SHARIAH DEBATE RAGES ON

A Circuit Court of Appeals has upheld the injunction against Oklahoma's constitutional amendment that prohibits state courts from considering international or *Shariah* (Islamic) law when deciding cases. More than 70 percent of the voters passed it in 2010. The court upheld the injunction because the amendment specifically targets *Shariah* law, even though supporters "did not know of even a single instance where an Oklahoma court had applied *Shariah* law..." The First Amendment's establishment clause prohibits the government from "preferring" one religion over others. Similar legislation is pending in at least 20 states—Alaska, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Virginia and West Virginia.

3 10 OF THE BEST

Jim Stembridge—author, photographer and former Oregon legislative staffer, who holds a Ph.D. in geography—has photographed every state capitol and published the results in "Fifty State Capitols: The Architecture of Representative Government." Who better to rank the 10 best capitols for tourists? The winners are... 1. Utah 2. Nebraska 3. Texas 4. Virginia 5. Massachusetts 6. Oklahoma 7. Ohio 8. Louisiana 9. Maryland 10. Your state capitol, if not one of the above. "Every state capitol is well worth visiting," Stembridge says. "Look it up online. Plan a visit. Go on the tour." But before you go, buy his book at www. ncsl.org/bookstore.

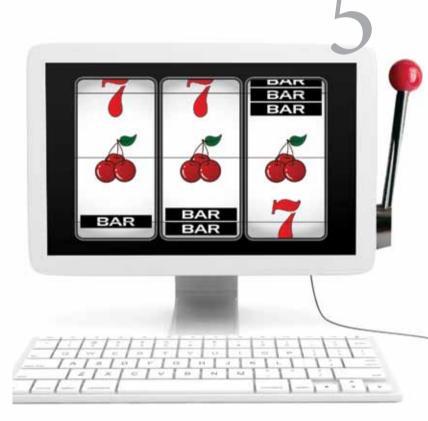
RURAL BOOST

It came as no surprise to attendees at the Legislative Agriculture Chairs Summit, co-hosted by NCSL and the Council of State Governments, that agriculture is one of the few sectors in the country that is running a positive trade balance. The annual summit is the only national meeting dedicated to leaders interested in agriculture and rural policy. Legislative leaders from 47 states and seven Canadian provinces attended. Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman praised agriculture for helping to keep his state's unemployment rate at a low 4.1 percent. Legislators also met with administration staff to discuss the Farm Bill's future and challenges such as rural energy, animal welfare, invasive species, food safety and farmland taxation.



PLASTIC OR PAPER

Washington lawmakers are considering legislation that would make the state the first to ban plastic grocery and retail bags. The legislation makes exception for their use with fresh meat, fruits, vegetables, nuts, dairy products, ice and cooked foods. Senator Maralyn Chase introduced the Senate bill to protect sea life. "I want plastic out of the water," she told The Seattle Times. Mark Daniels, vice president of sustainability and environmental policy for Helix Poly Co., the nation's largest plastic-bag maker, told the newspaper that plastic bags often are recycled or reused by consumers and that paper bags actually consume more resources than plastics ones and cost more to make and transport. At least four cities in the state have passed their own bans: Seattle, Bellingham, Edmonds and Mukilteo.



GAMBLING ONLINE

The U.S. Justice Department ruled at the end of 2011 that in-state Internet gambling does not violate federal law if it doesn't involve sports betting. Lawmakers in Illinois and New York had asked for the clarification. New York will add two games online, and Illinois will offer lottery tickets online. The ruling has sparked legislation in other states as well. Legislators in California, Nevada, Iowa, New Jersey and Washington, D.C., are considering various proposals to expand online gambling, including online poker. According to the American Gaming Association, 15 million Americans gambled with \$4 billion on the Internet in 2010. The association estimates that legalizing online poker would generate 10,000 jobs and \$2 billion in tax revenue a year.

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ABORTION LAW STANDS

The 5th Circuit Court ruled that Texas' law requiring a woman to have a sonogram of her fetus before having an abortion "falls well within the state's authority to regulate abortions and require informed consent from patients before they undergo an abortion procedure." The law's author, Senator Dan Patrick, told the American-Statesman the ruling was "a victory for women's health and for the protection of the unborn." The law requires the doctor to describe the fetus, but women may opt out of the verbal explanation in cases of rape or incest or if there are abnormalities. Opponents contend the law is an overreaching government intrusion into the doctor-patient relationship. "This law, and this decision, inserts government directly into a private decision that must be protected from the intrusion of political ideologues," Nancy Northup, president of the Center for Reproductive Rights, told the Associated Press.

ENERGY EXPLOSION

Move over finite fossil fuels, a new source of renewable energy may be bursting onto the scene soon.

Geothermal energy developers plan to pump 24 million gallons of water this summer into the side of Newberry Volcano, 20 miles south of Bend, Ore., according to the Associated Press. If all goes as planned, the water will bounce back to the surface quickly and be hot enough to create cheap, clean electricity. Scientists believe the process won't cause earthquakes—a concern with current geothermal energy production in Arkansas and Ohio. The U.S. Department of Energy has given the project, by AltaRock Energy of Washington state and Davenport Newberry Holdings of Connecticut, \$21.5 million. That amount was matched by private investors, including a \$6.3 million chunk from Google. The Department of Energy is monitoring other "enhanced geothermal systems" projects in California, Idaho and Nevada.



Pennsylvania will begin taking into account the assets applicants possess before granting food stamps. Anne Bale, from the Department of Public Welfare, told the Philadelphia Inquirer that the change was to ensure "people with resources are not taking advantage of the food-stamp program." The proposed change surprised many, the paper reported, because federal statistics show the state, at 0.1 percent, has one of the lowest food-stamp fraud rates in the country. As of May 1, people under age 60 with more than \$2,000 in savings and people over 60 with more than \$3,250 no longer will be eligible.

At least 35 states have eliminated asset tests, four recently raised their minimums to \$5,000 and 10 states—Alaska, Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia and Wyoming—have a low threshold of \$2,000 in assets, according to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.



In Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, the Supreme Court lifted restrictions on independent corporate spending in political campaigns on the grounds that political speech by a business should receive similar First Amendment protections as political speech from people. In response, several cities have passed resolutions distinguishing the differences between corporations and citizens. Some have taken up the fight at the state level against what they call "corporate personhood." California legislators are looking at a bill to require the disclosure of political corporate sponsors. Montana's Supreme Court upheld a ban on unlimited corporate spending on political campaigns. Lawmakers elsewhere are considering calling on Congress to support a U.S. constitutional amendment separating the rights of individuals from the rights of corporations. Opponents characterize these efforts as misguided.



Virginia's Republican Party will require voters in this month's presidential primary on March 6 to sign a loyalty oath stating, "I, the undersigned, pledge that I intend to support the nominee of the Republican Party for president." Virginia's law allows the party holding the primary to determine the requirements for voting in it, including "the signing of a pledge by the voter of his intention to support the party's candidate when offering to vote in the primary." Virginians do not register to vote by party, allowing anyone to vote in any primary. Republican Delegate Robert Marshall disagrees with his party's decision. He told Fox News, "For the Republican Party to depart so far from what the founders wanted, I think, is a mistake."