

Minnesota Sen. Ann Rest

Lawmaker's intellectual curiosity has taken her in a wide range of policy directions — with many legislative successes along the way

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

When it comes time to decide to run for re-election, Sen. Ann Rest always sits down and asks herself, “What are the pluses? What are the negatives?”

For more than 30 years, the positives have always come out on top.

“There aren't many jobs that when somebody asks, ‘What do you do?’ You can say, ‘Things that interest me,’” Rest says. “I feel very blessed in that way. I have the luxury of pursuing legislative policies that interest me. It's intellectually challenging and satisfying.”

“Sometimes those pursuits end in absolute failure. It simply doesn't work out. But the biggest incentive for me remains being able to try.”

She's had many successes along the way, and in a variety of policy areas — a reflection of her wide range of interests.

To name just a few of those accomplishments, Rest worked for more than a decade on getting the Minnesota Capitol restored, has become a regional leader on Great Lakes protection, and fought for improved accessibility for the disabled in state parks (wheelchair-friendly trails) and state buildings (including new assistive listening technologies at the Capitol).

But she's most known for, and spent the most time on, state tax policy.

Before joining the Legislature, and after working as a high school Latin and English teacher, Rest was a certified public accountant. She would sometimes travel to St. Paul to drop off applications for income tax extensions, and curiosity brought her inside the state Capitol: “I watched the tax committee and then the floor session, and I said to myself, ‘I can do this.’”

She won a Minnesota House seat in 1984 (by less than 60 votes). Since then, Rest has been instrumental in major tax changes: for example, a working-family tax credit, incentives for low-income housing and, most recently, taxation of online sales.

During a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Rest reflected on her time in the Legislature and looked ahead to 2019 and beyond.

Q: In your experience, what are some of the ingredients to making a legislature function, and to getting its members to work well together?

A: I think the most important thing a legislator can do is tell the truth — be direct and honest on what you propose or what you oppose. That leads to the best outcomes. Honesty and directness are certainly what I try to show my colleagues. It's also important to be willing to be part of a team — whether that's members of the same party or a different party. Work hard together on a bill, and then don't feel the need for your name to be first on every bill that you've worked on.

Q: You've been in the Minnesota Legislature since 1985. Experience obviously has many advantages, but is there anything you and other longer-term legislators have to guard against?

A: You have to be willing to take on new ideas, face new challenges, and look for

Bio-sketch of Sen. Ann Rest

- ✓ member of the Minnesota Legislature since 1985, first as a representative and now as a senator
- ✓ previous leadership positions have included House assistant majority leader and Senate president pro tempore
- ✓ past chair of the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus (CSG Midwest provides staff support to this binational, nonpartisan group of legislators)
- ✓ lives in Minneapolis suburb of New Hope, has a daughter and two grandchildren



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solutions that are going to fit for the future — not just tired, old solutions that worked 20 years ago but no longer do. We see that need to change and adapt all the time in the Legislature. For example, on economic development, some property-tax statutes that were great 20 years ago don't work anymore. We can't be clinging to ideas that don't reflect the current reality. You have to be focused on the future, and in areas like transportation, you have to think out 20 years.

Q: So looking ahead to 2019 and beyond, what are some of the big challenges ahead for the Minnesota Legislature?

A: Some of it is maintenance in terms of fiscal stability. Minnesota just re-achieved a triple-A rating from two of the three big bond houses. That is outstanding news. Certainly we've been riding waves of economic prosperity, and that has helped. But we've also put in place some good, strong fiscal policies. We're being responsible with our [budget] surpluses. For example, we're setting aside one-third [of any surpluses] from our November forecast and putting it right into our reserve account; nobody can spend it. We've also had important pension [reform] legislation that passed and raised income taxes on the very wealthy.

Q: One area of big discussion in 2018 was how to adjust Minnesota's tax policies in light of the recent changes at the federal level. Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed legislation earlier this year. Will those tax conformity issues be a high priority in 2019?

A: That will be the biggest challenge for us in the 2019 session, and it won't end there. We'll be thinking about the changes they made [at the federal level], and how that's going to impact

Minnesotans. We'll need to be careful but bold on the decisions we reach.

Q: One other big change is the new authority of all states, including Minnesota, to require remote sellers to collect online sales taxes. You've worked on that issue a long time, inside Minnesota and across state lines via the Streamlined Sales Tax Governing Board. How big is this change going to be?

A: It's going to be a major step forward. It means that our Main Street sellers — the big guys like Target and Best Buy, but also places like a local hardware store — are not subsidizing the remote sellers anymore. That starts for us on October 1. And I guess that's another reason to stick around the Legislature, because sometimes you have to be here for a while to see things you've been working on get done. That's true of the online sales taxation, and certainly true of our restoration at the state Capitol.

Q: In other areas, too, such as being a founding member and past chair of the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus, you have devoted yourself to working across state lines. What value do you find in this?

A: I've found that it really becomes very much about bipartisan collaboration in those settings. There is a true common goal, even if there are different ideas on how to reach it. At times, there can be more of a willingness to pursue those common goals and look for results. So it's another level of satisfaction when sometimes you might get discouraged because the issue in your legislature doesn't seem to be making any progress. You can work on issues and get ideas from folks from Michigan, Ohio or wherever.