

Energy policy? Immigration? We'll see

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Some might think it takes a miracle for Democrats and Republicans to get along together in an election year. But all it took Saturday morning was coffee and cinnamon rolls. State Sen. Roger Reitz (R-Manhattan) and State Reps. Richard Carlson (R-St. Marys), Sydney Carlin (D-Manhattan) and Tom Hawk (D-Manhattan) attended the season's first legislative forum at the Union Pacific depot. The forum, moderated by former House speaker Kent Glasscock and former Governor John Carlin, allowed the public to question lawmakers and hear their expectations for the new legislative session.

It was a renewal of a format popular for here for many years, but which had fallen into recent disuse.

Area lawmakers confirmed that immigration and energy issues will be prominent this session, with different proposals expected in both chambers. None ventured a solution to the two issues.

"We'll probably all be flip-flopping (on energy) because we don't know how it will turn out," Hawk said, suggesting a mix of wind, solar and coal power will be needed. Reitz stressed the need to expand wind energy, but added a nuclear option. "Wind and nuclear will be the thing of the future," Reitz said. "If it's not going that way, it's not right."

Carlson said he welcomes expanded energy, especially in areas such as Holcomb, where exporting energy is a valuable source of revenue. "They are economic development tools," Carlson said of power plants, "but I don't want to do it at the expense of the environment."

Legislators also took time to touch on their own initiatives for the session. Carlin spoke about her efforts to expand child advocacy centers related to criminal procedures, as well as addressing needs of military parents and their children. Carlin also voiced her support of a bill to require mandatory drug testing for individuals involved in serious or fatal accidents.

Carlson spoke about the need to address tax issues for Kansans working in other states, as well as out of state residents working in Kansas. He also said a disaster relief bill is likely to pass, giving tax credits and sales tax exemptions to areas hit by natural disaster.

Reitz said the state-wide smoking ban bill he has been backing is likely to come out of judiciary committee within the next week and could go to a county-by-county vote this November.

Hawk indicated the need to acquire state funding for the Manhattan airport to help the city become a larger player within Kansas. He also stressed a need to increase wages for state employees.

Legislators also weighed in on a "three strikes" proposal that would require judges to sentence convicted criminals to mandatory jail time if convicted of three or more felonies. Carlin said she is not in favor of the rule, claiming it would increase prison populations dramatically. Reitz said funding through budgetary sources - not bonds - would be needed for his support, as well as a clear desire for the bill by the public.

Carlson indicated he is likely to support the bill. "There are situations where we need to give jail time," he said. "If we need to build prisons, than I'm for building prisons."