



Regents cannot obsess over single issue

Posted: Tuesday, November 24, 2009 11:45 pm

The University of Nebraska Board of Regents has too many consequential issues to deal with to allow the debate over embryonic stem cell research to become an all-consuming passion.

While the issue stirs emotion on both sides of the question, it's crucial that the regents continue to pay keen attention to the other challenges that confront the board.

There's unlikely to be societal consensus anytime soon on the question of whether it is ethical to use leftover embryos from fertility clinics for research.

The 4-4 split vote by regents on the motion to limit research to embryonic stem cell lines approved by President George W. Bush no doubt reflects deep division in public sentiment. As exemplified by the vote by Regent Jim McClurg of Lincoln against the motion, even some who identify themselves as pro-life part company with their colleagues on this complex issue.

The vote should settle the issue for now among regents, at least until the membership on the board changes. It's time for the regents to focus on other business. There's plenty to do.

*The University of Nebraska-Lincoln on Jan. 1 will acquire the 251-acre State Fair Park, the future home for Innovation Campus. NU regents Friday approved business and master plans for the campus.

The plans hold out the possibility that NU can surge ahead of other universities in providing a stimulating, rich learning environment. The challenge will be getting the campus off to a solid start and maintaining momentum in an economic downturn.

* The same economic pressures jeopardize the affordability of college education. In California, regents have proposed a jaw-dropping 32 percent hike in tuition. Nebraska, fortunately, is in a stronger financial position.

Nonetheless, the Legislature only this month cut state funding for NU by 1.4 percent this year and 3 percent next year. Prospects for the following biennium look just as grim. NU leaders will be hard-pressed to keep tuition costs within reach of the average Nebraskan family.

* Meanwhile the possibility looms that the higher education in Nebraska may be restructured as Gov. Dave Heineman and the Legislature try to reduce overall costs of higher education in the state.

The NU regents may be asked to take on additional responsibilities for state colleges or even community colleges. The regents need to be fully engaged in considering options and in the ongoing discussion.

There's little doubt that intense debate on the ethics of embryonic stem cell research will continue.

But regents cannot obsess on this single issue. Other matters demand their attention.