

Nebraska Speaker Jim Scheer

Fairness and consistency are foundations of Nebraska native's approach to serving as his state's top legislative leader

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Soon after his election to the top leadership post in Nebraska's Unicameral Legislature, Jim Scheer happily carried on one of his state's traditions — inviting all of the living former speakers out for lunch.

"We spent an hour and half, two hours just talking," Scheer recalls. "Everyone was so giving of their time, willing to share their experiences and their advice."

"It was probably the most beneficial lunch I've ever bought in my life."

But even that fruitful meeting couldn't fully prepare Scheer for what lay ahead — helping guide senators through what many longtime political observers in the state said was one of the hardest legislative sessions that they've ever witnessed.

There already was the known challenge of closing a deficit in the state's current biennium as well as crafting a new budget. But then came the unexpected: The first 30 days of Nebraska's planned 90-day session were consumed by debate over legislative rules, particularly whether to lower the threshold for ending filibusters from 33 votes to 30.

Unlike in other states, Nebraska's speaker doesn't lead a partisan caucus, control committee leadership or appoint members to committees. The job, Scheer says, is more like that of train conductor: "Make sure the train starts and leaves and that we get to the next station at the right time."

One-third of the way into the session, with debate over the rules leaving little time for action on legislation, Scheer had to get the train moving. He did so by pulling discussion of the rules off the floor and also limiting debate on contentious bills. After three hours, if a bill's supporters had no chance of getting the 33 votes needed for cloture, the measure was pulled from the floor.

The strategy worked, and by Day 86, the Legislature had passed a new two-year budget and was ready to adjourn — with a few days to spare.

"At first there was a little resistance [to the three-hour rule], but after we started moving, I think people saw that the rule was fair," Scheer says. "It didn't make any difference to me the subject matter of the legislation. I treated everybody the same, and I think the senators appreciated that."

Above all else, he believes, fairness and consistency are what Nebraska's senators are looking for and need in a speaker.

"I consider all 48 other senators my personal friends," he says, "but you can't play favorites with any of them."

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Speaker Scheer reflected on his first year in the top leadership post and looked back on his long career in public service. Here are excerpts.

Q: You came to the Unicameral Legislature in 2013 after many years of serving your community. What led you to a life of public service?

A: My mother was very active in party politics and civic organizations, and was

Bio-sketch of Nebraska Speaker Jim Scheer

- ✓ Elected speaker at start of 2017 legislative session
- ✓ Member of Unicameral Legislature since 2013; once served as chair of Banking, Commerce and Insurance Committee
- ✓ Previously served as mayor of Norfolk, Neb.; as member of local school board; and as member of State Board of Education
- ✓ Insurance agent and small-business owner
- ✓ He and wife, Kristi, have three children and six grandchildren



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in fact one of the 10 original members of the Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women. So being involved in public service and the community is what I grew up with; it became the norm for me. [Editor's note: Speaker Scheer lost his father at a very early age.]

Q: What has kept you involved and interested in public service?

A: Part of it is the unexpected, and also having the ability to solve a problem. That goes all the back to my days serving on a local school board and hearing from a parent who says, "Gosh, the carpet is terrible in my kindergarten's room; it hasn't been replaced in 22 years." You're in a position to help and do something about it. It's not that you individually do it, but you can bring it to someone's attention, and the one thing you learn along the way is the importance of personal relationships to get things done.

Q: From your experience now as a state legislator and leader, how important are those interpersonal relationships in the Legislature?

A: I do try to share with other senators that, first and foremost, you are not doing your job of representing your people if you're sitting in your chair. Most of the time you should be conversing and building relations, because to get anything passed, it takes 25 votes. That means you're going to need 25 friends, 25 people who trust you.

We don't have political caucuses here in Nebraska. We don't have Republicans meeting in one room and Democrats meeting in another. As a result, the people who are going to get you to 25 votes can change every time there is new

legislation. You need a good working relationship with everyone.

Q: Has it been more difficult to build those relationships with all of the recent turnover in members?

A: There has been an extraordinary change, without a doubt. This session, 36 of our 49 senators had two years of experience or less. I'm not saying that those of us who have been here a little longer are any better or any worse; it's a continuing learning process. In Nebraska, that learning process is only for eight years [because of term limits], for bad or for good."

But I do think the big turnover had an effect on working together as a Legislature, because when we started in January, people hadn't worked a lot with the other folks, if at all. There was a lot of relationship building that had to happen in a very fast period of time.

Q: Looking ahead, what are some of the big challenges that may lie ahead for the Unicameral Legislature when it reconvenes in January?

A: Our budget and our revenue conditions will again be the big thing to watch. We've reduced our revenue expectations, so we'll be watching and hoping that we don't have to reduce them anymore.

This past session was my third budget year, and from my time in the Legislature, it was the most contentious one. In better fiscal times, when you've got money to spend, you can fund good programs or at least start pilot initiatives of some kind. That makes life a lot easier on the floor [of the Legislature]. It's much easier to get along when your pocketbooks are in better condition. ★