

# An exit interview with Williston Mayor Ward Koeser

After 20 years of performing duties as the mayor of Williston, Ward Koeser has decided to let the mayoral chapter of his life come to an end. I am sure a book will one day hit the news stands documenting Koeser's time as mayor of the fastest growing micropolitan in the U.S.



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*For Bakken Breakout Weekly*

Koeser was elected in 1994 during a time when Williston was declining in population and infrastructure was deteriorating. In addition to declining micropolitan trends, the city was still paying back loans stemming from projects related to the oil boom of the 1980s. However, these past several years have painted a different picture.

"It's been an exciting time, but especially the past four years," Koeser said. "Those four years have been some of the busiest, most stressful and hectic years of life, but they also have been four of the best years of my life."

Koeser continued saying those past four years have created numerous opportunities in Williston and his decision not to run has left him with mixed emotions.

"There are parts (of the Bakken boom) I am anxious to be over with; while there are parts I will certainly miss," Koeser said.

One part of his term that was difficult was the very beginning. When Koeser was elected 20 years ago the town was in post-boom phase with limited opportunity and a declining population.

"When I started 20 years ago we had gone through a bust cycle and the community was struggling," Koeser said. "Then in about 2006 we started to see activity, apartments fill up, and from then on the city just continued to grow."

Koeser added that the Bakken has become a "game changer" for Williston, the state and the region.

Looking back, Koeser could see the evolution of the Bakken's global appeal. At first when the national media arrived on the scene, it was something to note. However, when the international reporters began showing up, Koeser knew the Bakken was even more of special place than he could have ever imagined.

"After the year of national media the world media began showing up — China, Japan, Germany, France, the Nether-

lands, Switzerland, you go right on down the line, Norway," Koeser said.

The intrigue displayed by the international media proved to be enough evidence to Koeser that this oil play was indeed special. Koeser recalled a moment in time with a German reporter that became etched in his memory as an indicator of how important Williston was.

"I would sometimes ask them, 'why do you come to Williston?'" Koeser said. "The one I distinctly remember was a female reporter from Germany, and she said 'because in Germany we look at what's happening in Williston as how it impacts the U.S. economy.' That really was an eye opener for me."

Another difference in this generation's oil play, according to Koeser, is the investment into real estate by oil companies.

"The thing that is really different now than in the '80s is the large oil companies are investing in the communities," Koeser said. "In the '80s during that boom they rented properties. This time they

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are actually buying properties and making huge investments."

Koeser added it isn't uncommon for an oil company build a \$30-50 million dollar project in a community, whereas 20 years ago, that wasn't the case. Koeser continued citing comparisons with the industry's drive for blazing a new path of community spirit in the Bakken.

"The other difference is how involved the oil companies are, especially the larger oil companies," Koeser said. "Whether it is cleaning up the patch, working with the schools or just looking for projects to be a part of. I am quite pleased."

He added the smaller oil companies often have their capital and investments tied up and are not as flush with their cash, but still contribute to the community in a variety of ways.

Contributions to Williston are welcome in every shape and size while they navigate uncharted waters of unprecedented growth. The speed of the community's expansion has been something of a challenge, but on paper the numbers for future growth look promising. Specifically, over the past three years

Williston has issued approximately \$1.2 billion dollars in building permits, according to Koeser.

"The ARC, that's the rec center, is probably the biggest project we've done," Koeser said. "But you just see the city working on all kinds of infrastructure. Whether it's churches they are building or banks that are expanding, most businesses are doing very well right now and are making this the opportune time to invest and expand."

With two boom bust cycles in the history books and a current building craze in northwest North Dakota, one can only wonder if the oil patch towns are overbuilding and spending beyond their means. During those bust economic recessionary years, pretty much the only economic stimulus to the remote Bakken towns consisted of a sojourn society of roughnecks and roustabouts traveling the country like professional nomads in search of their next well to drill. Some stayed, but most left. This time things appear different.

"I think we are starting to see more young couples," Koeser said. "The hospitals will tell you that, the churches will tell you that, the schools will tell you that. The town is becoming a much younger town. And a much more diverse town."

Koeser said the "big indicators" like unemployment numbers and per capita income are positive, but the town still struggles on some of the daily community issues.

"Day-to-day we still struggle with long lines at the post office, dust, dirt, trucks and traffic and all sorts of things," Koeser said. "But the big indicators are good and the young people seem to embrace this change."

How about the life long residents and the older population? According to Koeser the "older generation" continues to struggle with the changes and preferred a day when Williston life was quieter and less congested. Koeser said he empathizes with those who have stayed in the area through the years, but he also knows the reality of the Bakken.

"The first thing you have to do is give them a chance to speak and you have to listen," Koeser said. "Affordable housing has been one of those issues that has been really tough to deal with."



Tribune file photo  
Retiring Williston Mayor Ward Koeser did not run for re-election this year.

Consulting with other boom towns, listening to ideas from solution makers and special committees have been formed to address housing costs, but in the end, too much housing demand and not enough supply escalated the cost of living to rival Manhattan, N.Y.

"I just tell people to try and be patient with us as we work through this," Koeser said. "It's going to get better. The price of housing will come down and in some areas it has already started to go down. Just hang with us, better days are ahead."

So what is ahead for Williston besides a new mayor? Major investments into the community nearly demand the need for cultivating a youth movement, one thing northwest North Dakota has lacked in decades.

"For years the only way we kept our population is by farmers retiring and moving into town," Koeser said. "All our young people would go off to college and never come back because there were no jobs for them. Now, that has changed."

Koeser added he believes the increase of job opportunities, community projects like the ARC and other "quality of life investments" have turned Williston into a community cultivation center for younger families to develop roots.

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