

Iowa Rep. Chris Hagenow

Majority leader always trying to find balance, whether it's working on budget or meeting demands of family, work and public service

by Ilene Grossman (igrossman@csg.org)

On the same day that the local paper ran an announcement of the birth of his oldest child, Chris Hagenow had news to share of a very different kind — a press release in that same newspaper declaring his run for a seat in the Iowa House.

“As I have found out in politics, sometimes you don't get to pick your spots,” he now recalls, “so there was this opportunity, and I went for it.”

Hagenow survived the challenge of simultaneously adjusting to fatherhood and running a first political campaign, and eight years later, he has had two more children while also rising in the ranks of his House Republican caucus. (He also is a partner in a law firm.) And that connection between fatherhood and service in the Iowa Legislature remains as strong as ever.

“I want my children to have great opportunities in Iowa so they won't have to move out of state to chase their dreams,” he says.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, the sixth-generation Iowan reflected on his legislative tenure to date, talked about his new role as majority leader and looked ahead to 2017. Here are excerpts.

Q: You were chosen last August as House majority leader. What have been some of the key challenges for you with this new position?

A: I had to work through the mechanical process of getting legislation ready for the floor. This and some of the other jobs of the majority leader were new to me, but it made it a lot easier that we were not new to the majority. Having Speaker [Linda] Upmeyer right next door, who had done this job for five years, was very helpful.

I would like to think that, by and large, it was a fairly seamless transition, but the challenges include a lot bigger demand on your time, and finding ways to manage my own schedule, so that I can get things done and be effective. Every legislator faces the challenge of balancing family and work. My law partners are very understanding of the demands on time. But it's also about putting boundaries around my time to make sure that I have time with my family as well. That's a work in progress year after year.

Q: What do you view as some of the most rewarding parts of the job of being majority leader?

A: I really enjoy working on a broad range of issues, and I have had the opportunity to do that even more. I get to spend more time in areas that I was not familiar with, and now I get to engage and learn even more. Also, I have opportunities to be a bigger part of the budget process. The negotiations between the House and the Senate [controlled by different parties] are largely done at the senior leader level, and it was good for me to be a part of that.

Q: How would you describe your leadership style in the Legislature?

A: I try to be someone who listens first. I think that we should be collaborative, and

Bio-sketch of Rep. Chris Hagenow

- ✓ elected majority leader in August 2015; previously served as majority whip (first elected to Iowa House in 2008)
- ✓ attorney who practices law in Des Moines
- ✓ lives in Windsor Heights, a suburban town just west of Des Moines
- ✓ graduate of University of Northern Iowa and University of Iowa College of Law
- ✓ he and his wife, Amanda, have three young children



“[We] are able to have productive conversations across the aisle. That is an advantage of state-level lawmaking as opposed to what happens at the federal level. ... We have authentic relationships, so we can work through differences.”

I think that is where we are at our best. That goes for inside the caucus as well as throughout the Legislature. Also, you want to have the credibility that you understand the issues and the big picture, and how that all works together. I also believe strongly in providing opportunities for members to take on bigger and bigger tasks, helping to equip them to become future leaders themselves.

Q: What are the challenges as a leader when one chamber is controlled by Republicans and the other by Democrats?

A: We are in year six of the current balance of power. Most of the same players have been in leadership all six years, including the [Republican] governor, and I think we have grown to understand the issues on which we can work together, and where will we not be able to agree. We have a good understanding of what is possible, and we try to focus on issues where we can find common ground.

I think legislators in Iowa are able to have productive conversations across the aisle. That is an advantage of state-level lawmaking as opposed to what happens at the federal level. We know one another and we have authentic personal relationships, so we can work through differences. With that mutual respect, it makes a lot of other things possible.

Q: What were some of the biggest issues the Legislature faced this year, and what do you see as some of its biggest accomplishments in 2016?

A: The big accomplishment this year, and every year we have been in the majority, was to balance the state budget and to make sure

that we do not spend more than the state collects in ongoing revenue. That is always a difficult challenge, and was maybe more so this year because we had our revenue estimate cut in March.

Within that, we also had to fund K-12 public education. The two sides [Democrats and Republicans] have been far apart over the last several years, but we were able to find common ground. We put 77 percent of new dollars from year-over-year revenue growth into our K-12 education system.

Q: What are your legislative priorities for 2017 and beyond?

A: Both parties have expressed interest in some kind of income tax reform, but what shape that takes is an unknown at this point. Another issue our caucus spent a lot of time on this year was funding for water quality improvements. This year we passed a bill in the House funding improvements with existing revenue, and next year we want to find new money to invest.

Q: What are some of the bills you have sponsored that you are most proud of?

A: There are a number that I have been a part of and enjoyed working on. ... A few years back, I floor-managed a bill to expand the School Tuition Organization tax credit, which provides scholarships to children from lower-income families to attend private schools. Individuals in Iowa can make a donation into the STO and receive a tax credit for their contribution, and the STO provides the scholarship. I have had the chance to meet a lot of students and families that have benefited from that. ★