



North Dakota Sen. Mac Schneider

Senate minority leader continues family tradition of service; goals include investing oil revenues to strengthen education, workforce

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

When Mac Schneider walked into the state capitol as a newly elected senator, it brought back memories.

As a young man growing up in Fargo, Schneider often accompanied his uncle, then-Rep. John Schneider, to Bismarck during session.

"I remember sitting there on the floor with my cousins and helping my uncle push the green and red buttons to vote," Schneider recalls.

Inspired by these early experiences, Schneider went on to work as press secretary for North Dakota Congressman Earl Pomeroy. After law school, Schneider moved back to North Dakota to continue a family tradition of legislative service (including his cousin, Jasper, who had also served in the legislature).

At age 29, Schneider was elected to the Senate's 42nd district, which includes Grand Forks. Schneider's young age was not a barrier to getting elected — in fact, he says, it might have been an asset. About half of the voters in the district are college students attending the University of North Dakota, and the median age is around 22.

As a proud UND alumnus, Schneider's top priorities include ensuring that students can afford college so they can have the same academic opportunities he had. Although he ran on implementing a two-year tuition freeze, Schneider was able to help pass a cap on tuition increases as well as on student fees.

"When I come back from Bismarck over the Columbia Road bridge and into the district, I see the beautiful buildings we have on campus and I get chills every time," he says. "It's an honor to represent this part of North Dakota."

Tradition of leadership

Schneider is not only carrying on a family tradition of legislative service — he's also following in his uncle's footsteps as leader of his caucus.

In just his second term, Schneider was elected minority leader. But he's quick to acknowledge that each member is a leader in his or her own right.

"Sen. Tim Mathern, for example, represents the district in which I grew up — and has been since I was in grammar school," Schneider says. "He doesn't need any leadership tips from me."

Instead, Schneider considers it his responsibility to make sure the priorities of his caucus get a fair hearing, both in the legislature and in public.

"I think we've all said to ourselves at some point, 'There ought to be a law' — and in this job, you can actually take that idea and run with it," he says. "You find someone on the other side of the aisle who feels the same way you do, and you work together to advance public policy. It's a pleasure to get to do that."

Earlier this month, CSG Midwest talked with Schneider; here are some excerpts from the interview.

Q: How does representing the University of North Dakota shape your legislative work?

Bio-sketch: Sen. Schneider

- ✓ elected to North Dakota Senate in 2008; minority leader since 2013
- ✓ represents the Grand Forks area
- ✓ graduate of the University of North Dakota, where he played varsity football
- ✓ served as press secretary for North Dakota's U.S. congressman
- ✓ law degree from Georgetown University
- ✓ has a daughter with his wife, Crystal

A: I have a very interesting district because we have people from all over the state who come to attend the university. So, the issues facing District 42 are North Dakota issues. ...

[For example], some challenges have occurred in western North Dakota secondary to the development of our natural resources: rutted roads, a strain on housing, and the challenges that come with population growth — including crimes like human trafficking, which many of us never thought in our wildest dreams that we'd ever have to deal with in our state.

There is an old saying that North Dakota is a small town with long streets, and I think that really applies. I try not to get involved in the urban/rural divides that occur. For example, even though my district is far away from western North Dakota, I think it's a moral obligation to stand by those communities as they deal with some of the challenges that come along with welcoming growth. When you do what's right for the state as a whole, more often than not your constituents will react positively.

Q: What are you proposing this session as a way to spend oil revenue?

A: Everyone's got an idea on what to do with the newfound revenue. They range from ... providing a dividend to citizens as Alaska has done to a House proposal that would eliminate the personal and corporate income taxes. Plus, there are proposals to spend the money on what are definitely legitimate needs.

What I'd like to see us do is take this bonanza of revenue and invest that in the next economy. That includes making North Dakota's education system the best in the entire country. We absolutely have the ability to do that, starting, in my opinion, with early-childhood education this session. My goal is that 50 years from now when my daughter is in the twilight of her career she can say that dad's colleagues did a good job in preparing us for the next economy.

Q: One of your goals this session is to reduce human trafficking. Can you talk about your approach to addressing this issue?

A: I have a bill that would target the demand side of this crime. It would require offender education when someone is convicted of soliciting or patronizing prostitution. It is patterned after the so-called "john school" in the Twin Cities of our neighboring state, Minnesota.

The idea is to educate offenders that this is not an industry that is transactional; it is inherently exploitative. In Minnesota, they have had a lot of success with the program. There were 700 offenders in a three-year period who went through the program, and only three had reoffended.

What we need to do is not only go after the offenders but also to decrease the demand. It has been a hard pill to swallow here in North Dakota, but if there was no demand for the services that sex traffickers provide, they wouldn't do business here.

Q: You're also working this session on another policy inspired by a successful initiative in another state. Can you talk about your proposal to create an education endowment fund?

A: I have been working with the Senate Education Committee to take the one-time harvest of natural resources money and make it a permanent investment in our people. We can draw from something done in Wyoming, which endowed the Hathaway Scholarship fund with several hundred million dollars, the principal of which cannot be touched. The earnings on the principal go to funding access to education for Wyoming's best and brightest. ...

We have a fund in North Dakota called the Foundation Aid Stabilization Fund ... and it has about \$1 billion in it. I am planning on introducing a resolution to turn that fund into an endowment to provide college scholarships to North Dakota's best and brightest.

The Education Committee is working on a proposal right now for a revolving loan fund for K-12 school construction, as well as this endowment program for college scholarships. The biggest long-term public-policy challenge facing our state is: How do we take this one-time harvest of natural resources money and invest in our people? An endowment fund for school construction and access to higher education is a good way to do that.

Q: In your legislative career so far, is there a bill of which you are especially proud?

A: In my first session, I [authored] a bill that created "individual development accounts," through which low-income individuals get incentives to save for limited purposes, such as buying a first home, starting a business or paying for college.

There is a financial education component to it, too, so it's really giving a person a fishing pole instead of a fish. ... Just knowing that there are people who have been able to start a business or go to college or buy a family home in part as a result of the [program], that's why I got into this business: to provide, even in some little way, greater opportunity. ★