After a journey from town supervisor to Assembly majority leader, Steineke discusses leadership, legislating and what comes next in the time of COVID-19

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Jim Steineke’s path to legislative leadership began with a favor for a friend.

“In the town I lived in, there was an issue between the volunteer fire department and the town board,” he recalls. “One of my neighbors was a volunteer fireman, and we would talk regularly about how the town board was treating the volunteers, and I was squarely on his side.

“He said at the time, ‘Well, we could really use the help. If you’d run for town board, that would be great.’”

Though new to the small Wisconsin town of Vandenbroek, Steineke ran and won. He served as a town supervisor from 2005 to 2011, including a stint as town chairman from 2007-2011, and as an Outagamie County supervisor for six years.

“When I got to the county level, I realized that most of the problems were at the state level, so it was just a matter of trying to find the spot where I felt like I could do the most good,” he says.

That same idea — finding a spot to “do the most good” — soon led him to seek positions of leadership.

Steineke has served as majority leader since being elected to the position in 2014, and in a recent interview with CSG’s Midwest, he discussed topics such as his leadership style and challenges that lie ahead for Wisconsin and its elected leaders.

Here are excerpts from that conversation.

Q: What have you learned from leading the Assembly and your Republican caucus during the COVID-19 pandemic?

A: I think that in times of crisis like this, it may be harder to lead people. But it’s easier to keep people together because I think people typically want to stand together when you’re facing greater challenges.

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Q: How would you describe your leadership style at this point? How has it evolved?

A: I don’t know that it’s changed a whole lot. I’ve always been the one that always wants to do my best to bring people together to gain consensus surrounding issues … to move the group forward.

I don’t think that has changed a whole lot. Maybe stylistically I do things a little bit different, but my main goal is still to try to get all 63 of our members on the Republican side moving in the same direction with a unified voice.

Q: Has that become more difficult over the years?

A: Any time you’re dealing with 63 people that are typically Type A personalities, you get back to the whole “herding cats” analogy. It is difficult, and it’s probably gotten a little more challenging over the years.

Q: Do you anticipate any further pandemic-related action in the current session? What do you anticipate for the new session in January?

A: As far as coming back into session (in 2021), I think a lot of that is going to be determined by whether or not the U.S. Congress passes something that we have to then come in and pass enabling language to help facilitate.

If Congress does, we’ll likely have to come in before the election; if not, I’m not certain that we will because the governor, through the [federal] CARES Act, has all the resources he needs to help fight the pandemic. We have no control over where those dollars go anymore, so I’m not certain that there’s a dire need for any new legislation at this point.

But we always stand ready and willing to come in if something comes up that we need to address. We can certainly do that.

Q: If you have to reconvene the Assembly, are you considering holding a virtual session? (The Wisconsin Senate did so earlier this year, and the Assembly held a “partial” virtual session.)

A: Anything is possible. It’s hard to predict what next week is going to look like, let alone five or six months from now, but a virtual session is something we would only utilize if we absolutely had to. It’s a clunky way of doing business. It’s very difficult to have good debates on the issues because everyone is participating remotely. It’s not something we would prefer to do unless we absolutely had to.

We’re fortunate that we have that experience behind us now so if we need to utilize it, we can. We’ve been able to learn some things from what could have been done better. I also think we’re hoping we don’t have to go down that road again.

Q: How did you come to be in leadership?

A: My personality is such that I like to be involved in decision-making processes. I think that’s pretty natural when it comes to people who run for office.

So when I saw an opportunity to get involved in leadership, it was just kind of a natural spot for me.

I first ran for assistant majority leader as a sophomore, in my sophomore term, just to give our group of legislators who came in at the same time a voice at the table when it came to some of the decision-making that leadership was contemplating. It was really about giving our group of legislators a voice at that time.

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As far as going into next year, especially in this environment, it’s incredibly difficult to try to forecast what the issues are going to be.

But I’m assuming, based on economic conditions, that our biggest challenge is going to be the state budget next year and trying to figure out how to navigate that, given the fact that we’re assuming that we’re going to have to deal with some revenue shortfalls that are going to present some challenges as far as where to allocate the dollars and what, if any, cuts are going to have to be made.

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When I first came into office, there was a large contingent of freshmen in that class — I think just about less than half of the total caucus was freshmen — and we were pretty unified, especially with some of the issues we were dealing with. It really drove us closer together.

As the years go on, it’s a little bit more difficult because I think it’s just the nature of some people’s personalities to want to stand out from the crowd just a little bit. So it’s a little bit harder to have a unified voice sometimes.

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