In his first year in top leadership role, Iowa native talks about COVID-19, the unprecedented challenges it poses to states, and the role for legislatures

by Ilene Grossman (igrossman@csong.org)

Very early, Pat Grassley makes a point of holding a town meeting in each of the towns that make up his rural legislative district in northeast Iowa. He jokingly refers to these events as “the full Grassley.”

Why not the “full Grassley”? He reserves that title for the town hall meetings held by his grandfather Charles, the legendary Iowa political leader and longtime U.S. senator who has been holding these events for 39 straight years in each of Iowa’s 99 counties.

Grandson Pat has a long way to go before reaching the political longevity of Charles, but he already has left his own mark on Iowa politics and policymaking since first running for a seat in the Legislature in 2006 at the age of 23. (Charles also served in the Iowa House, and was only a few years older than Pat when he first elected.)

After serving two terms as chair of the House Appropriations Committee (from 2015 to 2019), Rep. Pat Grassley ascended to the chamber’s top leadership position — in time for the start of the 2020 session and, as it turns out, likely one of the most challenging periods in the history of U.S. state governments.

In an April interview with CSG Midwest, Speaker Grassley talked about the legislative role in addressing the state’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, his views on leadership, and other policy priorities. Here are excerpts.

Q: COVID-19 hit Iowa shortly after you became speaker. What is your perspective on the challenges now facing Iowa and its leaders?

A: Whether you are a new leader or have been at this for a long time, it is very hard to plan for something like what we are enduring right now. We’ve had times when revenue did not meet expectations and we faced low commodity prices. Those kinds of things you can work through. But as our governor says, there is really not a manual for something like this. All of us across the country are learning as we go, not just the specific issues but general preparedness as well. We just have to work through it and look ahead to learn how to handle future emergencies.

Q: How do you view the Legislature’s role in managing the state response?

A: We did several things to ensure that the Legislature was staying engaged and involved. In Iowa, the Legislative Council is mostly up of leadership from all four caucuses in the Legislature. In legislation we passed on the last day of session [before session was suspended], we gave the council more authority. We wanted to avoid the situation that when we needed to take some level of legislative action, we would have to bring the whole Legislature and support staff back together. So, for example, we were able to meet by phone to extend the legislative session. (Editor’s Note: Like many states in the Midwest, Iowa has a part-time legislature that does not meet year-round.)

Another part of the legislation addressed oversight of state funds. Our Economic Emergency Fund has $200 million. The governor has discretion over the first $20 million, and after that, the Legislative Council has to approve additional spending.

I have full confidence in Gov. [Kim] Reynolds. We want the governor to have the ability to react quicker than the wheels of government can sometimes move when the situation is as fluid as it is, but we also want to make sure that the Legislature is still involved in that process.

We are collecting information on the requirements of the federal funds Iowa will receive, so when the Legislature comes back, we are ready to act.

Q: This pandemic is a reminder of the importance of leadership in the states. What are some of the qualities and characteristics that an effective leader should exhibit? How would you describe your legislative leadership style?

A: Gov. Reynolds offers an example of leadership in this time. She keeps open lines of communication, not only with her own party but both parties. She puts herself in front of the media to reach all Iowans. It is important to be open and transparent, and to rely upon experts and data.

As House Appropriations Committee chair (from 2015-2019), I had to first work with the budget subcommittee chairs, and then build consensus within the entire caucus. I have always operated in a way that builds consensus from the ground up, so we spend a lot of time in caucus getting the input that is needed for both the budget and policy.

Q: Looking beyond the impact of the pandemic, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges and opportunities for Iowa over the next 15 to 20 years?

A: One challenge that Iowa will face is population growth, or where population is located. I represent a very rural district, and one of the concerns I see is population loss and shifts in population from rural to urban areas. As the population continues to shift from rural areas, our districts are getting bigger and rural areas will have less power.

As the population continues to shift from rural areas, our districts are getting bigger and rural areas will have less representation. I have some concerns about how long we can go without making sure rural areas have the same economic development and educational opportunities. The Legislature has to be mindful of this.

But we also have tremendous opportunities as an agriculture-based state and being a leader in so many commodities.

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