

Wisconsin Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz

Five-term legislator, now leader, looks to balance cooperation, contrast as he leads his caucus into 2018 session, election

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

Legislative life has moved quickly for Rep. Gordon Hintz, who was elected to Wisconsin's Assembly in 2006 and chosen as minority leader by his caucus in 2017.

His path to the Legislature took a bit longer, but can be traced back to his childhood in Oshkosh, Wis., and growing up the son of university professors.

"My dad taught public administration and my mom served on the city of Oshkosh Zoning Board of Appeals, so the dinner table was a place where I listened to a lot of stories about the role of government and the minute details of policy and administration, and politics and policy overlapped to some extent," Hintz says.

That led to involvement with student council and a study of political science at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn. Which led to working on Paul Wellstone's 1996 U.S. Senate campaign, then working for former U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl and former U.S. Rep. Jay W. Johnson as a legislative staff assistant in Washington, D.C. Hintz also served as a research assistant for Gov. Tommy Thompson's Commission on State and Local Partnerships for the 21st Century (the 1999-2000 "Kettl Commission") and worked as a management assistant and budget analyst for Long Beach, Calif.

He was also runner-up in the 2003 U.S. Air Guitar National Championships, shredding as "Krye Tuff," and was featured in the documentary "Air Guitar Nation" (making him one of the rare Midwestern legislators with a film credit on IMDB.com).

In a recent interview with *Stateline Midwest*, he reflected on his path to the Legislature and leadership, and on priorities for 2018. Here are excerpts from the interview.

Q: What got you interested in politics? Was there an "a-ha" moment that prompted you to run for office?

A: I think it was more around 2003 where probably, professionally I was looking for a change and I was finding myself increasingly frustrated with government at all levels. At the time, there was a lot of negative attention and concern about foreign policy and the Iraq War; but for me, it was also about my hometown of Oshkosh, and increasingly seeing what I thought was a state government that was not supportive as a partner for local governments. I felt sort of called into action, that I should put myself up and put myself forward. While I hadn't thought about it [at the time], it made sense to do it because of a lot of the things that I had done up to that point.

Q: What prompted your decision to become minority leader?

A: I think in my case, I'm in the middle of my caucus both in terms of my age (43), and in terms of my service (11 years).

There are, I think, 15 people who have been there as long or longer than me, and 20 people who have come in in the last five or six years. Age-wise, I'm about in the middle, so I think given my experience we needed some juice to kind of put us in a position to be successful going forward, I responded to my members

Bio-sketch of Rep. Hintz

- ✓ Elected in 2006; selected as Assembly minority leader in 2017
- ✓ Has a bachelor's degree from Hamline University, and an MPA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison
- ✓ Taught American government at UW-Oshkosh
- ✓ Lives in Oshkosh with his wife, Liz, and their infant daughter, Beatrix



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that we needed to rally around a leader and move it in a new direction.

Q: As both minority leader and representative for your district, what are your priorities for 2018?

A: There are issues that I think we can get done that have bipartisan support: closing what we call the "dark store" tax loophole, where national retailers have been getting their taxes lowered, which shifts the costs to residential property tax payers and small-business owners. There's bipartisan support for that in both houses; both houses have had hearings. I think that's a real priority.

There is a bipartisan bill to decriminalize marijuana, [as criminalization] has human costs and also is driving up costs in our criminal justice system. I think we need to focus on that issue more. Student loan debt is something that Democrats have been talking a lot about in Wisconsin. Gov. [Scott] Walker has mentioned it, but hasn't supported any of our initiatives to allow people to refinance their student loans like people do their houses or cars.

A lot of it is contrast with the policies that exist now — the state is going to give \$3 billion to a foreign company instead of providing even a quarter of that over time to expand rural broadband or to incentivize entrepreneurship and start-ups, an area where Wisconsin is a little bit behind. So, a lot of ideas take time and you have to be able to sort of balance what things you think are public policy you can get done. Certainly [I will] work with Speaker [Robin Vos] to encourage getting things on the calendar that I think we can get done.

I think criminal justice reform is another area where we've been doing the status quo while other states have been more active in reducing recidivism and lowering costs. It's a challenge that Wisconsin is going to have to deal with, the expense numbers and [talk] of potentially having to build another prison.

Q: How do you ensure that your caucus's voice is heard?

A: I'm a big believer that a lot of the nuts and bolts — and a lot of the argument and bringing attention to things — has to be done at the committee level, meaning if you can get a hearing on a bill or a hearing on an issue, you can get attention on it and get invaluable input from people. Hopefully we then get more organic, Wisconsin-based solutions from lawmakers that take their responsibilities seriously. A lot of our role was to highlight issues that weren't being addressed and that weren't seeming to be a priority.

Q: With 2018 being an election year, what is your role as minority leader in treading the line between politicking and legislating?

A: I think it's about having clear communication, and so far, the relationship with the speaker has been good. We have lunch with both Speaker Vos and Majority Leader [Jim] Steineke, and keeping those channels open, both when we engage and when we're trying to get things we think are priorities. I think it's important to express [our thoughts on] some bills which we think we can actually get passed, and that they're priorities; to keep them on the radar and make sure they're moving through the process.

It's always a fine line, but I think the public would be surprised at how functional the relationship is and how members interact personally. We remain friendly, and there's almost a solidarity in what we all have in common, and that we've put ourselves forward to serve. We do many of the same things on a daily basis. I think that's important to maintain. It certainly has been a challenging few years, the last six-seven years in how contentious a lot of politics have become among the public and politicians. I think just reminding ourselves of what we're ultimately there to do and knowing that there are issues that have bipartisan support ... are things to always keep in mind. ★