A decade ago, Scott Louser got the nudge he needed to run for office. It came from his best friend’s father, a longtime leader in his home community. “He said he heard a rumor that I was interested in running for office,” Louser recalls. “I don’t know where he heard that, and I suspect now he made it up.” “But he got my interest.” And it led Louser to work that, 10 years later, he still relishes: “Even on the toughest days, I enjoy being a legislator.” Some of those toughest days came early in his career. In the spring of 2011, his hometown of Minot was hit by one of the worst natural disasters in state history; the Souris River rose over its banks and levees, resulting in record-level floods, mass evacuations and extensive property damage. Louser’s role as a legislator, as well as a local real estate agent, has put him in the middle of Minot’s efforts to recover ever since, from securing funds for various infrastructure upgrades to ensuring the completion of flood control projects that protect homes and businesses. “We are not even close to being done in trying to recover from that flood,” he says. While protecting Minot from a repeat of the 2011 flood remains a priority for Louser, his legislative focus has taken on a larger, and more personal, mission since he became House assistant majority leader in 2018. “I like being able to have an impact for the whole state, not just my district,” he says. “I’m inspired by my kids, and I want to make this state as welcoming as I can … I want it to be the best state in the country for my children and I want them to have more opportunities than I did, so I make decisions on a daily basis with that in mind — just trying to be a good dad.” In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Rep. Louser discussed his views on leadership, the challenges facing North Dakota, and how he and his colleagues are conducting session in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are excerpts.

Q: As you mention, this has been a landmark session for North Dakota on the technology front. What were some of the big changes made in 2021, and how has it been going early on?

A: Not only can the public watch [committee meetings] live or archived, but they can testify and weigh in remotely. We as legislators are able to participate in [committee hearings and floor session] remotely. I’m really proud of how we have been able to incorporate all these technological changes to accommodate anybody, COVID-related or not. I can’t say enough about our IT division. Whether or not everybody is using the tools is one thing, but the fact that they exist is really impressive.

Q: What kind of impact could these changes have on public participation?

A: They are going to create a lot more engagement. You get some kind of controversial or passionate bill, and it used to be that maybe 20 people wanted to testify. It could now be 1,000 people saying ‘I want my voice heard.’ While practically that can’t happen, it’s going to lead to a lot more engagement, as well as awareness of what we do… People think it’s just a lot of fun coming to Bismarck for four months. I enjoy every day, but getting up at 5:30 and being in the Capitol from the time it’s dark in the morning until it’s dark at night? That’s not everybody’s idea of fun. The work we all put in will now be on display.

Q: How has the pandemic, and the government’s response to it, impacted the relationship between your state’s legislative and executive branches?

A: Because of the pandemic, we have recognized that we ceded to our governor and our executive branch a lot of authority over the years that the legislature probably should have maintained. And so we’re trying to strike that balance between the executive branch and the legislative branch. That’s really a top issue right now.

Q: Most states are dealing with budget challenges this year. How is North Dakota faring on the fiscal front?

A: I’m feeling better when I see oil at $50 a barrel than at $40, because we are very dependent on that revenue. … We’ve always prepared for the worst, and we’re going to be in pretty good shape coming out of the session. But there’s so much uncertainty with the new [Biden] administration and all the discussions about tax policy and banning fracking … If that [ban] comes to fruition, it’s going to really hurt our state.

Q: If you could accomplish just one thing this legislative session, what would it be?

A: We have a Legacy Fund that was set up by the voters. It is constitutionally protected and takes in 30 percent of the oil tax revenue. That fund is now generating returns that allow us to fund some of our general fund obligations, and there’s discussions about bundling against the future revenue. That is a large, large lift this session and an overriding issue. I want to ensure our ability to protect that fund and use it according to what the voters want. It’s going to be the biggest fight this session.

Q: Taking a broader look at the North Dakota legislature and its accomplishments, what are some areas you would put at the top of that list?

A: Many of them are ongoing. For example, security of the elections in North Dakota. We are consistently rated the top state for election security and transparency. I’m very proud of that. I’m also proud that we have protected private property rights in our state and that we’ve been able to keep taxes low while being able to fund critical infrastructure.