



# Michigan Sen. Arlan Meekhof

Majority floor leader reflects on first eight years in Legislature, and looks ahead to final four under state's strict term-limits law

by Tim Anderson ([tanderson@csg.org](mailto:tanderson@csg.org))

Eight years ago, it was decision time for Arlan Meekhof: Who should get his vote to be his next state representative? The seat was open because of Michigan's term limits law, and plenty of candidates planned to be on the Republican ballot.

"After looking at some of the choices," Meekhof recalls, "I thought, 'It might as well be me.'"

Public service wasn't new to Meekhof. He was a township supervisor, had served as board president for the private school that his children attended, and had long been an active member of his church.

And Meekhof also remembered a lesson taught to him long ago by his high school government teacher. If you don't get involved, the teacher said, you get the government you deserve.

Meekhof didn't necessarily like the state government that he — and the rest of his district — was getting, and he wanted to be a part of changing it.

"Michigan was struggling financially, and you could see the things that needed to be done," he says. "You could see the budgetary constraints that needed to be put in place, but nobody at the higher level was willing to do it. We needed to get on a financial path that was sustainable, and that meant making hard decisions."

Meekhof decided to run, surviving an eight-person primary during that first race in 2006 for state representative. Since then, he has become part of a Republican leadership team that now has full control of state government in Michigan. He currently serves as majority floor leader in the state Senate.

The turning-point election was 2010, and for the last four years, the GOP-led Legislature and Gov. Rick Snyder have moved ahead with a series of big changes — major budget cuts in 2011, elimination of the Michigan Business Tax, changes in the income tax, implementation of so-called "right to work" legislation (sponsored by Meekhof), and, most recently, phase-out of the state personal property tax.

"Over the past decade, we lost over a million people who went other places to find opportunity," Meekhof says. "We want them back in Michigan, and with these tax changes, our goal has been to make Michigan one of the most attractive places to grow your company or move your company."

"We can now challenge those people to come back home."

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Meekhof discussed some of his continuing policy priorities, his perspective on legislative leadership and what lies ahead for the Legislature in the coming year. Here are excerpts from the interview.

**Q: What were some of the goals that you and other leaders had early on for the Michigan Legislature in terms of how its work would get done?**

## Bio-sketch: Sen. Meekhof

- ✓ serves as majority floor leader in the Michigan Senate
- ✓ first elected to Michigan House in 2006, serving as assistant leader during his second term
- ✓ first elected to Michigan Senate in 2011
- ✓ previously served in local office, including as supervisor for Olive Township in western Michigan
- ✓ once held position of board president at private school where his children attended
- ✓ worked in office furniture business as director of operations

**A:** One of the things we wanted to do right away was give citizens some confidence that the budget would be done on time, and that it would be done professionally without smoke and mirrors. People might not agree with what we did, but it would at least be done on time and be consistent.

**Q: First in the Michigan House and now in the Senate, you have served in leadership, and pretty early on in your tenure in both legislative chambers. Why do you choose to pursue a leadership role, and what do you see as the role of legislative leadership?**

**A:** I've always been interested in trying to step out and lead, and it's really something that I feel like has come pretty naturally to me, ever since I played sports to the different things I've done in my professional career.

I look at leadership as trying to find ways to build coalitions around a solution. ... As a leader, you may have some input in the solution, but it's most important to get ownership from the whole group. Get the thought process of all the members of the group, and really work to understand the thought process of each member.

From there, members of the group then want the solution to happen, and they believe in the solution because they've all had a part.

**Q: What are some of the challenges of managing a legislative caucus?**

**A:** In Michigan, term limits is certainly one of them. This upcoming election will be the last one for a lot of legislators because of term limits, and that leads to some questions about legacy for them.

Many of them have a passion for an issue, something that they maybe have been running on

and working on since they first got elected and that has not yet gotten done. So from their perspective, they are going to want to focus all of their remaining energy on getting the issue resolved before they leave the Legislature.

So because of that, you have challenges in trying to keep some cohesion. You need cohesiveness of the entire group to solve problems in ways that are in the best interests of the whole state of Michigan.

**Q: After eight years now in the Legislature, what is your perspective on how term limits have worked in Michigan, which has a lifetime ban on service after three two-year terms in the House and two four-year terms in the Senate?**

**A:** I think there should be term limits, but they are too severe right now. And that's especially true of cases where you have a House member who doesn't have the chance to move on and become a member of the Senate [because a seat is not open].

That member then only gets three two-year terms. You might just be getting effective as a legislator at the end of your second term, and by the third term, you're looking for some other sources of employment.

I look at it this way: Michigan has about a \$50 billion budget. If you were on the board of a company that was worth \$50 billion and you told your investors that every six years, the board of directors is going to change, how happy are your investors going to be? Could the company even survive?

How well can you manage that \$50 billion with only a few years of experience? In Michigan right now, because of term limits, once you get that experience, you're off to other things.

**Q: One of the big unresolved fiscal issues in Michigan right now, and in states across the country, is finding a way to adequately fund transportation. Will that continue to be a top priority?**

**A:** A lot of what we do will be around finding a sustainable solution to fix our roads. We've neglected this for more than a decade.

One of the first things we have to do is to ensure the citizens of Michigan that the money they're already paying — gas taxes and other things — goes right to the roads. And also give them confidence about the credibility of the construction [projects] and the warranty of the roads.

Then we have to look at exactly how we fund our roads going forward. We're buying fewer and fewer gallons of gas, so that revenue line is going down. Meanwhile, guess what? The price of asphalt is going up because it's made of ... oil.

So our current formula simply can't keep up with our expenses. We'll probably have to look at a way of changing our per-gallon tax to a wholesale tax, so that [revenue for roads] grows with inflation. If we'd have done this 17 years ago [moved to a wholesale tax], which was the last time our state had a gas tax increase, we would have nearly a billion dollars more a year to spend. ★