

Kansas Rep. Don Hineman

House majority floor leader reflects on major tax changes in his state, as well as the lessons he has learned on building consensus

by Laura Kliewer (lkiewer@csg.org)

For Don Hineman, juggling the responsibilities of farmer and legislator is nothing new; in fact, it's a family tradition. The native of western Kansas watched his father, Kalo, do the same thing in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

It was around that same time, too, that Hineman began to gain an interest in state politics himself, eventually leading to 16 years of service as a county commissioner as well as active membership in farmer-based associations.

In 2008, he followed his father's footsteps to Topeka, winning election to the Kansas House and making tax policy an immediate focus. From the start, Hineman says, an overarching philosophy has guided much of his legislative work: "broad-based, balanced, equitable tax policy where everyone carries their share of the tax burden for the good of society."

That interest in fiscal affairs has served Hineman well as a legislative leader, an additional responsibility he took on last year as the Legislature faced thorny questions about how to close budget deficits.

Back home, he turned over farm operations to his son a decade ago after the younger Hineman returned home from school (much like Kalo had done with him).

"[My son] is in charge, and when I am available, he tells me what to do," Hineman says. "I think that is the way it should be — give the younger generation a chance to do it and make their own way."

Meanwhile, in the Legislature, Hineman continues to have a big role in the policies affecting the entire next generation of Kansans. In a recent interview, he reflected on some of the important decisions made over the past few years, as well as his views on legislative leadership.

Q: What do you view as your most important legislative accomplishment?

A: Probably the tax reform package that passed last year, which was made necessary by a persistent imbalance between revenues and expenditures that could no longer be met through budget cuts — at least not responsibly.

So the Legislature collectively concluded that some tax reform was needed to somewhat overturn the tax cut that was passed in 2012. I was one who voted "no" in 2012, and I made the remark at that time that cutting taxes was a very worthwhile objective, but that the particular bill was a case of too much, too fast. *[Editor's note: In 2012, at then-Gov. Sam Brownback's urging, the Legislature cut individual tax rates by 25 percent and repealed the tax on sole proprietorships and other "pass-through" businesses. In 2017, the Legislature voted to repeal most of the tax cuts instituted in 2012.]*

Q: Regarding those changes made in 2017, what do you recall about the process for finding enough votes among legislators for a new tax plan?

A: I was involved in examining a number of different alternatives last year, in concert with

Bio-sketch of Rep. Don Hineman

- ✓ elected Kansas House majority leader in 2017; member of the Kansas House since 2009
- ✓ lives in western Kansas town of Dighton; he and his wife, Betsy, have two children and three grandchildren
- ✓ owner of Don Hineman Farms and general manager of Hineman Ranch LLC
- ✓ 2011 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development



"Let the session come to you. ... Try not to rush an issue, try to build consensus through communication and collaboration with other interest groups or factions."

the tax committee chair and [legislative] leadership. ... It took a long time to come to a consensus.

It reminds me of some advice that one of my legislative mentors shared with me, probably during my very first session. He was fond of saying, "You just have to let the session come to you." You have a difficult problem that is begging for a solution, but you cannot get consensus. In those instances, it just takes time for that consensus to build until you finally have a product that is agreeable enough to get passed.

Q: What are some of your future goals in terms of state policy?

A: The tax bill we passed last year restored some fiscal sanity, some fiscal stability, to state government. It's now our challenge to address the pent-up needs and demands that are in state government without further adjustment of taxes. We did what we did because we had to, and yet we recognize that raising taxes always has negative consequences, and there is no appetite for doing that anytime soon.

So it's a matter of prioritization. There are always more budget requests — more needs and wants within state government — than we can ever adequately fund, and I think that is probably the way state government ought to operate. It's not healthy for state government to be awash in funds. Now that we have restored a base of fiscal stability, it is a matter of deciding the top priorities within government.

Q: The tax agreement came during your first year as majority leader. Can you talk about your path to leadership?

A: The Kansas Republican Party is maybe somewhat atypical compared to most states. There is both a fairly conservative branch of the party, and there is also a fairly centrist/moderate wing of the party. I am in the centrist wing. We sometimes call ourselves "civic Republicans"

because when we talk amongst ourselves, we learn that many of us had a history of civic involvement back home (on city councils, school boards, county commissions) that kind of shaped our view of government and the legitimacy of it.

The election of 2016 created a circumstance where those two wings were fairly equally represented within the House of Representatives. The result was that Speaker [Ron] Ryckman, who represents the conservative wing, was elected speaker, and I was elected majority leader. I have really enjoyed working with Speaker Ryckman. It has been sometimes a challenge to keep our two wings working toward a common goal, but we have made it a priority for both of us to work together to achieve the best possible results.

Q: What has been your biggest challenge as a legislative leader?

A: Probably communication, communication with membership, communication with other members of the leadership team — that's a high responsibility if you want things to work, and that's not always easy to achieve. There are only so many hours in the day. It's easy to get distracted with the issue of the moment and forget to communicate with someone else who needs to know what is going on. Frankly, the advent of texting has been a godsend. There is a lot of texting that goes on, and if we didn't have that, communication would really lack.

Q: How would you describe your style of legislative leadership?

A: Consensus building. It goes back to that advice [from a legislative mentor] of letting the session come to you. Try not to rush an issue, try to build consensus through communication and collaboration with other interest groups or other factions within the Legislature.