

Patrol Academy headed to G.I.

By Carol Bryant
The Independent

The Legislature approved a bill Wednesday that includes appropriating \$12 million to move the Nebraska State Patrol Academy from Lincoln to Grand Island.

LB1108 passed 38-3, with two senators present but not voting and six senators excused. The academy would be jointly located with the Nebraska Law Enforcement Training Center in Grand Island.

The bill now goes to Gov. Ben Nelson, who has told state Sen. Chris Peterson of Grand Island that he would not veto moving the State Patrol's school if the Legislature approves it.

All of Nebraska's basic law enforcement recruits study at the Grand Island center, except for those with the State Patrol, Lincoln police and Omaha police. It serves more than 300 agencies and more than 2,600 certified law enforcement personnel.

The State Patrol Academy offers basic recruit training and continuing education.

Peterson, state Sen. Jerry Schmitt of Ord, Training Center Director Steve Lamken and State Patrol Col. Ron Tussing see the academy move as a victory for law enforcement statewide.

"I'm absolutely thrilled," Peterson said Wednesday. "This is a wonderful opportunity for us. It was a real community effort."

Relocating the Patrol Academy began the Legislative session in LB1005, which was Peterson's priority bill.

"I was very pleased that the Appropriations Committee put my priority bill as part of their mainline budget bill," she said.

The training center at the northeast edge of Grand Island is in Schmitt's district.

"It's something I've had an interest in for quite some time," said Schmitt, who spent 30 years in the State Patrol. "I felt Grand Island had the facility, and I think down the road it's going to save us money."

He said the current Patrol Academy, located in two World War II-era buildings at Lincoln Air Park, is "in bad shape."

"I didn't feel it was adequate for the training. They used it because it was the only place they had to go," Schmitt said. "This is going to assist in some cross-training between the agencies."

"We're excited about having updated facilities," Tussing said. "I think it's a plus we'll be in the same place other law enforcement officers are being trained. It's something we've needed for a long time."

"It's going to make one outstanding facility," Lamken said. "We will have the infrastructure to provide quality law enforcement training well into the next century."

"It's also wise use of the taxpayers' dollars," he said. "Our responsibility is to make it the best project we can make it and be good stewards of the funds entrusted to us."

Lamken doesn't expect construction to begin until the spring of 1999.

A 1996 program study that cost \$60,000 will be revised at a cost of up to \$20,000. An architect must be chosen and bids accepted for a contractor.

The State Patrol must submit a plan to phase out Lincoln training operations by Oct. 15, according to LB1008.

"There's a lot of work ahead," Lamken said. "A lot of success isn't the building. It's planning to make sure your mission is provided."

Representatives of the two agencies will "sit down, be open and honest and develop a plan of how we're going to work together," he said.

Peterson believes moving the State Patrol Academy was approved for three reasons.

"We reduced the cost significantly from the second proposal," she said.

A September 1995 study gave a \$4.9 million estimate for relocating the academy. A September 1996 study showed a \$16.2 million cost.

Second, "we showed that there was a definite need to renovate the Law Enforcement Training Center and provide new facilities for the State Patrol Academy," Peterson said.

Third, "for the first time, all the law enforcement agencies came together in support" of the project, the senator said.

Nebraska Crime Commission member Bill White of Grand Island, crime commission Director Allen Curtis, Tussing, Lamken, Lancaster County Sheriff Terry Wagner, City Administrator Dale Iman, Mayor Ken Gnadt, City Council President Glen Murray, Nebraska League of Municipalities Director Lynn Rex and Bill Giddings, president of Central Community College's Grand Island Campus, testified in favor of LB1005 on Feb. 9.

Peterson worked with Gary Gannon of the chamber of commerce and Gary Hedman of the Grand Island Area Economic Development Corp. to secure backing from local businesses.

"Many of them called or wrote the senators in support," she said.

Lamken said he wasn't sure that the project would proceed. Relocating the academy appeared to be stalled in January 1997 because of increased cost shown in the second study. Curtis said it would take a champion to move the project forward.

"It's been a roller coaster ride," Lamken said. "Sen. Peterson pulls a hat trick, and it's going to happen."