



South Dakota Sen. Jason Frerichs

Fourth-generation lawmaker is carrying on family tradition of serving in the Legislature — and protecting the family farm

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Jason Frerichs hadn't always thought about carrying on the long family tradition of serving in the state Legislature.

"It wasn't anything I had on a trajectory in terms of where I wanted to be," he says.

But as a cattle farmer in northeast South Dakota who spends a good amount of time with his herd, he also knows that some things just run in the genes.

"I'm probably a political hybrid," Frerichs quips.

His family's connection to the Legislature dates back to 1955, when his great-grandfather was a member of the South Dakota House. Frerichs' father, Kent, and grandfather Bertrum Ellingson then served for long stretches in the 1970s and 1980s, including several years together.

Now it is his turn.

Six years ago, at age 23, Frerichs was first elected to the South Dakota House, becoming one of the youngest-serving legislators in state history. After one term, in which he served as minority whip for the Democrats, he pursued a state Senate seat.

He ran unopposed that year, but 2010 was a much more difficult year for his party in other parts of the state. It was so difficult, in fact, that an already-small Senate Democratic caucus was cut in more than half — to only five members compared to 30 Republicans.

"You have to be prepared to work twice as hard to get anything done or to get any of your legislative goals accomplished," Frerichs says about serving in a heavily outnumbered caucus.

He decided early on to help lead those efforts, running for minority leader as both a young and still relatively new legislator. He won the vote of his caucus.

"Ever since I joined the Legislature, there has at least been a handful of us who were younger," Frerichs says, "and I think there was a recognition that we should be represented in leadership."

"It was a contested race for leadership in the Senate," he adds. "The younger members helped me out, and then everyone rallied behind me once it was all over."

And just as he is carrying on a family tradition in the capital of Pierre, Frerichs is doing much the same back home. He helps run a family farm with his brothers and father — part of an agricultural legacy that also dates back four generations.

As a child, Jason Frerichs saw family, agriculture and politics all come together over a statewide campaign to pass Amendment E — a historic, highly contentious measure that was passed by voters in 1998 and referred to by advocates as the "Family Farm Amendment."

"I got very involved with that with my dad," Frerichs recalls. "It meant putting up signs, tagging along to the State Fair to discuss the issue with farmers. It showed how you really can make a difference."

"Some people get down on whether there is an opportunity for citizens to make a true impact, or even rural legislators like myself who are four hours away from the state capital. But I really do

Bio-sketch: Sen. Frerichs

- ✓ serves as South Dakota Senate minority leader
- ✓ first elected to state House in 2008 at age 23
- ✓ joined state Senate after running for open seat in 2010
- ✓ fourth-generation state legislator and farmer from northeast South Dakota
- ✓ helps run family farm, is deeply involved in agriculture policy in the Legislature

think we can make an impact if we have a solid policy point to make and depth in our arguments."

CSG Midwest recently interviewed Sen. Frerichs about his legislative priorities and his role as minority leader. Here are excerpts.

Q: What do you see as the state's role in protecting or supporting agriculture?

A: I like to look back to the days of starting a billion-gallon-a-year ethanol industry in our state. It's an example of just how much state government can make difference. If our state hadn't had certain policies in place, we might have had half of that production in other states instead.

But we included incentives at the pump, and incentives to build the facilities and the infrastructure. They were small policy wins at the time that ended up having big results for our state.

Q: What are some of the big issues right now in agriculture that the state has to address?

A: Certainly a big one right now is water management, and that's one that I've been spending a lot of time on as part of [the Legislature's] Regional Watershed Advisory Task Force. We've met for the past three years, and we're at a pivotal point.

We're getting set to embark on changing how we give out drainage and water permits. Instead of having the county involved, the idea is to shift to a watershed approach — by creating regional watershed councils.

Q: What is the advantage of creating these councils?

A: Right now, we have counties that spend more than half of their meeting time dealing with water disputes. We wanted to find a better way of resolving those disputes and keeping them out of the court system.

We looked at models in places like Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota, and the more we looked at it, the more we liked the idea of moving to a watershed district — because water doesn't follow the county or other political lines you see on a map. The idea

is to create new districts that respect the flow of the water, and that take a scientific, engineering approach [to managing water].

In this era of anti-government, folks are going to question any new layer of government. But we're going to have to fight through that and convince people this is for the better.

Q: On agriculture and other issues, what has been your philosophy in trying to work with the majority party in the Legislature?

A: When I was first elected to leadership, one of the first calls I got was from my counterpart [Majority Leader Russell Olson at the time]. I had always worked with him on bills in the past. So because of that, we had mutual respect and trust for one another.

From his side, he'd hear, "Why are you giving Democrats this or that, like a second committee seat?" At the same time, party loyalists on our side would beat us up a little for not being hard enough, not throwing enough bombs at the other side.

But even with that, we still chose to continue to work together on issues.

Q: One tool for the minority party is South Dakota's ballot initiative process — to bring issues directly to voters. Do you consider it an important tool?

A: Sometimes it is our only option when you have very few if any statewide officeholders. For example, we opposed one of the governor's signature economic development initiatives [HB 1230] because we thought it was giving handouts to corporations.

We were able to refer it to the voters and got a no vote. What it meant was that the next legislative session, the Republicans opened their arms up to us and sought help in creating an economic development plan for the state. We wrote Building South Dakota [the state economic development plan] together, as Republican and Democratic legislators.

Q: You serve as minority leader, live hundreds of miles from the state capital and help run a family farm. How do you try to balance all of those responsibilities?

A: Sometimes you have to burn the midnight oil, and there are times where I literally climb out of the combine and go to meet with constituents. Or come back from meetings to do cattle chores.

But I've also had a lot of help from my family with our farm operation. And there's an understanding from my community as well that I might not always be around. They'll give me a break every now and then, but they're not going to cut me any slack. They're going to hold me accountable.

And my fellow legislators and other folks in Pierre know those demands and are respectful of what I have to do. ★