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# KSC-NU merger plan *deja vu* for Bob Spire

Two decades ago, University of Omaha board Chairman Robert Spire and others predicted that Kearney State College soon would be part of the University of Nebraska.

Today, Attorney General Spire is preparing a Nebraska Supreme Court challenge to the KSC merger bill passed by the 1989 Legislature.

Spire was chairman of the University of Omaha board in 1968 when the municipal school became the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He knows the problems, pressures and potential of such a merger.

"There are a lot of ironies in life," Spire said. "I have to try as best I can to shut out any of my personal views."

In January 1967, NU and Omaha University regents endorsed the union. The Legislature approved it, and in December, Omaha voters agreed by a 4-1 margin.

Omaha University's levy was straining the taxpayers. Some saw OU as a liability to Omaha, Spire said, but he saw it differently.

"The merger election is a great vote of confidence in both the University of Omaha and the University of Nebraska. This will benefit higher education throughout the entire state," he said in 1967.

Because OU was a city school, no con-

Jack  
Kennedy

Education



stitutional questions arose then.

## Separate entities

The NU Board of Regents and the State College Board of Trustees are separate public constitutional entities. Spire says that means a constitutional amendment is required to take supervision of KSC from the State College Board of Trustees. He hopes the Supreme Court will decide the issue by January so that legislative action and a constitutional amendment vote can be taken rapidly.

The Kearney supporters' fervor sounded familiar as he pondered the KSC issue, Spire said.

"We thought the OU merger was important to the state, not just to the city. Many students could not afford to go anyplace else," he said.

## Terry keyed up

The issue got former state Sen. Terry Carpenter of Scottsbluff, who wanted all

Nebraska public higher education to be free, "all keyed up," Spire said.

Omaha backers said the merger would add prestige and help recruit and retain faculty, Spire recalled. KSC supporters express similar sentiments today.

At about the same time the OU-NU merger talks were going on, Regents Chairman Ben Greenberg was chairman and Spire vice chairman of a group that promoted post-secondary coordination but took no stand on the merger.

"I personally favored a super board to prevent needless duplication. I still feel that way," Spire said.

The issue of whether all public higher education should be under a single board is still volatile today. But one merger criterion should transcend all others, Spire said: "We must look at what is best for the students.

"Kearney State ought to be a university," he said. "When the Omaha merger occurred, many people said, 'The next one will be Kearney.' They thought UNO's coming in would trigger that."

Perhaps it has, 22 years later.

## Will it work?

An ambivalent view on the Kearney State merger came from North Platte Telegraph Editor Keith Blackledge, member of the State College Board of Trustees.

"My feeling about Kearney State is something like that of a father whose favorite daughter has announced plans to marry and leave home," Blackledge said at a hearing conducted earlier this year. I am naturally reluctant to see her go. I want to know if the proposed groom's intentions are honorable and if he appreciates her unique qualities. I am willing to give her up, but only if I feel assured she will be truly happy.

"I wish that the groom would show a little more enthusiasm for the match. I expect he can offer her some things I cannot, but if he restricts her and breaks her spirit to get her to conform to his style, it will be a bad marriage."

## Colleges make history

On June 2, after the state board voted to hire an attorney to advise it on the Kearney State-NU merger, Celann LaGreca of Omaha was elected chairwoman to succeed Jean Lovell of Ger- ing.

Lovell was the first woman to head the board in 35 years. The last one, from Chappell, headed what was then the Board of Education of State Normal Schools.

She was Virginia Smith, who will represent the 3rd Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives until her current term expires, at which time she will retire.