Nebraska Sen. Mike Hilgers
First-term lawmaker has emerged as institutional leader while pursuing ‘win-win’ policies in areas such as transportation and health care

By Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Q: Nebraska Sen. Mike Hilgers immediately cut a lot out of any budget, whether during my time in the Legislature. It is hard to a big issue in Nebraska’s 2020 legislative session? What are some of your goals there? How do you apply that vision to something as contentious as tax reform, which is expected to be a major win.

A: You now have three years of working in the unicameral legislature. From your perspective, what qualities in a legislator help the body as a whole address some of the state’s biggest issues?

Q: Much of the talk in Nebraska has centered on cutting property taxes. Why is it such a policy concern right now?

A: It’s been at the top of the [priority] list every year I’ve been here, and even in years before that. Family farms in Nebraska are being choked off because they can’t afford the property taxes. When I go door-to-door, there are people who are thinking about leaving or have neighbors or family members who have left. If you think about the brain drain, about why people come home or don’t come home to Nebraska, part of it is family. For me, I wanted to raise my family here because I know it was a great place to do that. But part of the reason, too, was because my parents are here. So I think we need to think about that bigger picture. If we want our kids to come back, we can’t be scaring off their parents with high property taxes.

Q: What do you see as some of the key leadership qualities in the legislative environment?

A: It’s also important to keep your word. If you promise people you’re going to be with them, you’ve got to be with them. And you’ve got to be straight with people as well. If I am against your bill, I try to make sure you know upfront and why. You also need to be seen as someone who treats others fairly. You know there’s going to be fights or debates about the substance of issues, so you need to take care of all the process issues. Avoid things that surprise people and that can sour relationships.

Bio-sketch of Nebraska Sen. Mike Hilgers
- elected in 2016
- serves as chair of the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature Executive Board
- founding partner of Hilgers Graben PLLC, a national law firm based in Lincoln, Neb.
- lives in Lincoln with his wife, Heather, and their four children: Alice, Elsie, Clara Jane and Michael Jr.

“As a Nebraskan who came back home, I saw the unicameral legislature as a place where I could add value and contribute to the state.”

Q: Where do we want to settle down and raise a family?

A: One of the first big questions for Mike Hilgers and his wife, Heather, to answer was this: Where do we want to settle down and raise a family?

Hilgers is not a native of Nebraska, and Mike, though from Omaha, had gone to law school in Chicago, practiced law in Dallas, and worked for a federal judge in New Orleans. “There are a lot of Nebraskans who leave and never come home,” he notes.

Not Hilgers, though. He and Heather decided to put down their roots in Nebraska’s capital city of Lincoln, and that led to another question: How do we make it a better place to live?

“When you start to invest in your community — building a business, starting a family, volunteering at your church, caring about your local schools — it becomes a natural extension to start thinking about the decisions being made by elected leaders,” Hilgers says. “They have such a big impact.”

“So as a Nebraskan who came back home, I saw the unicameral legislature as a place where I could add value and contribute to the state.”

Elected in 2016, he’s entering the final year of his first term in Nebraska’s uniquely nonpartisan unicameral system. It’s been a busy few years, to say the least.

Outside the Legislature, Hilgers and Mike Hilgers have four young children, and the law firm he started in Lincoln in 2011 has taken off: For three straight years, Hilgers Graben PLLC has been recognized by Inc. Magazine as one of the nation’s 5,000 fastest-growing private companies.

Inside the Legislature, Hilgers has emerged as an institutional leader, first as chair of the Rules Committee, now as chair of the Executive Board. He’s also led on policy — from bills that found new efficiencies and innovations in financing Nebraska’s transportation projects, to legislation that has expanded the availability of direct primary care.

Hilgers has also brought a new forward-looking focus on the state’s financial health, particularly by taking on the issue of property taxes.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Hilgers discussed his views on legislating and leadership, as well as the 2020 session in the unicameral legislature. Here are excerpts.

Q: You’ve talked about trying to avoid “zero sum” policy outcomes and instead focusing on “win wins.” How do you apply that vision to something as contentious as tax reform, which is expected to be a major win?

A: You now have three years of working in the unicameral legislature. From your perspective, what qualities in a legislator help the body as a whole address some of the state’s biggest issues?

Q: Much of the talk in Nebraska has centered on cutting property taxes. Why is it such a policy concern right now?

A: It’s been at the top of the [priority] list every year I’ve been here, and even in years before that. Family farms in Nebraska are being choked off because they can’t afford the property taxes. When I go door-to-door, there are people who are thinking about leaving or have neighbors or family members who have left. If you think about the brain drain, about why people come home or don’t come home to Nebraska, part of it is family. For me, I wanted to raise my family here because I know it was a great place to do that. But part of the reason, too, was because my parents are here. So I think we need to think about that bigger picture. If we want our kids to come back, we can’t be scaring off their parents with high property taxes.

Q: Much of the talk in Nebraska has centered on cutting property taxes. Why is it such a policy concern right now?

A: It’s been at the top of the [priority] list every year I’ve been here, and even in years before that. Family farms in Nebraska are being choked off because they can’t afford the property taxes. When I go door-to-door, there are people who are thinking about leaving or have neighbors or family members who have left. If you think about the brain drain, about why people come home or don’t come home to Nebraska, part of it is family. For me, I wanted to raise my family here because I know it was a great place to do that. But part of the reason, too, was because my parents are here. So I think we need to think about that bigger picture. If we want our kids to come back, we can’t be scaring off their parents with high property taxes.

Q: Much of the talk in Nebraska has centered on cutting property taxes. Why is it such a policy concern right now?

A: It’s been at the top of the [priority] list every year I’ve been here, and even in years before that. Family farms in Nebraska are being choked off because they can’t afford the property taxes. When I go door-to-door, there are people who are thinking about leaving or have neighbors or family members who have left. If you think about the brain drain, about why people come home or don’t come home to Nebraska, part of it is family. For me, I wanted to raise my family here because I know it was a great place to do that. But part of the reason, too, was because my parents are here. So I think we need to think about that bigger picture. If we want our kids to come back, we can’t be scaring off their parents with high property taxes.