

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature
Transcriber's Office

General Affairs Committee
April 09, 2008

[CONFIRMATION]

The Committee on General Affairs met at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, April 9, 2008, in Room 1510 of the State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska, for the purpose of conducting a public hearing on gubernatorial appointments. Senators present: Vickie McDonald, Chairperson; Russ Karpisek, Vice Chairperson; Merton "Cap" Dierks; Annette Dubas; Mike Friend; Ray Janssen; and Don Preister. Senators absent: Philip Erdman. []

SENATOR McDONALD: We'll get started here. Welcome to the General Affairs Committee. I am Senator Vickie McDonald, Chairperson of this committee. The committee members that I have present are: Senator Friend from Omaha, District 10; to my far right then I have Senator "Cap" Dierks from Ewing, District 40; Laurie Lage is my committee counsel. And to my far left is: Don Preister from Omaha, District 5; Senator Annette Dubas from Fullerton, District 34; Senator Ray Janssen from Nickerson, District 15; and Matt Rathje, my committee clerk. Today we're going to have two confirmation hearings and I will ask that you please turn off your phones or anything that makes noise. If you have handouts, please have at least ten handouts. Please speak clearly into the microphone; spell your first and last name, and I think we'll get started. We have Robert, known as "Bob", Culver, Jr. Please come forward. Welcome. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself, Bob?
[CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Yeah. I'd be happy to. I'm a vice president of Business Strategy at Lincoln Financial in Omaha, and I've been asked to serve on the Nebraska Arts Council. And I've been at Lincoln for about nine years, and prior to that I owned a marketing firm, and prior to that I was down here in Lincoln and worked at the Lincoln General Hospital. So I've been in business for quite a while and I'm also very active in the arts. I have a Bachelor in Fine Arts from the University of Nebraska and then in Omaha I serve as a Public Arts Commissioner and I'm also on the symphony and the opera board as well as to Bemis Board. So my art is a very important part of my life and my family's life. And so I'm very excited about the opportunity to serve Nebraska on the Nebraska Arts Council. By the way, I also grew up in outstate Nebraska. I grew up in Hebron and Superior and Sutton and Nebraska City and so I'm very familiar with the rural part of our state, at least the southeast part. So I'm also looking forward to not just serving in Omaha and Lincoln, but the whole state of Nebraska. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Thank you, Bob. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: You're welcome. [CONFIRMATION]

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SENATOR McDONALD: Any questions? Senator Preister. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR PREISTER: Bob, I was reading through your biography and your accomplishments and was reading and reading and reading. I just have one question. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: It only means I'm old. It only means I'm old. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR PREISTER: Do you sleep? I appreciate your community involvement and your spirit of service to the community. I guess my question gets to the point of time. It seems like you've been very involved, so you're able to balance that. But you're also still currently pretty involved. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Absolutely. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR PREISTER: Is that something that's a conflict or a problem in terms of having the time and the availability of the time? [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Well, you know, time is always a problem. But I did think about that, and the way I'm addressing that is twofold. Number one, my company, Lincoln Financial, is very committed to the community. So I actually have, as part of my job, is to be a liaison with the community. So that gives me a certain amount of time there. But still on a personal side, you have to kind of reconcile down steps. So I've been thinking about possibly actually not serving on one of those boards. I have a term that's almost up on the Symphony Board and so I think I won't renew that so I make sure I have plenty of time to devote to the Arts Council. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR PREISTER: Okay. And I would mention, your new to...your current address. John Synowiecki would be your state senator and he's a very fine senator, I might add. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Yeah. I haven't met him yet, but I'm looking forward to meeting him. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR PREISTER: Thank you for your willingness to serve. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: You're welcome. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Thank you, Senator Preister. We've been joined by Senator Russ Karpisek from Wilber, District 32, and he is the Vice Chair. Senator Friend. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: Thank you, Senator McDonald. Bob, I concur with Senator

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Preister's...I think we're really lucky to have you, you know, have you interested in this role. And I've been meaning to ask this about arts. I mean, I've been on the committee for six years and I've never really...what are the biggest...it sounds a little cliché', but I don't mean it to be, what are the biggest challenges that the Arts Council faces every year? Maybe on a daily basis, a monthly basis, I mean, what are the things that you anticipate to be the challenges if you don't know what the challenges are now?
[CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Yeah. I'd have to say anticipate. I'm somewhat familiar with what the rule is and what they've done over years. I've followed them and I've had other friends of mine serve on the council. Yeah, I think it's always an issue of resources. In terms of financial resources, the hard...you know, it's always a struggle to try to get the focus on the arts and how to help people understand how important arts are to the fabric of our society. So I think that is probably job one is to educate the community on that so they can understand that. I think the challenge probably is a resource one. Although I must say from what I've seen, Suzanne and her staff and the board have done a phenomenal job. I mean, with what the Nebraska Arts Council has done over the years, I think it is very impressive. So those challenges, even though they're there, I think that they've obviously been able to meet them so far. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: I suspected that that might be your answer and that would have been my guess. But do you think the difficulty Omaha, Lincoln...I'm not saying that the challenges are less in those areas, but that is probably where you can tap into, you know, greater resources I think. Are the challenges greater in different areas of the state than they would be in Omaha and Lincoln? I mean, is it an urban... [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: No. I don't think that's necessarily true. Dick Holland, you know, funded a study--what was it?--about a year ago he released through the World-Herald, and the way the arts are supported in Nebraska is not that great compared to other states in what we've done. But more importantly I think what Dick showed was the importance of the arts to our economy. It was a pretty dramatic report in terms of understanding that the arts aren't just a part of that stereotype about the arts, but it's also is part about business. And in fact, Lincoln Financial believes now. I mean, we have three impact areas at Lincoln Financial. We're a Fortune 200 company, and one of them is human services; one of them is education; the third one is the arts because we do believe that the arts are very critical to the way we think and the way we live. And so we fund...that's how we fund...that's how we direct our funding, our resources.
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: Excellent. Thanks. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Any other questions for Bob? Thank you for being here.
[CONFIRMATION]

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ROBERT CULVER: Yeah. Thank you for having me here. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Is there... [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Anything else I need to do? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: That's it. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: All right. Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Is there anyone here in a supportive role for Robert Culver, Jr.? Anyone in an opposing role? If none, we will move on to our next appointment. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Do I need to stay around at all? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: No. [CONFIRMATION]

ROBERT CULVER: Thank you-all very much. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Thank you. Helen Abbott Feller, position is with the State Racing Commission. Welcome, Helen. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Welcome, Senator McDonald and committee. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Would you tell us about yourself? [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Well, my name is Helen Abbott Feller. I grew up in western Nebraska on a cattle ranch, and was raised kind of with horses. My dad always in the (inaudible) racing industry and he would bring them up to the ranch and we...when I was little. He had a horse farm in Omaha that was a commercial breeding farm and when I left college, I came back and I ran it for him for about 15 years. And then I got married and my dad was passed away, so I sold the farm and raised my family and kind of kept in racing a little bit, you know, just with breeding and different people I know. But I have decided to...the Governor asked me if I would be interested on the commission, so I'm going to...it's been my life, so I thought maybe I could help. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Well, thank you for coming forward. Do we have questions for Helen? Senator Janssen. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Helen, do you know Herb Riecken? [CONFIRMATION]

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HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Um-hum. I know Herb real well. We raced against each other with Who Doctor Who and...yeah. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: He's a good competitor, wasn't he? [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yeah. He's in Fremont. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Yes, absolutely. That's my district. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Oh, okay. Yeah. He's from Fremont. I'm from Wisner. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Uh-huh. I know my wife and I know Herb (phonetic) and his wife quite well. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yeah. They're fabulous. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Yes they are. Great people. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Senator Friend. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: Thank you, Madam Chairman. Helen, I'd be remiss if I said we weren't we're very lucky to have you here too. I know you were in the room when we were throwing superlatives at Bob. But I notice on your resume too, we know I think what the challenges are, we get a feeling what the challenges are with the Racing Commission. Do you...I mean, do you think it's a glass-half-full type of environment right now in Nebraska? I mean, because I have...my wife, family members are really heavily involved in the racing industry and they're concerned. And they do a lot of their work out of the state now obviously. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yeah. Who's your wife? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: It's the Helt (phonetic) family, Don Helt (phonetic) and some of those folks. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yeah. Well, I was really active in racing when racing was awesome, when there was 30,000 people on a weekend at Aksarben and 15,000 on a Wednesday afternoon. And you know, we've lost...I was very involved in the Nebraska-bred program. I was on the thoroughbred breeders board, two of them, different ones. There was lots of challenges ahead there. We tried to change some things to kind of stay with it. Obviously we couldn't keep up with it. I think that there's some good things that Nebraska can do if we wanted to be proactive to that revenue

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source, some great changes. But you have to have everybody kind of on board. I think more people are on board now that they've seen kind of what did happen. I'd like to be part of that, you know. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: Great. Great. Thanks, Helen. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Senator Janssen. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Helen, what's your thoughts on the State Fair Park here in losing the track in Lincoln? How do you feel? Do you feel that there is a need for another facility in the state? Should we relocate that track or do the horsemen have any, you know, any ideas? [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yeah. Well, my kids are in 4-H, so I've been up here to the State Fair for the last couple of years and I'm going to miss it being in Lincoln. Although my daughter rode horses and showed horses and the State Fair, actually for horses, is in Grand Island. And I think Grand Island will be a great move for the State Fair. I think that racing will suffer. I think with the population that Lincoln has coming to that, you're going to have to make some changes, you know, so that we don't lose that source of people and numbers. Some great things you could think about would be another facility between Omaha-Lincoln, but some rules have to change. But there are some people here in the state that have bigger, better stables that could contribute a lot to something like that to make it feasible. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Do you think a location in between the two metropolitan areas, Omaha and Lincoln... [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: I think around Mahoney State Park, do a whole complex of entertainment and everything else that could be kind of interesting. I hate to keep seeing those cars parked over in Council Bluffs. There's a lot of money that doesn't need to be there. Aksarben used to be one of the top ten tracks in the country and it's just an oasis out here. And when I was in the racing, the worst thing you could say to somebody is you were going to raise an Iowa-bred. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: And now it's the only thing to do. And if you are going to...I didn't. I went ahead and kept raising Nebraska-breds. But now I'm not. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Well, I remember back a long, long time ago that my dad was a racing enthusiast and I always wanted to go along. Well, you had to be 16-years-old I believe was the age limit to get in. But they also had an area that you could drop your kids off. So I'd get stuck in that place, you know. [CONFIRMATION]

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HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: I know. Senator Janssen, I was going to say you must be younger than me because I can remember getting dropped in the sandbox right there by Aksarben and having to wait for my dad to come back after he would be racing, and it was fun there though. You met a lot of kids and a lot of the racetrack kids and stuff. But... [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. But you were isolated. You know, you couldn't get out of that area. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Um-hum. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: I'd have loved to, but... [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Thank you, Senator Janssen. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: That explains a lot, by the way. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Senator Dierks. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: Yeah. It's real revealing, isn't it? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR FRIEND: Yeah, yeah. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: That sandbox, a lot of lessons over there. How many members are there in the State Racing Commission? [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Three. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: Three. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Um-hum. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: Who are the other two? [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Dennis Lee from Omaha and I think it's Janell Beveridge, and she's from Paxton. I don't know her. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: Is this your first go at it then? [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yes. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: You'll be a new appointee. [CONFIRMATION]

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HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Um-hum. I'm replacing Bob Volk, which he was awesome. I mean, Bob had a lot of experience and I kind of struggled with that. But I think it was inevitable anyway, so I think he's... [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Bob's a good friend of mine. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yeah, Bob was...I really...I had a hard time, you know, it took me a couple of weeks with the Governor and talking to him, say boy, I don't know, I'd rather be doing it with Bob than taking his place, but... [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: Well, good. I knew Bob Volk very well too. He's been a lot of places and done a lot of things. [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Yeah. He's...and he was good on this board. I hope that it's...I'm sure he'll be...he's got to be proracing. He's been in racing all his life, in agriculture and... [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: Maybe he was thinking about this, but I don't think so, Ag Committee members you can tell me, I thought that the provision with the change in the State Fair Park was that there would be a racing facility left in Lancaster County or at least in this area. Isn't that right? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR KARPISEK: Five years, wasn't it? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: I think for a period of time that it was going to maintain its current location. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: I don't recall it. I don't recall, but it probably was. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DUBAS: Yeah, yeah. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR JANSSEN: Okay. I wasn't paying attention when that was discussed. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR DIERKS: Okay. Thank you very much. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: Thank you. Any other questions? Thank you, Helen... [CONFIRMATION]

HELEN ABBOTT FELLER: Okay. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR McDONALD: ...for coming. Do we have anyone who would like to speak on

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Helen's behalf in a positive note? Anyone in opposition? Seeing none, the hearing is closed. Thank you for coming. [CONFIRMATION]

Chairperson

Committee Clerk