South Dakota Sen. Jim Bolin

Retired educator on government now values chance to be part of the legislative process — from crafting bills to building relationships

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

As a longtime teacher of high school history and government in his adopted South Dakota hometown of Canton, Jim Bolin had learned much about the ins and outs of politics by the time he became an elected official himself.

There was at least one lesson, though, that could only come with firsthand experience. “Being in the Legislature, you see how much of government and lawmaking is a human process,” he says. “There are relationships you develop that help you accomplish your goals.”

Legislative colleagues become trusted friends, Bolin adds, and they help you fine-tune a policy idea or discover a weakness in your legislation that needs fixing.

Now entering his 11th year as a South Dakota legislator, Bolin looks back on how those personal relationships helped get landmark legislation on South Dakota’s roads and teacher pay signed into law.

But he’s also looking forward to 2019, when he takes on the position of Senate assistant majority leader. One of his goals for the new year and in his new position: Help new members make the personal connections that they need — and the Legislature as a whole needs — to be successful.

The learning curve can be steep in South Dakota, where legislative sessions come and go faster than in most states. Lawmakers meet for 40 days before returning home, and along with passing a budget, they will be asked this year to address concerns ranging from how special education is funded in South Dakota to how some rural areas lack access to mental health services. Bolin expects, too, to lead discussions on improving civics education and ensuring free speech on the state’s college campuses.

In a December interview with CSG Midwest, he discussed the legislative year ahead and looked back on his decade of service to date. Here are excerpts from the interview.

Q: Based on your nearly 10 years of personal experience and observations of the process, what do you view as the most important attributes for a legislator to have?

A: I think it’s important to know who you are — to be comfortable in your own skin and to have perspective about the work. You know it’s important, but you’re not going to sell your soul to hold on to the [elected] position you have. … Take the issues and the job seriously, but not necessarily yourself too seriously. You serve your constituents and try to leave the state a better place, but also recognize that you’re not going to be in this position very long.

Q: You’ve said that two of the most important legislative actions in recent years involved tax increases — raising the gas tax by 6 cents per gallon for roads and the sales tax by a half-cent to pay for increases in teacher pay. Why did you support these proposals?

A: The easiest thing to do is say “no” to everything. But I think it’s best to evaluate every issue carefully and on their own merits. I was convinced on both — raising the gas tax and then raising the sales tax — that they would improve the outlook of our state.

In South Dakota, we accomplish a lot without a lot of resources because we are a low-tax state. We emphasize the basics, and roads and schools are two of the most important, core functions of government. With those two laws, we’ve protected our infrastructure and we’ve ensured quality teaching.

Q: South Dakota is known to be fiscally conservative, and passing tax increases requires a two-thirds vote of the Legislature. How were you and other supporters able to gather enough votes?

A: One factor was that these were not excessively high tax increases. For instance, when you compare our road tax to our neighbors, Iowa and Minnesota, our taxes are still much lower. The people of this state saw that, and realized that these were things that had to be done. Inside the Legislature, we had bipartisan support in both instances, and probably the No. 1 thing was that our governor got behind the measures.

Q: It looks like your background in teaching is informing some of the policy work you have planned for 2019. For example, you’ve made civics education a priority. What kind of changes are you looking for in that area?

A: I would like to put into South Dakota’s education standards for graduation that students get at least one semester of civics education. Our new governor (Kristi Noem) has emphasized that we need to increase our student involvement and knowledge of civics education. I don’t know if she’ll support our exact proposal, but we’re hopeful that we can work out some details so that civics education is emphasized more in our K-12 system. It goes back to things that I think we all want to see — for example, increasing voter participation and encouraging young people to appreciate the political process.

Q: You’ve mentioned, too, that you will revisit some legislation from 2018 that seeks to ensure free speech on college campuses. What have legislators been exploring in that area?

A: We want to make sure we have a full sharing of ideas on our college campuses. We don’t want situations like we’ve seen in other states where some people aren’t allowed to speak. So there was a bill brought last year, and it will be modified and brought back this year. One genuine concern is whether the right of students to sue for damages should be included in this proposal.

Q: Along with these specific policies, you plan to spend considerable time helping new legislators. What advice do you plan on giving them?

A: First, stay in good contact with your constituents back home. And then during session, don’t take the lead in pushing really controversial issues, unless you have a really compelling interest to do so. Those issues will be there anyway; others will bring them forward. … I’ll also encourage them to listen a lot and try to learn a lot. If you study the issues, you become a better legislator, and it can change your viewpoint as well. Over the years, I’ve learned that some of the ideas that I had weren’t accurate. However, on many issues, I remain convinced that my initial views were correct.