

Michigan House Speaker Tom Leonard

Leadership style focuses on importance of promoting civility, personal relationships as foundations for legislative success

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

On any given Saturday or Sunday during the year, Michigan Speaker of the House Tom Leonard makes a point of taking a few hours to write what he calls “happy notes” to his legislative colleagues.

“They’re just to let them know how much I enjoy serving with them,” he says, “or how proud I am of the work they’ve been doing.”

It’s a small part of a two-pronged legislative philosophy that has guided Leonard ever since coming to the state Capitol in 2013: first, “work your tail off”; second, never forget the importance of building personal relationships.

Both traits have helped Leonard’s ascension during his first four years in office to one of the top leadership posts in Michigan state government.

“I came to the Legislature certainly wanting to be as relevant as I could,” he says, “but it was never my top ambition or goal to be speaker.”

Now that he’s in the position, though, Leonard sees it as a unique chance to be part of what he views as the most rewarding part of being a legislator: “to tackle very big issues in a way that you know will have a real impact on everyday people.”

He cites historic changes to the state’s teacher-retirement system and a bipartisan House effort on transparency in government as two recent examples of addressing important, and controversial, policies head-on. Looking ahead, his legislative priorities include improving the state’s mental-health system and the fiscal outlook for local governments’ retirement systems.

One key to success in all of these policy areas, Leonard says, is the personal bonds made by legislators themselves.

“That is something I’ve always valued, and in the Legislature, it’s not much different than working with others in a business or anywhere else,” he says. “Make yourself accessible and hold yourself accountable, and make sure you’re honest with everyone.”

“But then don’t lose sight of the little things you can do to build a relationship. The happy notes are one example of that, and during session, whenever I have the chance, I like to walk around the House floor to ask members how they’re doing and make sure they know I’m there to help.”

Leonard came to the Legislature with experience as a former local prosecutor and assistant state attorney general, and during his first few years in office, he led efforts to improve the rights of crime victims (for example, passage of a law ensuring that the families of a crime victim get full restitution if the victim has died) and to reform the state’s court system.

He became part of the House Republicans’ leadership team in 2015 (as speaker pro tempore), and by the end of next year, Leonard’s term-limited tenure in the Michigan House will end — “the quickest six years of my life,” he says.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Leonard talked about his remaining priorities as speaker as well as his approach to promoting civility in government. Here are excerpts.

Bio-sketch of Speaker Leonard

- ✓ Elected speaker in late 2016
- ✓ Member of Michigan House since 2013; previously served as speaker pro tempore
- ✓ Once was assistant state attorney general and local prosecutor in special crimes division for Genesee County
- ✓ Has a history and Spanish degree from the University of Michigan and a law degree from Michigan State University
- ✓ Lives in central Michigan’s DeWitt Township with wife, Jenell, and daughter Hannah



“Make yourself accessible and hold yourself accountable, and make sure you’re honest with everyone.”

Q: You’ve talked about the importance of personal relationships and trust in the Legislature. What can you do as speaker to promote this?

A: I’ve tried to really focus on the importance of civility in our political system. We can disagree, but we have to do it in a respectful manner, so when the issue is done, we can come to the table, have a cup of coffee and determine what issue we can work on together next.

It starts from the top. I never make issues personal, I avoid name calling, and I just try to stick to the policy. That has worked very well. It’s allowed me to have a good relationship with my counterpart, [Michigan House Minority Leader] Sam Singh. He and I have had some issues we’ve been able to work on, such as legislation on transparency and our FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] laws. We’ve had other issues where we were worlds apart. But the fact that he and I have been respectful of each other has allowed our relationship to be very productive this term.

Q: In terms of public policy priorities, you’ve talked about improving the state’s mental health system. How is the Legislature going about that work?

A: Mental health issues affect most every resident of this state. If they don’t suffer from a mental health issue, they’ve got either a close friend or a family member who does. As a state, too, we have a prison population that is costing our state \$2 billion a year. A quarter of our prison population suffers from some type of mental illness.

Our first step was to put together a mental

health task force — seven Republicans, seven Democrats. They traveled the state all summer on a listening tour. They’ve been talking to providers, they’ve been talking to local units of government, they’ve been talking to law enforcement, and, most importantly, they’ve been talking to families who have suffered directly from this issue. That task force is going to come back from the listening tour and then do the best it can to put together comprehensive, bipartisan legislation.

Q: You also helped pass a very high-profile bill this summer (SB 401) regarding the retirement system for Michigan teachers — moving to a defined-contribution type of plan. Why was that a priority?

A: The liability for the state of Michigan had gone from \$250 million back in 1997 to \$36 billion today. It’s a system that is sucking 36 to 40 percent of our local schools’ payroll just to pay the pension debt. We didn’t want to continue to pass along this debt onto the backs of our children and grandchildren, and we finally stepped up and did something about it. It was a heavy lift, but it’s a real solution that we’ll see the fruits of years down the road.

Q: You’re also prioritizing improvements to the long-term fiscal health of local governments. What are your concerns?

A: We’ve got several local governments that are upside down and underwater because of their pension and health care liabilities, so it’s something we need to work on to ensure that they’re solvent and in sound fiscal shape. Because if they’re not, then they’re not investing in infrastructure, they’re not investing in police and fire. These are the basic needs of citizens from their government. ★