

THE **Equalizer**

SATURDAY, APRIL 11, 2015 VOLUME 22 • ISSUE 52

Lawmakers share 'wish list' with Vermillion Rotarians Tuesday

DAVID LIAS
Managing Editor

District 17 Democratic Rep. Ray Ring and District 17 Republican Sen. Art Rusch, both of Vermillion, were asked to look ahead and form a "wish list" of proposals that didn't receive adequate attention during the 2015 session of the South Dakota Legislature.

Ring hopes future legislative sessions in Pierre will take on Medicaid expansion and education funding. Rusch would like to see more work done by lawmakers to hold down

tuition increases at state universities, and increase the collection of unpaid fines and restitution.

The two legislators were guests of the Vermillion Rotary Club at its noon luncheon meeting Tuesday at the Al Neuharth Media Center on the University of South Dakota campus. District 17 Rep. Nancy Rasmussen, a Republican from Hurley, was unable to attend.

"I think it's just inexcusable that we haven't expanded Medicaid, particularly when we

LAWMAKER'S WISH LIST

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

can do it at no cost to the state, and we have to do something about education funding," Ring said. "We have a blue ribbon task force that is going to look at the school aid formula. As far as I'm concerned, if what they're looking at is just the school aid formula, they're rearranging the chairs on the Titanic.

"You can move some chairs farther away from the water, but only by moving some other chairs closer to the water. The iceberg is still out there," he said. "Our teacher salaries for elementary and secondary education are 70 percent of the national average. Adjusted for inflation, they're 80 percent of the national average."

Ring noted recent media reports have stated that one-third of students finishing college in South Dakota are planning to leave the state. An informal survey of education students at South Dakota State University revealed that one-third mentioned they were going to seek teaching jobs out-of-state because of higher salaries, he said.

Rusch noted that he was involved in efforts that hopefully would have not made it necessary for the South Dakota Board of Regents to increase tuition at state universities next year.

"The Regents have gone ahead and increased tuition by 5 percent which is way above what inflation is. I guess I don't understand that, but I know from the number of students that I've talked to that ever-increasing tuition is a problem," he said. "There are a couple of other things that we passed on this year that were near and dear to my heart, and need a lot of fine tuning yet. The state is owed roughly \$125 million in fines and restitution that have been ordered by the courts that have never been paid."

Rusch said most of this is happening because the people who owe fines and restitution don't have any money.

"But there's also a fair share of them who prefer to spend it on beer and cigarettes, and are not paying their fines and restitution," he said, adding that the Legislature this year formed what has been called a "state collection agency," despite strenuous opposition, with the hope of collecting unpaid fines and restitution.

"Another issue that I was really invested in was the juvenile justice bill, which is an effort to try and do more reforming, more changing of juvenile attitudes rather than the punitive incarceration that we've done in the past," Rusch said. "Again, we'll have to see how that works out ... I'm hoping that will be effective or that we'll at least have some changes or

fine-tuning that can be done in that area."

Rusch, a retired First Circuit Judge, is currently in his freshman year as a state lawmaker.

"The big question that I get asked about the Legislature is 'did you have fun?' It was certainly an interesting experience, but I wouldn't call it fun at all," he said. "It actually is pretty physically demanding."

Rusch served on three committees during the 2015 session — Senate Judiciary, Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources, and Senate Health and Human Services.

"Each of our committees met two or three times a week, so most mornings I had to be up at the Capitol by 6:30 or 7 a.m. to review the schedule of what's coming up that day, and the first committee generally began at 8 a.m. and met for two hours, with a second committee meeting at 10 a.m. that lasted two hours," he said.

Following a caucus meeting early each afternoon, the South Dakota Senate would begin each legislative day in session at about 2 p.m.

"There is a lot of difference between that and being a judge. As a judge, I would listen to both sides' arguments, and then I would make a decision," Rusch said. "It just doesn't work that way in the Legislature."

Lobbyists, he discovered, are a regular part of the lawmaking process.

"The lobbyists are lined up every day wanting to talk you about the bills that they are favoring. Half of those are state employees and the other half are privately-hired lobbyists," he said. "Lobbyists have a bad name, but by and large, while you're not obligated to go along with them, they are providing useful information about the bills."

Much of Ring's time during the 2015 session was dominated by his serving on the House Appropriations Committee.

"We would usually start at 7:30 every morning, and usually run until close to noon every day. We would hear basically an explanation of every program in state government," he said, adding that, "I learned a ton on Appropriations. There was a lot of useful information, much of which I'm still trying to figure out. We get so much detail that there really isn't time to do much analysis, or do much discussion."

"I'm afraid that we (Appropriation Committee members) don't really sit back and look at the big picture so that we can do a better job of analyzing proposals," Ring said.

The Vermillion Democrat said he fears that South Dakota is balancing its budget by shortchanging critical areas.

"Education funding — even if you adjust for the cost of living, we're \$7,500 roughly per teacher behind the 49th-ranked state, which



District 17 Rep. Ray Ring and District 17 Sen. Art Rusch reflect on their experiences in Pierre during the 2015 legislative session, which concluded March 30. The legislators were guests of the Vermillion Rotary Club Tuesday. (Photo by David Lias)

is North Dakota," Ring said. "To just make up for that is huge. There are other areas, Medicaid funding, nursing homes, where we're barely keeping up, and in some cases not keeping up with inflation compared to say five, six, seven years ago. Where do you get that (needed revenue)? I don't know."

He hopes that a request by Democratic legislators for an interim study on South Dakota's tax structure will be held sometime in the near future.

"We need to ask ourselves what else do we need to do? We have low taxes overall — in taxes as a percent of personal income, we're 51st — but we're also close to last ... in terms of average salaries. Not public sector salaries, but private sector salaries," Ring said. "With taxes that low, there must be something wrong with the way that we're attracting business, to have that low of salaries. We have a low unemployment rate, but we also have very low salaries, and I think we need to work on that."

Rusch said South Dakotans may have helped put state government on a path that eventually makes it tougher and tougher to balance the budget by repealing the state inheritance tax approximately two decades ago. At the time, that tax generated approximately \$25 million annually.

"A big part of my law practice was doing probate for people, and I never had anybody who got hurt very bad with paying that," he said. "If we had that extra \$20 to \$25 million — and I don't know what that would have grown to by now — that would have gone a long ways toward solving financial problems, but the voters repealed that without making

any effort to replace that tax."

The legislators were asked about the speed limit increase to 80 miles per hour on interstate highways that was part of the transportation funding package approved by lawmakers.

"The transportation bill went through the Senate with no mention of any kind of a speed limit increase on it," Rusch said. "The final day it came to us from the House with that increase to 80 miles per hour on there."

"I suspect what happened was the speed limit increase was thrown in at the last minute. It was basically either you vote for this, or you go home and tell people that you don't have anything to help pay for roads and bridges," Ring said. "I don't know exactly where that got tacked on."

He noted that a summer study committee had proposed a \$100 million transportation package, and Gov. Dennis Daugaard offered a proposal that called for spending half of that amount on the state's roads and bridges.

"They came together, and the latest I heard is it (the transportation bill) is estimated to raise right around \$80 million. The fact that it came right at the last minute, I guess, says something about the appropriations process," Ring said. "I think the 80 miles per hour just sort of got slipped in there."

"I talked with some of the people from the Department of Public Safety and the Highway Patrol, and my understanding is they are going to tighten up the enforcement a lot on that," Rusch said. "You may have had a 10-mile-an-hour leeway before (while driving); you're definitely not going to have a 10-mile-an-hour leeway now."