Kansas native shares his views on legislative leadership, the importance of communication, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on his home state.

by Laura Kliewer (lkliewer@csg.org)

B. Elaine Finch has always been up for taking on a policy challenge. In fact, it’s one of the parts of the job of state legislator that he likes the most. “That feeling when a bill passes, it gets to the governor’s desk and you know that it is going to make a difference in the lives of people who are affected by it,” he says. He refers to it as striving for the “bests” for Kansans — in the area of juvenile justice, for example, he helped lead an overhaul of the system that has since led to dramatic reductions in incarceration rates, saved money, and allowed for greater investments in re-education programs.

Today, though, Finch and other policy leaders are having to make the best of an especially challenging period in state government. “In Kansas, we had built up $1 billion surplus, and overnight saw it turn into a $300 million deficit,” he says. “No one yet knows how long the recovery will be, whether we’ve seen the bottom of the trough and we’ll bounce back, or whether there is more to come.”

Amid all of this uncertainty, though, Finch is sure of one thing — his desire to be one of the Kansas leaders helping state through the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts.

His interest in government dates back as far as he can remember, and by the time he was 19 years old, Finch was serving on the City Commission in his hometown of Ottawa. A year later, he was the mayor. Finch was elected to the Kansas House in 2013 and is now the chamber’s speaker pro tem. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Rep. Finch discussed legislative leadership, his leadership style, and his perspective on the economic and policy challenges ahead for the state of Kansas. Here are excerpts from that conversation.

Q: From an institutional perspective, what do you view as some of the biggest challenges for the Legislature, its leaders and its members?

A: I think one of the biggest challenges is communication. I see a lot more occasions where people come together and try to find the best way forward for the state, but what gets covered [in the media] are the people on either extreme who are willing to be loud or put out a message that is negative or put out a message that is extreme who are willing to be loud and not put out a positive message. The people on the other side [are] not covered in the media.

Q: How would you describe your leadership style?

A: To be a good leader, you have to be a good listener. You try to take in as much input from as many different people as you can. You try to collaborate. And then I try to take all that input, synthesize it down, and put some kind of proposal together. I try to take those differing inputs from people and say, “OK, where do we agree? What kind of legislation can we move forward with?” So that is probably my leadership style, a mix of being collaborative and also decisive at some point.

Q: To date, what have been the biggest challenges for Kansas and the Legislature in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?

A: The first and biggest challenge is how you keep people safe. How do you practice public health in a way that people will listen and follow and keep them safe? The second big challenge we have in Kansas is the same everywhere: How do you maintain your economic strength? How do you keep people either working or get them timely unemployment benefits? What do you do to ensure that the recovery is as safe and as fast as possible so that people aren’t damaged, and businesses aren’t damaged? And then for us in Kansas, we face another unique challenge, which is that our emergency management statutes were written in 1975. We’ve not had a human pandemic affect Kansas since then. And in fact, there is no specific provision for human pandemics in our law. We have a provision for animal pandemics, but we have no provision for human pandemics. So, how do you deal with a legal framework that is not really built for this type of challenge, and then how do you adjust it so that you can work through this type of environment?

Q: So was a statute adopted this year to address some of those uncertainties with the state’s legal framework?

A: Yes. When we had our special session [this spring] and passed HB 2016, we did make some changes to our Kansas Emergency Management Act. Those are not permanent. I would expect that we are not very different from a lot of citizen legislatures in that we are going to be calling on our interim committees to do a lot of work. We have three committees to do that — one is focused on the Emergency Management Act itself, another on the economic recovery for the state, and the third we have focused on mental health services because these times are trying for everyone, and we want to make sure people have access to the care they need.

You’ve also talked about the pandemic’s immense fiscal impact. Above and beyond that, what do you see as some of the lasting effects?

A: I think the notion of public health and how we do that [in terms of public policy]. I know that many states are trying to figure out what the right balance is — to give public health officers power to keep people safe but not so much power that we lose our way of life or our ability to continue to function, to thrive economically. I think we’re going to face myriad challenges. Despite every good effort to do virtual education, it’s not the same as being there in the classroom. So, what lasting academic impacts will we have when kids return to school, if they can return to school, in the fall? We’re going to be wrestling with the lasting impacts of this pandemic for a long time to come. All of that being said, I do think Kansans, and Midwesterners overall, are some of the most resilient people in the country, and we will find a way to get through it, to make whatever adjustments we need to make and come out of this better and stronger, and able to do the work we need to do.