



South Dakota Rep. David Lust

For native South Dakotan, legislative service is a way to give back — and preserve quality of life, fiscal health in the state

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

In David Lust's family, public service was simply a given. Growing up in Aberdeen, S.D., Lust was always encouraged to get involved in his community.

"Service was something my dad instilled in us: You need to give back to your community," Lust says. "It's not just about taking from your community; you need to participate, be engaged and make it better where you can."

For Lust, legislative service seemed like a good way to answer his dad's call to serve — especially after settling in Rapid City and finding himself dissatisfied with how the area was being represented.

"I thought I had no basis to complain if I wasn't going to do anything about it," he says. Before he knew it, Lust was knocking on doors and distributing lawn signs.

Seven years later, Lust is now serving his fourth term in the South Dakota Legislature, and much of it has also been spent in legislative leadership of some kind.

For the past four years, after a stint as majority whip, he has served as majority leader in the Republican-led House.

As a leader, he has at times introduced fewer bills of his own in order to focus on big-picture issues such as the state budget and education funding. Another part of that big picture, he adds, is knowing when proposed bills would do more harm than good.

"The best thing a legislature can do is defeat bad legislation," he says. "I don't keep a running tab of all the bills I helped defeat that were not good policy for South Dakota, but that should be every legislator's top priority: defeating legislation that is not constructive and positive."

Last month, Lust spoke with CSG Midwest about his vision for South Dakota and what makes it a great place to live and serve. Here are some excerpts from the interview.

Bio-sketch: Rep. Lust

- ✓ first elected to South Dakota House in 2006; now serving his fourth term
- ✓ second term as majority leader
- ✓ represents western Rapid City
- ✓ has a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College and a law degree from University of South Dakota
- ✓ served as a law clerk for the chief judge of the United States District Court of South Dakota and is licensed to practice before the court
- ✓ practices business and transactional law in Rapid City
- ✓ has four children with his wife Rebecca

Q: You've said that South Dakota has been recovering well from the economic downturn. What has been the key to that progress?

A: I am a business and transactional attorney, so my motivation is to make sure that our business environment stays as competitive as it is and that South Dakota is a good place to do business. I firmly believe that is going to be our path to success in the future: expanding current businesses and recruiting out-of-state businesses to take advantage of what we have to offer.

Our two largest communities, Rapid City and Sioux Falls, are doing very well. The Black Hills is a great place to live, and you're seeing growth in Sioux Falls, which is recruiting insurance and

financial businesses. I would like to see some of that filter up to other parts of the state. ...

We have a low unemployment rate, and that's a good thing in the sense that everyone is working and contributing to the economy. But it can be somewhat of a deterrent to businesses looking to move here in terms of whether there are enough workers to move their businesses here. So it is a blessing and a bit of a curse. When the analysis is done, the lower unemployment rate is not a deterrent if there are enough people who are willing to move from their existing jobs or who are under-employed.

Q: South Dakota has a very strong banking and insurance sector. How did that come to be?

A: Several decades ago, Gov. Bill Janklow made a conscious decision, along with the Legislature, to get rid of our usury laws and really open up our regulatory environment. Attracting Citibank was the impetus at the time. We got them here, and from there the insurance, banking and trust industries took off. It was the leadership of the governor and the legislative branch making a determination that they wanted to go after these businesses and create an environment that is hospitable to them — and it has worked.

Q: What would you say has been your top priority as a legislator?

A: The first thing is maintaining the fiscal discipline we have had here — and this is not unique to me but is true of many past leaders in the Legislature and the executive branch. We don't spend what we don't have, and that has contributed to keeping our economy as strong as it is. That's the first priority: keeping things where they should be economically.

For example, our retirement system is funded to 103 percent. Fiscally we are, if not the best, then one

of the best states in the country in terms of our fiscal health, and it is important to me to keep that going.

Q: Maintaining a strong higher-education system is another issue that is important to you. Can you explain why it's at the top of your list?

A: For a state like South Dakota, we need to be a net importer of intellectual property. The best way to do that is to have a higher-education system that caters to in- and out-of-state students, encourages research, and from that spin off commercial development of intellectual property — both in terms of human capital and traditional patents.

... That should be the pathway to success for almost any rural state.

"Serving in the Legislature is not the be-all and end-all. ... I want to be remembered as a good father, spouse, son and community citizen."

Q: One concern many states have is keeping young people in the state after they finish their education careers. How is South Dakota working to do that?

A: Statistics show that of the students who go to school here, a much higher percentage stay than you would anticipate. It's about getting them here and showing them what South Dakota has to offer.

I know the perception of South Dakota is not as a robust place to live, but once you live here, that changes quickly. So the key is to get students first to visit, and then to come here for school, and they realize this is a pretty good place to be.

For example, I absolutely loved living in Chicago. It's an awesome city. But I don't miss the hour-long commute, dealing with on-street parking, and all of that. When I look at my life here, it's completely different — and for me it's a comfortable fit.

Q: You will be leaving the Legislature at the end of the year due to term limits. What is the most important thing you have tried to impart to fellow legislators during your tenure in leadership?

A: What I have tried to instill is a level of perspective; serving in the Legislature is not the be-all and end-all. You should come serve for a time and then move on and go back to civilian life. I think that makes for the best leaders and legislators, if they can keep that focus. I try to emphasize that with my caucus and the House at large: Remember, you are here to do a job, but it shouldn't be your primary job and it shouldn't be what you are remembered for.

In my last speech in the House, I said that I want to be remembered as a good father, a good spouse, a good son and a good community citizen. Being a good legislator should be way down on the list. ★