

# Nebraska Sen. John Stinner

A former community banker, he has helped lead the state through a difficult fiscal period — and more challenges await in 2019

by Tim Anderson ([tanderson@csg.org](mailto:tanderson@csg.org))

**B**efore joining the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature, John Stinner had successfully built and run a community bank in the westernmost part of the state.

Today, he's left those banking duties behind and taken on a new challenge — helping build, and balance, the state's nearly \$9 billion biennial budget.

Sen. Stinner became chair of the Legislature's Appropriations Committee in 2017, only two years into his tenure and during a time of slumping revenues and widening projected budget deficits.

In many ways, this key legislative leadership position was a natural fit for Stinner. Not only had he been the CEO of a bank, and navigated his institution through difficult periods such as the financial crisis of 2008, Stinner worked for years as a certified public accountant.

The real education for him came outside the numbers.

"A lot of it was the politics, learning about coalition-building, and then trying to really understand the depth of our state agencies and the programs that are out there," Stinner says.

"The first time I took over [as Appropriations chair], I was there at the Capitol at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, trying to get ahead of the day. Because once the day starts, you're just buried."

Early mornings and long evenings helped the Legislature close a \$1.2 billion revenue shortfall in what Stinner calls a "fair and balanced way."

More challenges await with the coming 2019 legislative session. Voters may approve an expansion of Medicaid, while demand for property tax relief remains high. Stinner, meanwhile, has other legislative priorities as well: improve the state's economic development incentives, bolster mental health services for young people, and find a funding source for early-childhood education.

A successful re-election bid this fall would give Stinner four more years to reach those goals before term limits require him to leave office.

The same term-limits law gave Stinner the chance to become a state senator in the first place.

In 2014, a seat had opened up in his far-western Nebraska district, and when local leaders looked for someone to run, Stinner was an obvious pick: a respected businessman who also had served on the local school board.

"When you're a community banker, you get deeply involved in the community, and you get an understanding of the challenges that the people or the town are going through," Stinner says.

Starting and running that bank, he adds, turned out to be a "labor of love" — the chance to "help someone start a business, help people buy a first car."

"The first year I was in the Legislature, I tried to run the bank and do the legislative work," he adds. "I found out that I couldn't do either one very well by trying to do both."

A merger with another community bank allowed Stinner to retire and focus on his legislative

## Bio-sketch of Sen. John Stinner

- ✓ elected to Nebraska Unicameral Legislature in 2014
- ✓ chair of Appropriations Committee since 2017
- ✓ former CEO and president of community bank he started in Nebraska town of Gering (now Western States Bank, which operates in three states)
- ✓ member of University of Nebraska's national championship football teams of 1970 and 1971
- ✓ 2016 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development
- ✓ he and wife, Rita, have two children and three grandchildren



duties. He discussed his experiences in a recent CSG Midwest interview.

**Q: What have been some of the aspects about the state budget that have been most eye-opening to you, that maybe you didn't fully grasp before joining the Legislature?**

**A:** There is a general conception that we can cut everything we want. What I've found is that in this budget, there really isn't that much flexibility. The [state] Constitution directs us to do different things, like fund our K-12 schools. We also have passed statutes and rules over the years that dictate the work of state agencies. Then you work in the "have-to's" of federal laws and mandates. By that point, even though there are a lot of moving parts, there is a lot of inflexibility as well.

**Q: So your options are limited, and two years ago, you find yourself having to fix a \$1.2 billion revenue shortfall. How do you go about finding consensus to balance the budget?**

**A:** For starters, it helps to have a really good group of members of the [Appropriations] Committee, which we have. Then we have strong fiscal staff with lots of experience — an average of 25 years of experience, so we leverage [them] pretty heavily. From there, what we tried to do was be fair and balanced in our approach. ...

When you're having to cut that much, you first lay down what your priorities are. So for us, that meant funding our K-12 schools and providing property tax relief. The committee made justice reinvestment a priority as well, and then you start to work around those priorities. Everybody gave it their best to understand the situation, and I thought the agencies did a very good job of understanding the predicament and being helpful in the process. It was a team effort.

**Q: How would you characterize the current fiscal situation in Nebraska?**

**A:** We've stabilized, and we're actually above projections right now. The big thing right

now is the next biennium. It should be a fairly good first year, but everybody is telling me that 2020 is going to be down. I don't know how robust that will be.

**Q: Voters will decide this fall on whether to expand Medicaid in the state. What kind of impact will that have on crafting a new budget?**

**A:** For the next biennium, it looks to be about \$52 million [in state spending]. That means we're going to have to make some choices and find a spot for funding that expansion. The place we generally look to, because it doesn't run into [existing] statutes or mandates, is higher education — but that's your future. You have to be very careful there in terms of what is cut. We're also going to have to look at how to implement this expansion, look to other states and what they have done.

**Q: Beyond the budget, you've also taken an interest in issues related to mental and behavioral health. You had a bill (LB 801) this past year to implement a local pilot program called Panhandle Beginnings. What led you to work in this area?**

**A:** As a legislator, you talk to a lot of people, and just about all of them have expressed concern to me that we have an issue with mental and behavioral health, and that it starts at the school level, at the early school level.

Some local leaders here [in western Nebraska] came up with the idea for Panhandle Beginnings. It's a proposed pilot project for a day center for troubled youths — young people who might normally get thrown out of school or need specialized attention. There is a component that deals with the clinical side, while also providing young people with the educational services they need. If we could get some funding for the pilot program, all 21 schools in the [area] have said they would support this.

It's an issue not just here in the Panhandle, but across the state and across the country. This is an attempt to come up with something unique and focused on meeting the mental and behavioral health needs of young people.