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## OMAHA POPULATION NUMBER We're all in it together

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Here are thoughts on a variety of topics in the news: \* \* \*

In many ways, this is a tremendously encouraging time for **Omaha**.

The private and public sectors have made a variety of smart moves to promote community development and position **Omaha** as a forward-looking, ambitious regional city. **Omaha's** economic and livability advantages have rightly earned it praise from a variety of national publications.

This week brought a disappointing surprise, though, when the Census Bureau reported the city's population as 408,958 rather than the 458,000 that one would have expected from past projections by the Bureau.

That number isn't cause for panic. As an objective matter, the fact remains that **Omaha** is still an energetic, attractive city in many ways.

At the same time, the number provides a cautionary note for public- and private-sector leaders. To make some broad but important points: **Omaha** needs to remain attentive to encouraging residential and commercial development inside the city.

**Omaha** Public Schools should continue to strive for significant academic improvement, seek allies to help the district and forgo excuse-making.

The city government needs to pursue **annexations** where fiscally possible and put city finances on a stable path. (It's ironic that some folks are saying they moved out of **Omaha** due to the taxes when the city held the property tax rate unchanged for so many years during the

decade just ended.)

Plus, residents in the **Omaha** region need to avoid parochial thinking and not see themselves in narrow terms either as city residents or suburbanites. The more that people recognize and adopt a common vision for this area as a whole, the stronger the future will be for us all. But the more that people seek to separate into narrow groups, the more difficulties we will create for ourselves.

\* \* \*

That was an odd twist this week to learn that some opponents of allowing Omahans to vote on a half-cent increase in the local sales tax are trying to direct attention away from the actual policy issue by casting it as some sort of personal contest between State Sen. Brad Ashford and Gov. Dave Heineman.

That's silly; Ashford has spoken out on this issue, but he is only one of many Nebraska lawmakers who are lending support to the legislative proposal. It's by no means the initiative of just one lawmaker. Maybe that proposal will ultimately prevail at the Capitol, even over a gubernatorial veto; maybe not.

We regard the proposal as sensible and appropriate - it's entirely reasonable to allow Omahans to decide this issue themselves. They should be empowered to decide.

But in any case, let's have a serious, needed debate over the policy issue, rather than fixating on personalities. This is reminiscent of last year, when then-State Sen. Tom White introduced legislation to provide a smidgen of tax relief for Omahans burdened by the massive sewer-separation project. Instead of focusing on the actual issue, some people focused on personalities, swayed less by the facts than by their less-than-warm regard for White.

That wasn't the way to approach the sewer-separation issue then, and it's not the way to approach the sales-tax issue now.

Forget about the personalities. Look at the facts. Then have a strong, honest debate and decide this issue. That's the right way to do it.

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