



Summer Newsletter

July 2004

Dear Friends:

It has been over six months since my last newsletter, so I felt that it was time to update you with highlights of my office's activities. Please contact me if you would like more information.

Election reform: The federal government created a new agency called the Elections Assistance Commission. The commission's purpose is to set guidelines and standards for the states and territories to help bring more uniformity and reliability to our election systems nationwide. The commission has released a large share of the \$18 million that Nebraska will receive for election reform under the federal Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). We have implemented our provisional balloting system, which allows voters whose eligibility is in dispute to cast conditional ballots. We conducted public bidding for our statewide interactive voter registration system and awarded the contract to Elections Systems & Software of Omaha. We remain on target for, and we are confident that we will meet, all of the HAVA deadlines by 2006.

Voter turnout: The Legislature authorized the creation of a task force called Vote Nebraska Initiative. Its purpose is to examine why voter turnout continues to decline and what can be done to counter this trend. There are 18 members from many walks of life on this committee, including teachers, political party representatives, nonprofit representatives, minority representatives, county election officials, a state senator and myself as chairman. We have held regular meetings, heard testimony of witnesses and broken into subcommittees to work on issues. By August, we will start drafting our report to the Legislature, which is due December 31. The statewide turnout of registered voters in recent elections has been very disappointing – 22.7 percent in the 2002 primary election, 45.3 percent in the 2002 general election and 21 percent in the 2004 primary election. It will take great cooperation to turn things around, from teachers to news media and political parties to government. We hope the report will be helpful to everyone as a blueprint.

Notary public laws: Our office licenses and regulates over 31,000 notaries across Nebraska. We worked with the Legislature's Judiciary Committee and many interested organizations to draft a bill that would update and upgrade the notary public laws, which hadn't been substantially changed in 30 years. The 2004 Legislature passed the bill, which becomes effective July 16. To educate current and prospective notaries about the legislation, we scheduled a series of free, two-hour training sessions at 16 communities around the state during July. Over 3,000 people have registered for our training sessions, so we are pleased that we can reach that many people directly. It is part of my commitment to take government to the people!

Business Services and Licensing: I have promoted Deb Pester to become my third deputy, with responsibility for the Business Services and Licensing divisions. A longtime employee in our office, she has been a tremendous asset for me in developing professional standards for our office. The amount of activity in these areas is amazing. For example, there were 97,762 filings and 89,491 searches in 2003 regarding Uniform Commercial Code and other security interest records. Our goal is to make it easier to do business in Nebraska.

Youth programs: We performed at nine Statehood Day birthday parties around the state, appearing before some 3,500 fourth-grade students. We had a great time highlighting our state pride and history! Again this year, we cosponsored the Nebraska Capitol Forum program with the Nebraska Humanities Council, reaching out to high school students interested in international relations. We had about 100 participants, who reported back to their classmates on American foreign policy. This fall, we will jointly sponsor Nebraska Student Vote with the Omaha World-Herald. The program for grades K-12 combines class lessons on the election with a mock student vote. We hope about 90,000 students will participate.

State quarter design: I have been very busy with my duties as chairman of the Nebraska Quarter Design Committee. To gather widespread public input, we invited people to submit ideas for the commemorative state quarter. We had hoped for 5,000 designs and received about 6,500, many coming from students. The designs run from fun and cute to dramatic and professional. We have to cull down the 6,500 designs to five by September 30, so wish us luck!

International: Since the Legislature granted me authority in 2003 to promote cultural, educational and commercial goodwill with other countries, I have been working hard to build some solid programs. We receive some 250 foreign visitors each year and keep them on a database for future contact. New initiatives include an annual world affairs symposium in Lincoln and an annual diplomatic reception in Omaha for embassy representatives. I have continued as chairman of the International Relations Committee for the National Association of Secretaries of State and have enjoyed the many opportunities I have had with that committee to meet people and exchange ideas.

Electronic government: The state Records Board, which I chair, recently signed a contract with Nebraska Interactive LLC to manage Nebrask@ Online, the state's online information and services network. Anticipated projects under the contract include online state income tax filings and online motor vehicle registration renewals. We continue work in developing and expanding online lien filing services. The long-term plan for Uniform Commercial Code and lien filings is to have all types of lien filings available online for the convenience of the filers. Online filings are offered at a lower fee than paper filings and save our office money in staff time, creating a win-win situation for both our office and the state's financial industry. Our office once again provided electronic election results during the May primary election. The election website was viewed over 36,000 times on election night and used by the news media, public and candidates to get the most recent results.

We need your help! As part of an effort to improve our contact list, we would like you to provide an e-mail address. If you provide an e-mail address, we will send future newsletters to you electronically. Send the information to sos08@nol.org, or mail it to Secretary of State, P.O. Box 94608, Lincoln, NE 68509-4608. Thank you for your help.

With warm regards,

John A. Gale
Secretary of State