

## North Dakota Rep. Chet Pollert

Veteran of North Dakota House enters 20th year with new leadership position and duties, but with same views on legislating to guide him

by Laura Tomaka ([ltomaka@csg.org](mailto:ltomaka@csg.org))

Chet Pollert has come to expect the unexpected as a 20-year member of the North Dakota House.

When he first joined the Legislature, in his ranking of top interests for serving on a policy committee, Pollert placed human services at the bottom of the list. But he got appointed to the committee anyway. The end result? Pollert ultimately became a legislative leader on human services issues and an important advocate for the state's developmentally disabled.

"My least desirable choice was what I ended up chairing for many sessions," Pollert says, noting his role as chair of House appropriations for the Human Resources Division. "And I have to say, I did enjoy it and working with the Department of Human Services, which has the largest budget in the state."

His most recent leadership ascension may have surprised a younger Pollert even more: He is the state's new House majority leader, after colleagues chose him for the position in late 2018.

"I look back at [my start in the Legislature], and I would have never thought that I would be doing this," Pollert says. "I was always kind of a quiet person. I do my work and I move on."

Quiet, but clearly well-respected by fellow House members.

Pollert describes himself as a "straightforward, handshake kind of person" — traits that he expects to mark his style as the legislative leader of a Republican House caucus that holds 79 of the 94 seats in North Dakota's lower legislative chamber.

"We've got some ultra-conservative, conservative and moderate [members]," Pollert says. "It's a very diverse group of Republicans, and I have to get them to come together in a unified manner. I wouldn't say it's a struggle, but it's a challenge."

Prior to running for a House seat in 1998, Pollert had no background in politics, but he was a respected business leader — for his work as the general manager at a grain elevator, as past president of the North Dakota Grain Dealers Association, and, finally, as the owner and operator of his own business, G & R Grain and Feed.

That work led others to approach him about a run for office. It was an idea that Pollert had first thought about himself as a young man growing up in the North Dakota town of Pingree.

When he was a senior in high school, Pollert earned a Constitution Award; Dave Nething, a well-known state legislator at the time, presented it to him.

"He handed that award to me," Pollert recalls, "and I thought, 'Man, that's pretty awesome. Maybe someday I'll get a chance to do that.'"

Pollert got that chance, and he's making the most of it. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, he talked about his new role in leadership, legislative priorities for 2019, and some of his policy accomplishments of the past. Here are excerpts.

### Bio-sketch of House Majority Leader Chet Pollert

- ✓ chosen House majority leader in late 2018 (first rural North Dakota legislator in this position in nearly 20 years)
- ✓ has been member of the North Dakota House since 1999
- ✓ served for 14 years on North Dakota House Appropriations Committee
- ✓ owns and operates G&R Grain and Feed, a fertilizer and commercial feed business
- ✓ resides in town of Carrington; he and wife, Jo, have three children
- ✓ is a 2001 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development



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**Q:** You've noted that you have an ideologically diverse caucus, and it's large — 79 members. What are some of the challenges associated with this, and how would you describe your leadership style?

**A:** I have 79 head of cattle in this pasture and they all want to get out of the fence, and I'm in the middle of it. I don't have a whip. But I am not the type of leader to use a whip anyway. I like to work on consensus; that's what I like to do. ... I'm more of a handshake, work-things-out kind of guy. I didn't come here with a personal agenda. I want to do what's right for the citizens of the state of North Dakota. I don't need the credit, but I want to come out with [policies] that will work for the whole state. That's what the majority leader is supposed to do. I don't care who gets the credit. But I also know that I'm responsible for the tough decisions.

**Q:** During your last legislative session, a lot of those tough decisions involved getting the state's budget in balance. What is the budget outlook this biennium?

**A:** We're in a very cyclical, commodity-type environment here. Our ag economy is slow. The price of oil has dropped, but [oil] production is up and that's a very good sign. We're No. 2 in the nation for that, and our production numbers show that we are pumping out about 1.34 to 1.35 million barrels of oil a day, so that's helping us. But the lower price [of oil] has had an effect, and we have to be careful. We're by no means broke; we have good reserves. The word that I've been using is that we have to be "cautious."

**Q:** What are the other big policy issues that the Legislature will be trying to address in 2019?

**A:** We're short of the people we need to fill 30,000 to 35,000 open jobs. We need to take a look at workforce development and workforce recruitment, as well as our normal funding for K-12 education. Our roads and bridges are high on the list [of funding needs] as well. There's a bill out there called Operation Prairie Dog [to use oil tax revenue to fund infrastructure projects outside of the state's oil-producing areas]. We will come out with a package, but we've got to make sure it's all fundable and that it's all attainable during the 2019-20 biennium.

**Q:** Looking back on your 20 years of legislative service, what stand out as some of your biggest accomplishments?

**A:** If you took a look at my history, I don't sponsor a lot of bills. I'm one of those folks who believes that the work in the North Dakota Legislature is done down in the committees, and that's where I've done most of my work.

I would point to my work for the developmentally disabled. I have fought for increased funding for those most vulnerable citizens in the state, and I've been an advocate for long-term care as well. I also chaired the study committee [the Correctional Facility Review Committee] that led to \$64 million in funding for the expansion and remodel of the State Penitentiary.

Through the years, too, I have advocated and co-sponsored bills dealing with township roads. I'm an ag guy, and with my business background in fertilizer and seed plant operations, I know what township and county roads are like, so I've been an advocate for funding our township roads in the state.