with the folks back home before returning to Bismarck to repeat the same weekly grind.

Some are motivated by the reward of public service, some by intense ideological beliefs, and some, probably, by ego.

In any case, they are mostly our friends and neighbors who are willing to take four months every two years away from their jobs and their families to do work that needs to be done.

**You go, governor**

Last week Gov. Kelly Armstrong vetoed two bills: one that could have resulted in librarians facing criminal charges over some of the content in their libraries; and one was a “school choice” measure that would have allocated public funds for private school education.

Both are bills that never should have made their way to

his desk in the first place, and both have left ill will in their tracks.

Librarians, teachers and free speech advocates were offended that far-right ideologues accused them of “grooming” young people by failing to control content found in libraries and proposing criminal penalties.

Armstrong laid claim to being a “free speech absolutist” and vetoed the library bill, labeling it “a misguided attempt to legislate morality through overreach and censorship,” and said it would impose “vague and punitive burdens on professionals and opens the door to a host of unintended and damaging consequences for our communities.”

At a time when First Amendment rights seem often under attack, his stand is critically important, courageous and correct.

In the fight over school choice, rural communities and public school advocates perceived a money grab by urban and private school supporters. In return, they were chastised by a Catholic school administrator over the “demonization of Christian schools,” and threatened that at least one city legislator might oppose farm-related bills if they didn’t support funding for private schools, most of them in large communities.

None of this is a good look for the state. In reality, this year’s school choice bills were simply not ready for prime time.

One would provide assistance only to private school students. It was patently unfair, and received Armstrong’s veto. The other included all students, those in private, public and home schools, but that made it far too expensive.

Choice will be back next session. But the best choice is to reserve public funds for public schools.

# Long hours, high stakes

As the 2025 North Dakota legislative session draws to a close, lawmakers in both the House and Senate are working long hours -- including week-ends -- to finalize legislation through conference committees and floor votes.

Decision-making has become increasingly difficult, as many bills present compelling arguments on both sides of the equation. While the volume of legislative work to report on could easily fill a complete newspaper page, here are a few of the major developments.

**Senate Bill 2307**

One of the most debated bills this session, Senate Bill 2307, sought to require public and school libraries to relocate or restrict access to materials deemed “explicit sexual material,” particularly to protect minors. After months of debate, SB 2307 passed both chambers and reached Gov. Kelly Armstrong’s desk -- only to be vetoed.

In his veto message, Gov. Armstrong called the bill “a misguided attempt to legislate morality through overreach and censorship,” warning it could impose vague, punitive burdens on library professionals and have unintended consequences.

An attempt to override the veto fell short of the required two-thirds majority, with a final vote of 25–20 in the Senate. As a result, SB 2307 will not become law this session.

Although I’m very disappointed, I remain committed to protecting North Dakota’s children. I have already begun working with the state’s attorneys from Mountrail and Burke counties to draft stronger, legally enforceable legisla-

Capitol Views

By Sen. Mark Enget  
R-Powers Lake



tion. With lessons learned from this process, I am confident we will see a new and improved bill next session.

**House Bill 1168**

Another major focus this session has been property tax reform. I’m happy to report that the Legislature has passed House Bill 1168, a sweeping plan to deliver long-term property tax relief and place stricter controls on future tax increases.

HB 1168 creates two new funds -- the Legacy Earnings Fund and the Legacy Property Tax Relief Fund -- to use earnings from the state’s Legacy Fund to offset property taxes. Beginning in 2025, North Dakota homeowners are expected to receive a primary residence property tax credit of up to \$1,650.

The bill also caps most local property tax levy increases at 3% annually unless approved by voters. It requires clearer public notices for budget hearings and tax proposals, expanding transparency for taxpayers.

HB 1168 responsibly uses North Dakota’s oil wealth to provide meaningful tax relief while protecting taxpayers from unchecked local government growth. While not perfect, it is a strong foundation to deliver real relief and signals a commitment to continue expanding tax benefits across all sectors of our state’s economy.

As of Sunday, HB 1168 still awaits the governor’s signature -- so stay tuned!

**House Bill 1454**

Finally, another important bill soon to reach the floor is House Bill 1454, which would create an opt-out procedure for newly required vaccines, especially experimental or rapidly developed vaccines.

Having lived through the COVID-19 era, I became deeply concerned by how quickly personal freedoms were eroded by government mandates. HB 1454 seeks to preserve individual rights while still respecting public health needs.

Key points of HB 1454:

- Protects freedom: Allows individuals to opt out of vaccines for health, religious or philosophical reasons.

- Respects public health: Maintains exemptions for high-risk settings like hospitals, correctional facilities and schools.

- Builds trust: Encourages voluntary participation in public health initiatives instead of forced mandates.

This bill was scheduled to come forward on Monday and will undoubtedly be a hotly debated topic. You can follow the debate live at [ndlegis.gov](http://ndlegis.gov).

**Looking ahead**

As we head into the final days of the session, I remain firmly committed to fiscal responsibility, limited government and thoughtful policymaking. I am grateful for the engagement and support from constituents across District 2 and beyond.

Please continue to stay informed, share your thoughts, and stay active in the legislative process. Your voice matters.

# Finishing the year strong

As we enter the final stretch of the school year, there is an undeniable sense of momentum and celebration across Divide County.

Our students and staff have been working tirelessly to prepare for the North Dakota State Assessment, and it’s been inspiring to witness their confidence and determination.

Meanwhile, professional growth continues across the district. Thanks to our ND CLIMBS literacy grant, a team of educators will attend the national Building Assets, Reducing Risks conference in California, gaining strategies to support student success.

Locally, we’ve relaunched our professional learning communities with a renewed sense of purpose, and we’re excited to welcome Solution Tree experts this summer for our “summer symposium.”

Additionally, we’ve completed the Cogna accreditation review, marking a major milestone in our continuous improvement efforts. While we await the final report, we are confident in our performance.

School Scoop

By Anthony Vandal  
Divide County School District



We also recently received the state Legendary Learners grant, securing an additional \$105,000 in literacy support for our youngest learners.

Spring also marks the return of outdoor athletics, and student participation is at an all-time high. Our track and field, softball, baseball and boys’ golf teams have been gearing up for the season, with several students competing in more than one sport.

Under the leadership of Mrs. Haugenoe, Mr. Harding, Mr. Johnson and our coaching staff, we’ve seen tremendous collaboration between families, athletes and educators to ensure academic priorities remain strong throughout the season. While North Dakota’s spring weather can be unpredictable, our teams are prepared and excited to compete.

This year’s energy reflects

the well-balanced culture of academic achievement and extracurricular involvement that we proudly foster in Divide County.

Finally, we take this opportunity to recognize and celebrate the heart of our schools -- our people.

Our paraprofessionals continue to provide critical support to students and staff with unmatched patience and compassion. Our music department recently wowed at regional competitions, and two of our students proudly represented Divide County at the state spelling bee for the first time.

And of course, our amazing teachers remain the driving force behind it all, showing resilience, passion and a deep commitment to student growth.

As we close out the school year, I thank each of you for contributing to the spirit of excellence that defines our district. Let’s finish strong -- with purpose, pride and unity.

*Anthony Vandal is the superintendent of the Divide County School District.*

A Rural Journal

By Kevin Holten



How many new people do you meet each week? And how many do you have a lengthy conversation with?

When I was a kid, growing up in North Dakota, a stone’s throw from the Canadian and Montana borders, we’d often go to Williston or Minot to do our shopping. After all, those were the big cities.

And just as often, my grandparents, who were mostly unaccustomed to the big city and past the safe driving age, would accompany us.

For my grandfather, whose occupation on his wedding license way back when was “horse wrangler,” the trip had nothing to do with shopping and everything to do with adventure.

He might be, I think, the only person I’ve met who bragged about his age, as if he never thought he’d reach that age and, because of that, he needed to let people know.

And not only did he brag about his old age, but he’d add another year. In other words, instead of saying he was 84, he’d say he was going on 85.

Plus, like famous trick-roping cowboy and columnist Will Rogers, my grandfather never met a man he didn’t like. And he would search the sidewalks of the big city for someone to meet, greet and have a lengthy discussion with.

If that person spoke fluent Norwegian, like he did, even though he was born in America, then all the better. And if that person was gray-haired, bent over and full of stories like he was, it was like he’d found gold in them there hills.

Thus, whenever we went to the big city, before we could go back home, we’d have to track Grandpa down. And with time, I learned to keep an eye on him, to reduce the search time and the size of the search party.

Of course, today I’d give almost anything to have one of those trips back to the big city and do a better job of homing in on his conversations. But insightfulness and youth rarely make a matching pair.

And yet I know that today my grandfather would be very proud of me for one big thing: I’ve turned the meeting, greeting and discussion of life and the “olden days” addiction that he had into a career.

In fact, in just the last week, for our television episodes/series that air on the Cowboy Channel and other platforms, I

interviewed 21 people in Bozeman, Montana, and met more than that. Plus, I interviewed another five or six people in Ellensburg, Washington, and met more than that.

Thus, I have at least 26 new friends that, because of the in-depth interviews, I might know more about than their friends and family do. Because I know their hopes, fears, goals and most amazing experiences.

After each one-hour interview, they constantly tell me that it seemed more like 20 minutes. I think that’s because people love to discuss what is most important to them.

But over the years, I’ve not really kept in touch with most of the 25 or so people I meet each week. And so, as I was making the 15-hour drive back to the badlands of North Dakota, it was like the good Lord slapped me in the back of the head and said, “Stay in touch with them. I’m giving you an army of friends.”

And I realized that I’m getting the same gift that my grandpa did way back when: friendship, the most valuable thing on earth.

*Kevin Holten is an executive producer for RFD-TV and the Cowboy Channel and the creator of Wild Rides TV. He is a native of Wildrose and is now based in Dickinson.*

# Calving season always comes with all sorts of lessons

Our first calf of the season arrived last week. It’s a bit early to have too many follow suit, but it’s my favorite reminder that spring is on its way. My dad will keep a closer eye on our herd now, fussing over them, checking the draws and hills and taking notes.

We gathered the cows last weekend to sort off a couple bulls that got out. It was a sunny Sunday, and after a long week in the car and in the office, I was happy to be out in the grass and the smell of dirt and cow poop. Maybe only ranch kids understand the cow poop part.

I walked with my daughters down that familiar road to meet up with my sister and her girls to meet up with the guys and the cows. My youngest

Coming Home

By Jessie Veeder



started track this week, and my oldest is in soccer, so I trailed behind them as they raced -- my youngest, Rosie, always beating her big sister by five or more strides, and Edie just fine with that.

We arrived at the corral, and the cousins greeted each other as if they hadn’t spent hours together just the day before. Immediately, as kids do, they began climbing up the corral to perch at the top, only to jump down and then do it again and again.

Dangling off the corral, Edie asked a question about calving season that led her Papa Gene to start the lesson on how to spot the signs of a cow who might be close to delivering. She watched as he walked toward the herd to sort off a mama-to-be with large udders (or a full bag, as we say up here). He explained that, coupled with a loose back end, means a calf could be on its way soon.

The extended biology lesson that came after one cow mounted another wasn’t exactly what my daughters had in mind for a Sunday afternoon, but Papa was going to take the opportunity to explain heat cycles while he could. There may be a rancher in our little herd of girls, so he has to strike when the questions come.

I laughed to myself as I watched them squirm and dangle off the panels, their eyes wandering to the geese flying over, their boots kicking at the dirt until eventually their little bodies found a way to escape midlesson to look for crocuses across the road. Papa turned around to find his not-so-captive audience had vanished.

Calving season on the ranch always comes with all sorts of lessons, and whether or not they’re carefully crafted and presented is another story.

As a kid, I witnessed the miracle of birth from the passenger side of the feed pickup and behind Dad’s binoculars. Unlike my daughters, I was too shy to ask any questions, but I was a witness to what it looks like when it goes the way

nature intended, as well as what it feels like when we need to intervene.

Pulling a calf in the barn, grafting a new baby who lost his mama to a mama who lost her baby, bottle-feeding a runt who didn’t make it to summer, or watching that bottle calf get loaded up on the big trailer in the fall -- these are all big lessons that I often didn’t know I was learning when I was learning them.

I suppose this is the big reason I wanted to raise my kids here, on my family’s ranch. It was the connection I had to the land that pulled me back, but connection is more powerful when stewardship is in the mix.

And while there are plenty of things that can be learned in a textbook or a Google search,

if there is passion to be found, it can only be found in the kick of the dirt, the smell of the manure and the work.

It may be calving season, but I realized last Sunday that it is also the season for my daughters to truly witness and absorb and learn what it means to be here, ranching.

And they will do it because they will be out here, climbing up the panel fences, running wide open down the roads, sitting in the passenger seat and asking all the questions they are brave enough to ask.

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