

Minnesota Sen. Paul Gazelka

Majority leader has made improving partisan climate in St. Paul a priority since his unexpected rise to top leadership post

by Katelyn Tye-Skowronski (ktye@csg.org)

Paul Gazelka had never thought about running for elected office. That changed, however, one day in 2004, when Gazelka — already at the time a respected community and business leader in his central Minnesota district — was approached by then-state Rep. Dale Walz.

“I had never met with him before, but he asked to meet with me,” Gazelka recalls. “He told me that he had a serious medical condition and would not be running for re-election, and asked if I would run in his place.”

Gazelka talked it over with his wife and, although it would be a struggle with five kids at home and an insurance agency to run, decided to say “yes.”

“It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Gazelka won the race for the Minnesota House seat that year, but was defeated when he ran for re-election. He sat out of politics for four years before deciding to try again, this time for the state Senate.

He was sworn in to the upper chamber and found himself in the majority party; it was the first time Republicans had controlled the Senate in 40 years. Later that year, Gazelka was selected by his peers to serve as assistant majority leader. In 2013, when Democrats regained control of the Senate, Gazelka served as assistant majority leader.

Last year, the Republicans won back control of the Minnesota Senate, but then-Republican Leader Sen. David Hann lost his election and the caucus was unexpectedly left without a clear leader.

Gazelka found himself in a familiar position — he had no previous plans to serve as one of the state’s top four legislative leaders, but, as he had done in 2004, decided to take on the new challenge.

Above and beyond his goals for the caucus, he had one other objective after being chosen as Senate majority leader: Change the tone inside the Minnesota Capitol and eliminate what he saw as some of the unnecessary partisan discord.

“If someone is doing something right, we can acknowledge it, no matter what side of the aisle they’re on,” Gazelka says. “If we can build bridges to do what’s best for Minnesota, then we should.”

That’s not to say there isn’t plenty of partisan disagreement in one of the only two Midwestern states where control of the legislature and governor’s office is split between Democrats and Republicans. (Illinois is the other; see map.)

Still, Gazelka points to several major accom-

Bio-sketch of Sen. Paul Gazelka

✓ majority leader since 2017; first elected to Minnesota Senate in 2010 and previously elected to House in 2004, serving one term

✓ longtime owner of insurance agency in central Minnesota town of Baxter

✓ bachelor’s degree in business management from Oral Roberts University

✓ he and his wife, Maralee, have been married 35 years; they have five children and three grandchildren



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plishments last year, from passage of the largest tax relief bill in decades and the largest transportation funding package in nearly 10 years, to measures that implement REAL ID license standards and education reforms.

He credits these legislative successes in large part to a shift in attitudes inside the Capitol.

“It’s incredibly rewarding to know that you’re influencing the state, both in policy and style,” Gazelka says.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Gazelka reflected on his work in the Legislature, his role as leader, and his legislative priorities for 2018. Here are excerpts.

Q: How would you describe your approach to being a legislator and a legislative leader?

A: I’m a follower of Christ, and I believe faith is important in everything we do, including the political realm and how we treat people. ... My leadership style is “servant-leader”: How do you help the people around you be the best that they can be?

Q: When you talk to new lawmakers, what advice do you tend to give them based on your own experience in the Legislature?

A: I tell them that building relationships, whether it’s across the aisle, within your caucus, or with lobbyists, is really important in a

place that is often very partisan. I’ve been able to navigate through the things that are important for my district while being in the minority and majority because I haven’t unnecessarily created enemies. In the end, power shifts back and forth, and you should treat people the way you want to be treated.

Q: Looking back at your time in the Legislature, what is an accomplishment that stands out to you, one that you are particularly proud of?

A: In Minnesota, for more than 20 years, the pensions of those who served in our armed forces were subject to state income taxes. We were one of a shrinking number of states that did that, so more and more career military folks were moving [out of the state]. In 2015, I worked across the aisle with then-Sen. Rod Skoe, who chaired the Taxes Committee. He ended up putting my language (to provide a military pension tax exemption) into the budget bill, based on its importance to me and our working relationship. That was particularly rewarding because it was something the Legislature had worked on for years, and I somehow got it done while being in the minority.

Q: Regarding this year’s legislative session, what do you see as being an important policy challenge to address before you adjourn?

A: Minnesota must adapt to changes in the federal tax law. If we do nothing, the state’s tax preparation will be extremely complicated, but if we conform to the federal changes, it would lead to a tax increase at the state level. It will be complicated to navigate this with a Senate that is split 34-33 [Republicans hold a one-seat advantage] and a pending lawsuit that attempts to flip that majority to the other side of the aisle. So we’ll try to dance through some partisan gamesmanship and, at the same time, do what’s best for Minnesota.

