PROFILE: SOUTH DAKOTA SENATE MAJORITY LEADER GARY CAMMACK

A leader in business, on conservation and now of state government, he sees important economic and policy opportunities for South Dakota in year ahead

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

Gary Cammack’s road to legislative leadership began, and continues, in the western part of his beloved home state of South Dakota.

He and his wife, Amy, met while in high school in the town of Sturgis, got married in 1972 and, one year later, bought a business. “Just a little general store 12 miles off a paved highway,” Cammack recalls.

Six years later, they bought another location in the town of Unison Center (“this time on a paved highway,” Cammack says) and continued to grow the business into what it is today — one of the area’s most successful and respected supply stores for ranchers and farmers.

Along the way, Cammack also worked in construction, as an ironworker helping build the Alaska Pipeline. That job helped the family erase its debts and buy the first acres of land that is now their 11,000-acre, conservation award-winning ranch.

The Cammacks began a family as well, now grown to four sons and 10 grandchildren.

And then came the chance to enter politics.

“I’d always had an interest in that, in having a front-row seat to democracy,” Cammack says.

When a spot opened on the commission of his home county, Cammack, a longtime business leader, was an obvious choice. He eventually made the jump to the Legislature in 2012, winning a three-way primary for a House seat and then the general election. He soon joined the state’s upper chamber and emerged as a top legislative leader there — first as president pro tempore, and now as Senate majority leader.

Cammack also is now chair of The Council of State Governments’ Midwestern Legislative Conference, the binational, nonpartisan group of all state and provincial lawmakers from this region. In that position, he will guide the work of the MLC in 2021, including its Annual Meeting (that event is scheduled to be held July 11-14 in Rapid City, S.D.).

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Cammack discussed his views on leadership, the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for his home state of South Dakota, and the value of the Midwestern Legislative Conference. Here are excerpts.

What do you view as some of the most important responsibilities of the Senate majority leader?

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In South Dakota we do have a supermajority of Republicans in the Legislature, and we hold all of the constitutional offices in the executive branch.

So Republicans have a very strong representation in state government, and sometimes that has a tendency to create fractures based on differing viewpoints.

It’s important that we maintain some really good communication — within the [Senate Republican] caucus and also with the executive branch, the House of Representatives and the public in general. The other thing is that I think it’s really important, regardless of a personal position [on an issue], to make sure all viewpoints are heard in the caucus. Then, we agree upon a direction and move in that way so we can speak as mostly a unified voice.

In terms of leadership style, what have you seen work, or not work?

A

In leadership, you’ve got to do exactly that, you’ve got to lead. You can’t push. You can’t push people to do things and be very successful for any period of time.

My leadership style is to encourage folks, and to make sure I adequately communicate the vision I have.

The past year was incredibly challenging for all states and their legislatures because of the COVID-19 pandemic. What is the outlook for South Dakota in 2021?

A

We’ve got a really unique and wonderful opportunity, actually.

In our state, we never shut down and ended up, revenue-wise, in a very strong position. We also used the funds that came from the federal side wisely.

Because of all that, we’ve got approaching a couple hundred million dollars of money that’s available to us for one-time spending. So we’re going to be making some important things in the state of South Dakota that we might not have been able to do otherwise.

What are some ideas on how the state can use that money?

A

There’s going to be a focus on expanding and completing our broadband initiative. … Our goal is to have all of our citizens well-connected, so that’s going to be one of the big things.

We’re also going to be taking a hard look at trying to expand the capabilities of small packing plants and harvest facilities for livestock. We want to expand their capabilities and create some new ones, if it’s possible.

Last year, the people in the U.S. for the first time — well, I’m fairly certain in anybody’s lifetime that’s around right now — saw meat cases that were empty. And all of a sudden, it became a fairly clear reality that we need to develop those opportunities and expand those existing plants. Our smaller mom-and-pop plants can provide that local food and also provide opportunities for local producers in agriculture.

That’s one of the things I’m certainly going to be taking a look at.

You’re also taking on another leadership role: chair of the Midwestern Legislative Conference. What are your goals for this nonpartisan, regional association of legislators?

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Where I hope to leave the MLC is in a stronger position as far as participation and membership, and to be able to communicate to more people the value of the organization.

There’s always some improvement to be made, but the main thing is we have to make sure that the folks that we serve have a clear understanding of all of the good things that we can do, and all of the help that we can be to those members.

Any time I’ve attended one of the MLC meetings, you cannot walk away without having ended up with a lot of insights.

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