Michigan Sen. Ken Horn

Lesson learned after years of legislative service: You don’t always need to pass a new law to make a difference in the lives of your constituents

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

One of Michigan Sen. Ken Horn’s most treasured legislative memories will always be an encounter that occurred far away from the state Capitol, on a road he had never been on and with a family he had never met.

It wasn’t a campaign year, but Horn was traveling his eastern Michigan district to visit with constituents.

He met a mother of three who told him how her son recently had needed emergency care for an asthma attack, and how the family had been kicked off the state’s public health insurance program. They didn’t have the money to pay the hospital bill.

Not sure what he could do to help, Horn told the distraught mom that he would do his best.

With a few phone calls to state agencies, Horn and his staff got to the bottom of the problem: A caseworker had made a mistake. The children’s coverage would be reinstated, and the ER visit would be covered.

Five years later, by chance, the father of the family was at Horn’s home to fix a sewer line.

“Are you Ken Horn, the politician guy?” the father said to Horn after seeing some campaign materials on the table. “I just want to tell you that five years ago, you stopped at my house and talked to my wife. I told you my wife, ‘You’ll never hear from that guy again.’ But you helped us, and I’ll never forget that.”

Horn, in turn, will forever remember that father’s words of thanks.

“When he relayed that story to me, it gave me goosebumps,” Horn says. “That’s what it’s all about — just neighbors helping neighbors.”

As Horn sees it, his job as a legislator is to solve problems — sometimes by passing a new law, but more often by being a voice for people inside government. That can mean getting a veteran the care he or she needs, taking calls about cases of child neglect, or helping constituents navigate the state’s bureaucracy.

“Writing laws is maybe 20 percent of what we do in the Legislature, I couldn’t do it without having a really good staff. We have somebody who is an expert in just about every arena, and when somebody calls up, we try to get them an answer within 24 hours.”

A: Because of that legislation, we are now seeing multi-use developments on these brownfields, which were empty and contaminated sites that no one wanted to build on. Some of these developments are so significant that they will literally transform a community. In Detroit, when legislators come here (for the 2020 MLC Annual Meeting in Detroit; see sidebar article), they are going to see a skyscraper, probably near completion, that’s going to be the tallest building between Chicago and New York. It’s being built because of this brownfield law.

Q: You’ve talked about your emphasis on constituent services. Does that go all the way back to when you started in the Legislature?

A: It really began when I was serving at the county level [as a member of the Saginaw County Board]. As we went along, people would come to me with problems. And the longer I was in it, the bigger the Biloxi became. That allowed me to help more and solve more problems. It was a good feeling. In the Legislature, I couldn’t do it without having a really good staff. We have somebody who is an expert in just about every arena, and when somebody calls up, we try to get them an answer within 24 hours.

Q: On the policy side, you were behind legislation passed two years ago that provided some very significant income and sales tax incentives for the redevelopment of brownfields (SB 111-115). What kind of impact do you think that has had?

A: That bill became a seven-day-a-week project, and I think the key was the large coalition we built around it, plus getting the buy-in from other legislators — teaching, getting one-on-one with every single legislator, not leaving anybody behind, and always being willing to take questions. Because every time someone asks a question, it’s an opportunity to smooth out a ripple in the bill. We didn’t fight anybody on it, we just kept pursuing it.

Q: Because of term limits in Michigan, you are now one of the longest-serving members of the Legislature. What advice do you give to newer members about the legislative process?

A: First, you don’t have to write a law for every problem that comes your way, and that goes back to constituent services. Build relationships with department heads and staff people [within state government], along with experts in various arenas. If you find out about a problem, try to fix it first by working with those folks. Another is that no final bill is ever going to be as good as you want it to be, and it’s also never as bad as you think it is.