

Minnesota Rep. Melissa Hortman

House minority leader had her eye on a life in public service since childhood, and found the right fit inside the Legislature

by Katelyn Tye (ktye@csg.org)

From an early age, Melissa Hortman knew she wanted to lead a life of public service.

As an elementary school student, she was inspired by a line of Girl Scout Law: “Make the world a better place.” And from her Catholic upbringing, she took to heart that “to whomever much is given, of him much will be required.” In middle school, she learned about the U.S. Congress and the presidents, saw the impact elected leaders had on the positive development of the country, and decided that is how she wanted to give back.

“To me it was always about public service, never about politics,” she says.

Hortman was first elected to the Minnesota House in 2004, and since then has advocated for issues ranging from equity in the education system, to renewable energy, to transportation infrastructure.

She took on a new role late last year, when her Democratic-Farmer-Labor legislative colleagues chose her as minority leader. (Control of the House has been rather fluid of late: Republicans won the chamber last year, in 2014 and 2010; the DFL won it in 2012 and 2008.)

“The way I define good policy is meaningful investments in K-12 and higher education, and through my 12 years of service, I’ve seen much better investment possible under DFL leadership,” says Hortman.

When she attended Boston University as an undergraduate, Hortman would brag to fellow freshmen about how great Minnesota was because its students were always No. 1 or 2 in the country on education measures such as college attendance, SAT and ACT scores, and high school graduation rates. She says state policymakers in the early 1990s began coasting on that past success — and Minnesota was then overtaken by states that were working more aggressively to become education powerhouses.

“I always felt like Minnesota was the greatest in terms of education,” she says, “and I’m motivated by a desire to get us as high as we can be.”

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Rep. Hortman reflected on her legislative career and priorities for the next two years. Here are excerpts:

Q: In your 12 years as a Minnesota state representative, what are some of the legislative accomplishments that stand out to you?

A: In 2009, I carried the child passenger restraint bill that opponents called the “Wrap Your Kid in Bubble Wrap” bill. It requires a child to use a booster seat until he or she is 8 years old. AAA [American Automobile Association] has told me there are children in Minnesota who are alive today because of that legislation.

When I was chair of the House Energy Committee in 2013 and 2014, I authored a bill that set a solar energy standard of 1.5 percent by 2020 and authorized community solar projects in Minnesota. By 2020, we’ll have at least 35 times as much solar as we did before the bill passed. The very first contract Xcel Energy signed allowed [it] to avoid 7 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

Bio-sketch of Minnesota Rep. Melissa Hortman

- ✓ Member of the state House since 2004; served as assistant majority leader in 2007-2010 and as minority whip in 2011-12
- ✓ Attorney; has volunteered as a Sunday school teacher and Girl Scout leader
- ✓ Serves on the nonpartisan Uniform Law Commission
- ✓ Married to Mark Hortman; they have two college-age children, Colin and Sophie.



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Some years you look at the work that you do and you wonder if it is worth the low pay and the long hours. Those are a couple bills that I can look at and know that I did make a difference.

Q: What are some of your legislative goals for this year and next?

A: My goal is to improve the lives of Minnesotans in whatever ways we can. Student debt is a huge problem, and the House DFL Caucus would love to work on making college more affordable. Higher education should be something that closes the gap between rich and poor, and right now some families can afford it and some can’t. We’re at a dangerous point that it could exacerbate the divide between higher- and lower-income people.

Q: One of the first bills passed this year in Minnesota provides tax credits to individuals facing steep premium increases in the individual health insurance market. How would you assess the current market for insurers and consumers right now?

A: I think we’re fortunate in Minnesota; we had a fantastic system in place before the Affordable Care Act was passed (we had 93 percent of people covered). For the individual market, we had a comprehensive risk pool that was deconstructed after ACA. Insurers thought they were ready to deal with the individual market, but clearly had some problems predicting the people who would participate, and premiums have become unaffordable.

Since we had a good individual market in place not long ago, we should be able to put that back in place. I’m optimistic we’ll be able to make significant progress on that component. However, there’s so much uncertainty in the rest of health care. I think we need to set aside a large reserve to deal with potential multibillion-dollar cuts in federal assistance.

Q: As a veteran of the Legislature and now as a top caucus leader, what sort of advice do you give to new legislators?

A: I think the most important thing is to read all their constituent correspondence and, to the extent possible, respond personally. When you’re a freshman in the minority, the one thing you have is a little more time. I came in my first two years in the minority and spent that time keeping in very close touch with my constituents. People remember that you took the time to listen to them and respond to their questions.

To be a good representative, you have to do two things: exercise your own judgment and be reflective of what your constituents want. You can’t know what they want unless you are meaningfully engaged.

Q: What are some of your interests outside the Legislature?

A: I serve on the Uniform Law Commission, a volunteer job, with 350 lawyers from across the country working on proposed uniform acts for the states.

I’m also teaching my third course on climate change and renewable energy as an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota. In the fall of 2015, I team-taught an undergrad climate-policy class with former [Minnesota] Sen. Ellen Anderson. The Paris climate talks were coming up, and I felt the world was finally converging on consensus that it was time to do something about climate change and it was important to convey to undergrads that they have a part in that future.

We discussed the science of climate change; private sector, political and defense-related issues; and moved into city, state, national and international actions. It turned out that I absolutely loved teaching. ★