

The Watchful Citizen

*Forum speaker says
Nebraska's salvation
in pipeline fight is
"watchfulness in
the citizen."*



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Ben Gotschall ('03) was teaching English at Nebraska Wesleyan when he learned about TransCanada's plan to put a pipeline near his parents' ranch outside Atkinson, Neb. He was poking around on news sites, "trying to avoid grading papers" when he found the story.

"At first, I thought, 'Why put a pipeline there? There's no oil in Atkinson.'" The oil, he learned, was in Alberta, Canada. TransCanada planned to extract the viscous tar sands oil, thin it with chemicals, and pump it to the Gulf of Mexico to access the global market. The Gotschalls' ranch fell between points A and B.

The alumnus and former English instructor returned to campus to deliver an October 9 forum lecture on TransCanada's proposed pipeline—a plan that Gotschall takes serious issue with. For one, it would carve its way through the hemisphere's largest vegetated sand dunes. The Sandhills, he said, are notoriously fragile. "Disturb the surface and it'll blow away. Spill on it and it'll permeate down and out."

And the Ogallala Aquifer—the vast underground lake stretching from South Dakota to Texas—runs very near the surface in the Sandhills. "You can dig a posthole in Atkinson and hit water," Gotschall said. A leak there would threaten the water supply that most Nebraskans

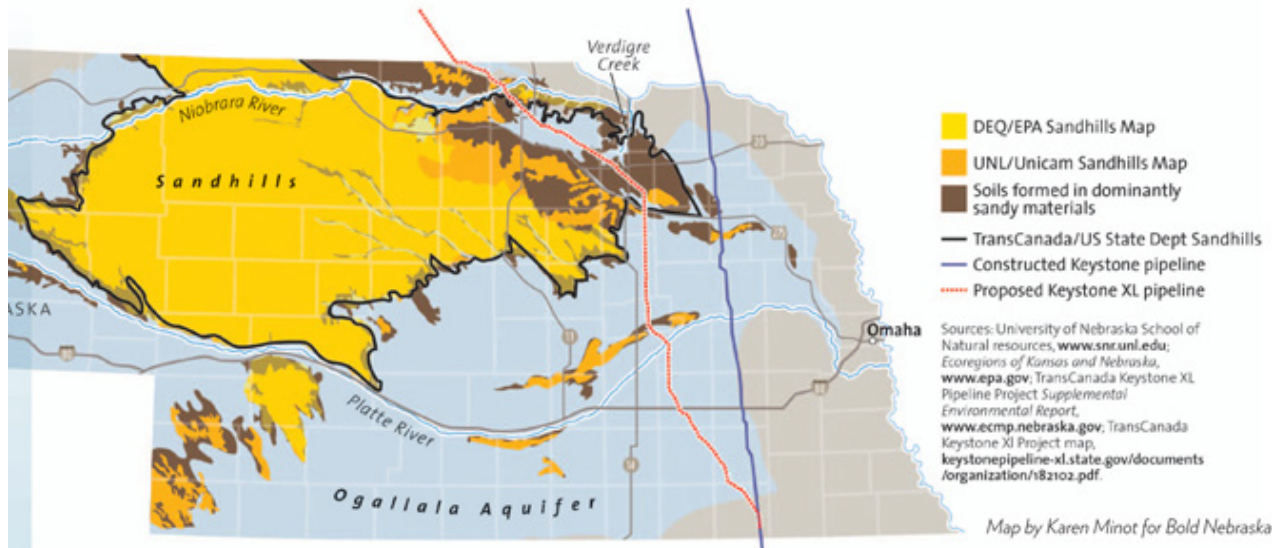
rely upon for drinking and irrigation—no small matter for the state with the most irrigated acres of farmland in the nation.

If a major spill occurred over the aquifer, what would become of Nebraska's agricultural economy? How would one clean the congealed tar sands oil—roughly the consistency of peanut butter at room temperature—from an underground lake?

Asking Nebraskans to accept a risk so that a foreign corporation might profit selling oil to Asia rubbed Gotschall raw. To stop it, he did some more research and discovered that Jane Kleeb of Hastings, Neb., had received a grant to support environmental advocacy. He called her and proposed a partnership. "Basically, I followed the money," he said. They used part of the grant money to buy an ad "and Bold Nebraska started right there," Gotschall said.

Bold Nebraska has since led protests and calls for legislative action against the pipeline. Gotschall pointed to a photo of the main entrance to Nebraska's Capitol. An engraving there reads, "THE SALVATION OF THE STATE IS WATCHFULNESS IN THE CITIZEN." The response to the pipeline proposal made it clear that Nebraskans are watching.

Nebraska boasts America's only unicameral.



"We are the second house," he said of all Nebraskans. "When the Legislature strays, it's our responsibility to check their power." That shared responsibility has joined Nebraskans with vastly different politics, he said. Liberal environmentalists have found partners in conservative farmers. Advocates for regulatory control have discovered a lot in common with libertarians concerned about landowner rights. Even cowboys and Indians have partnered against the pipeline through the Cowboy Indian Alliance, which they jokingly call "the new CIA."

Even Nebraska Wesleyan's Student Affairs Senate (SAS) decided to get involved. "It had been a while since SAS stood behind a big issue," said **Phil Bakken** ('12), who presided over SAS in 2011. SAS spent three weeks debating environmental concerns, job creation and the adequacy of relevant state regulations. They listened to their constituents across campus, and eventually passed a resolution opposing the pipeline. They took it to the Capitol.

"We didn't want our work confined to the university," Bakken said. "We wanted to make the point that youth in Nebraska were also concerned and we wanted the governor to know."

Meanwhile, Gotschall and Bold Nebraska increased their efforts. Gotschall joined thousands demonstrating against the pipeline at the White House in 2011. "The day I was arrested [for protesting], Governor Heineman wrote a letter to President Obama to protect the aquifer."

"I am opposed to the proposed Keystone

XL Pipeline route," Heineman wrote, "because it is directly over the Ogallala Aquifer."

"Think about that," Gotschall said. "A Republican governor wrote a Democratic president, urging him to protect the environment. That's big."

TransCanada responded by rerouting its proposed pipeline. The revised route skirts north and east of the Sandhills, but still passes over the aquifer. Heineman approved the revised route, even though it didn't fully address the concerns he'd expressed to the president.

Heineman's support paired with TransCanada's intense lobbying. "They've spent more per state senator on lobbying," Gotschall said, "than the State of Nebraska pays them."

Despite these realities, Gotschall remains optimistic. "If the pipeline were a done deal," he said, "it'd already be in the ground."

Regardless of the dispute's outcome and the differing politics of those gathered to hear him, Gotschall said he's proud of the watchfulness he's witnessed in Nebraskans. "A strong democracy is one in which people participate," he told NWU students. "And this is an issue that's led a lot of people to get involved."

Count **Ben Schilling** ('12) among them. He credited the 2011 SAS resolution with reigniting his interest in politics. "I think a lot of us at Nebraska Wesleyan shoot high," Schilling said. "I think our generation tends to be cynical, but we're headstrong, too. We don't throw in the towel." **N**



Participation in Student Affairs Senate supports the kind of watchful citizenry that Nebraska relies upon.

One outcome of the pipeline debate on campus has been the formation of an SAS committee tasked with examining state and national issues on which Nebraska Wesleyan students might take a meaningful stance beyond the campus's boundaries.