PROFILE: SOUTH DAKOTA SENATE PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE CHRIS KARR

Protecting the people by protecting the institution: Five-term lawmaker shares his views on leadership, integrity and building an 'independent-minded Legislature'

by Derek Cantù *(dcantu@csg.org)*

Respect. Professionalism. Civility. Inside and outside the Capitol, Chris Karr has spoken about how adhering to those three principles should be the foundation of the legislative process — "more important than any bill we bring."

"In leadership, you can protect the integrity of that process or you can try to put your thumb on the scale," Karr says.

The latter approach may be tempting during the hectic days and weeks of session, especially in a state such as South Dakota where lawmakers must get so much done in only 40 session days.

But using that "thumb" has consequences for the institution: less transparency and less room for input from individual members, he says, and the potential of rushing bills through the Legislature. Respect, professionalism and civility all get undermined as a result.

You follow those three principles, Karr believes, by instead allowing for open dialogue to debate and vet legislative proposals, even if that can make it more difficult at times to pass certain measures.

"It should be hard," Karr says, "and I think that helps protect the people of South Dakota from ideas that aren't quite ready."

Nearing a decade of legislative service, Karr was elected to the Senate for the first time in 2024 after four terms in the House. He immediately took on the position of president pro tempore.

Karr's first Senate session was an eventful one, and he points to successes in two of his long-term priority areas: strengthening the legislative institution and government accountability. For example, new laws will require legislative approval of certain capital projects and strengthen the investigative powers of the bicameral Government Operations and Audit Committee. ("DOGE before DOGE existed," Karr says.)

The Legislature also revisited perhaps the most contentious policy issue in South Dakota in recent years — the rights of property owners amid interest in the construction of carbon pipelines across the state.

Here are excerpts from a recent interview between Sen. Karr and CSG Midwest, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

BIO-SKETCH: SOUTH DAKOTA SEN. CHRIS KARR

✓ elected by colleagues in early 2025 as Senate president pro tempore

✓ first elected to the Senate in 2024; previously served four terms in House with stints as majority whip and chair of the Appropriations Committee

✓ is a self-employed business owner, accredited valuation analyst and financial consultant

✓ is an avid fisherman and hunter

✓ has a bachelor's degree in business economics from South Dakota State University and an MBA from the University of South Dakota

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Q What was your transition like this year in switching chambers and also immediately taking on a top leadership post?

A In South Dakota, we have term limits, and every two years, we have about a 30 percent turnover. So when I came into the Senate, I had honestly some of the most experience left of the senators — not only just in years but in experience.

I was majority whip leader in the House; I was chair of Appropriations for four years. So I had been a part of the negotiations in the Legislature with the executive branch to problem-solve and put budget packages together.

Q That high level of turnover means you have a lot of new members. How do you help them through their first session?

A I have a three-hour window driving from Sioux Falls to [Pierre]. I'm on the phone the whole time, touching base with the new members, "Hey, think about this" or "Do you have questions?"

They have so many questions, and typically they're already messaging me saying, "Hey, give me a shout when you can; I'm still trying to understand this process" or "Who do I talk to?" …

I also like to get out and walk the floor in both chambers. … You want to provide new members with mentorship and guidance because a lot of them don't know where to even start with a bill or a strategy. Even if you don't necessarily agree with the bill, you want the process to work as smoothly as possible.

Q This year, your state's new governor, Larry Rhoden, was sworn in during the middle of session. How did you go about building that relationship?

A Fortunately for me, when I came into the Legislature nine years ago, I served with at-that-time Rep. Larry Rhoden and got to know Larry over the years. As lieutenant governor, he was always somebody I could go talk to. He'd just be real open and honest, and we'd have good discussions about the Legislature and the executive branch. …

And the important thing is to have that professionalism, to be able to disagree and for it to not color the rest of session. Even when things didn't work — and some very large things didn't work this year, like [appropriating the construction of] a new prison — our governor was able to instantly recognize the challenges in the Legislature and say, "Okay, we're going to do a reset."

Q How do you balance the need to work with a governor with the idea of the legislative branch forging its own identity and independence?

A I think that independence has grown — a very respectful and professional independence.

A lot of my bills, even from my first year, have been inward looking about strengthening the Legislature, about creating greater checks and balances, about that accountability and transparency. And I think that's probably one reason why I've moved up in leadership and gained the confidence of my colleagues. …

Everybody needs to be able to have their moment to share their thoughts, and so when you put all that together, it allows for this kind of independent-minded Legislature that's able to say, "Thanks, but no thanks, governor."

But that wasn't easy. As a young legislator, I remember a lot of individuals who thought it was a much easier road to just fall in line and kind of take orders. That's not necessarily where we're at now.

Q One big debate in South Dakota, as well as other Midwestern states, has involved the construction of carbon pipelines. HB 1052 passed this year. What does it do?

A HB 1052 says that a carbon or CO_2 pipeline does not have the ability to use eminent domain. It's not saying the pipeline can't exist. The pipeline operators would have to find willing private landowners to allow them access to their land. It was a really short, sweet bill — all of a couple of sentences.

What I would say after being in this [debate] for a few years, and giving this a great deal of thought, is that a lot of [the support for eminent domain use] has come from the carbon credits. Nobody I talked to in the industry — whether it be ethanol producers, corn producers, jet fuel producers — nobody really thought that CO_2 sequestration was beneficial or a great idea. Nobody was really concerned about the CO_2 in the air and taking it out of the air. All they wanted was those federal credits, which were going to expire. …

For other states, I would just say stick to the facts. I think that property rights are a fundamental right in our country.

What worked here in South Dakota was activating a lot of grassroots activity among our landowners. I've never seen anything like it. It took a while to get those individuals fired up, tuned in, educated, and then willing to speak out. But I think that's what made the difference, that grassroots effort.