

Bro. Min. Malcolm X

The next debate over who merits a spot next to notable Nebraskans such as William Jennings Bryan and Willa Cather in the state Hall of Fame could again include discussion of civil rights leader Malcolm X because of a deal brokered on the floor of the Legislature Monday.

Sen. Ernie Chambers offered a lengthy discourse on both racism and Malcolm X, whom he said has more worldwide name recognition than any other Nebraskan but whose views are not popular in a white-dominated society. Then the Omaha senator successfully pushed to keep a rule that says candidates for the hall must have been deceased for at least 35 years.

Retention of that provision could ensure that Malcolm X, who died of a gunshot wound about 40 years ago, will be considered by the Hall of Fame Commission later this year.

A bill (LB37) introduced by Sen. DiAnna Schimek of Lincoln that received first-round approval Monday had called for the death threshold to be increased to 50 years, in part to help encourage historical significance dictated who received the distinction, rather than lobbying by contemporaries of candidates. Unchanged in the bill as it was introduced Monday were new, proposed requirements that the governor consider "gender and ethnic diversity and the person's appreciation for the history and culture of the state" when choosing appointments to the Hall of Fame Commission. The bill also requires public hearings regarding finalists considered for induction into the hall be held in each of the congressional districts.

"A lot of people look towards our Hall of Fame with admiration and maybe even a little envy," Schimek said. There are now 23 members of the Hall of Fame, which is fewer than other states, Schimek said.

The normally obscure commission that chooses inductees into the Hall of Fame landed in the spotlight last year when it picked former U.S. Sen. Kenneth Wherry over Malcolm X. The decision was called into question because of Wherry's role in removing homosexuals from government posts in the 1940s and 1950s. Attorney General Jon Bruning later ruled that the vote violated open-meeting laws, so it was nullified and the Hall of Fame Commission is slated to meet again sometime this year.

The flap over Wherry did not motivate her introduction of the bill, Schimek has said. Malcolm X died in 1965, so the 50-year threshold nixed Monday would have required the commission wait another 10 years before considering him. If the 50-year mark had remained, Wherry would still have been a potential candidate for induction into the Hall of Fame this year because he died more than 50 years ago, in 1951.

During debate Monday, Sen. Pam Brown of Omaha said decisions about the number of years one must be deceased before being considered are arbitrary and could exclude some who are worthy, such as Johnny Carson, the Norfolk-born entertainment legend who recently died.

"I do believe that he would warrant the inclusion even without an historical assessment of his significance," Brown said.

Chambers appeared ready to drown the bill in prolonged debate because of the 50-year time provision until he and Schimek reached agreement on keeping the statute's current minimum of 35 years in exchange for support of the bill. Other pieces of the bill besides the time requirement, she said, were more important.

Chambers peppered his discussion of the bill with biting remarks about how racism has caused a lack of recognition for blacks in Nebraska and at one point said when he dies, "I don't want to be a part of anything that relates to Nebraska."

When it appeared the bill would advance in the way he wanted it configured, however, Chambers praised the body he often chides, specifically pointing out the bill's mention of racial and ethnic diversity.

Nebraskan State Hall of Fame

Written by Robert ID851

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"There exists, at least on some issues, a greater sensitivity than when I came down here 35 years ago," Chambers said.

[Source](#)