

# North Dakota Rep. Kenton Onstad

Lawmaker from heart of Bakken oil boom reflects on changes to his home district, looks ahead to state's fiscal and leadership challenges

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

For more than 100 years, Kenton Onstad's family has called western North Dakota home — a place that for decades was a quiet, sparsely populated area made up mostly of family farmers.

Then came the oil boom.

"Before, I maybe would get the mailman, my neighbor and his hired man driving on the road by me," Onstad recalls. "Now overnight, an oil well comes and all of a sudden you have 100 to 200 trucks driving daily by your place."

Onstad's hometown of Parshall is where the oil boom started in 2006 (the first well was drilled just a few miles from his home), and ever since then, the changes from hydraulic fracturing activity have transformed his district and shaped his work in the legislature.

"To take a community of 1,000 [people], and then it's 5,000 six years later, you didn't have a water system compatible for that. You didn't have a school system compatible," Onstad says.

"You created a whole new town in five years. My only comparison is back when the railroad came in and developed the country, and every seven miles they needed a town, and towns sprung up and [provided] services. ... But that took many, many years. All this [development in North Dakota] happened here in a short period. Nothing like this has ever happened."

The Onstad family began farming near Parshall more than a century ago (the family farm was designated a "North Dakota Centennial Farm" in 2013), and he has proudly carried on the family tradition of being an active part of the community.

Onstad has been a math teacher at the local high school, coached the football team and, later on, got involved in local politics. Then came his first election to the North Dakota House in 2000.

"I thought I was only going to do this for 12 years, and if I lasted for 12 years, that would be good," he recalls.

But Onstad now has been in the North Dakota House for a decade and a half, and has been serving as minority leader since 2013.

As one of the few members in his caucus from the western part of the state, and the only House Democrat in a district that is actively producing oil, he has a unique voice and perspective. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Onstad reflected on his legislative career, North Dakota's oil boom and recent downturn, and what he sees as likely topics in the 2017 session. Here are excerpts from that interview.

**Q: In addition to trying to address some of the infrastructure needs that came with the oil boom, what have been some of your legislative priorities for your district and its constituents?**

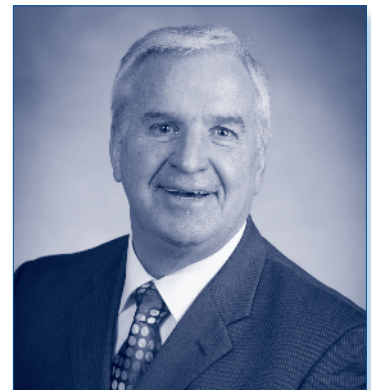
**A:** When the oil development came in, I recognized an imbalance between the landowners and the oil investing, so I have championed the [rights] of landowners — working toward annual payments, better compensation for damages, trying to protect their property rights while not to the detriment of development.

## Bio-sketch of Rep. Kenton Onstad

✓ House minority leader since 2013 (assistant minority leader in the 2007, 2009 sessions); served in North Dakota House since 2001

✓ former high school teacher; works at Mountrail-Williams Electrical Cooperatives, manages family farm

✓ lives in western North Dakota city of Parshall with his family



"Before, I maybe would get the mailman, my neighbor and his hired man driving on the road by me. Now, overnight, an oil well comes and all of a sudden you have 100 to 200 trucks driving daily by your place."

**Q: North Dakota has swung from budget surpluses to a projected \$1 billion deficit for this biennium. How do you feel North Dakota has positioned itself to face the global decline in oil prices?**

**A:** We became more dependent on oil ... and I just think we went the route of trying to lower some revenues [such as income tax] ... and now we are in that crunch right now because of how much we cut some revenues. I think that we could have done a better job recognizing that this is a commodity and those prices go up and down and it's a world market. If we could control that world market, yeah, that's wonderful, but you can't. The state of North Dakota can't.

**Q: Looking ahead to the 2017 legislative session, in addition to dealing with the decline in oil activity and state revenues, what other issues will you and your colleagues face?**

**A:** The major issue is our incarceration rate. Our population was declining in the early 2000s and all of a sudden it expanded and crime went up — human trafficking, drugs, and things that came along with it. Our prison system is just exploding. And so it's going to be an issue to find alternatives to incarceration. The trouble is that it's not going to be cheap, but we need to come up with some solutions. Sixty percent of people that are behind bars are not there for serious crimes. We have to work out better education programs. We have to correct this thing.

We are going to have some serious discussions about higher education and K-12 funding. And then I think we have to make a decision that if we want to have working families, we have to have early childhood education, day care, and those kinds of things. If you want families to come to the state, you have to help provide some of those amenities. You don't have to provide it totally but we have to create a system that helps [lead to] affordable day care and early childhood development.

**Q: How do you view your role as minority leader and your leadership style?**

**A:** We have to lead our party and our caucus into the next generation. I saw this need and that's why I sought the leadership position. I don't want to be here forever. That was never my intent. We need to transition and get our younger caucus members more involved, and develop and use their energy, their social skills, and their IT skills. I was a football coach for a number of years and I use coaching analogies a lot: The head coach leaves, the next head coach comes in, and the team carries on. That's what I'm trying to do with our caucus — keep them excited and have them understand their role and cultivate them so you have a winning team.

**Q: Democrats currently have 23 of 94 members in the House, and your caucus has been in the minority for many years. How do you motivate your caucus and help ensure that members feel relevant to the process?**

**A:** You have to understand who you are representing. Your constituents, whichever district you came from, elected you to represent them. So when you go to vote and think about a bill, always remember who you are representing; and that's your driving force to be their voice.

When I first came, everybody worked together. They weren't all about who is taking credit. You saw across-the-aisle stuff, and then all of a sudden it gets to be partisan ... I disagree with that. People elect you and they expect you to go to Bismarck to make policy that is good for everyone. If we are not getting along in Bismarck, they look at it and [ask about] what is going on.

My point is that we are not here to play games; it is not a power struggle. I just want to get good legislation. And I encourage my caucus [members] that if they want good legislation, then they vote for what is good for their constituents. ★