

Indiana Rep. Matt Lehman

For seven-year veteran of the legislature, new year brings new challenges and opportunities as House majority floor leader

by Ilene Grossman (igrossman@csg.org)

When he meets with newly elected legislators, one of the first items that Rep. Matt Lehman shows them is a picture of the 1899 Indiana House of Representatives.

"I ask them to name me one person in that picture," he says, "which, of course, they can't do."

"I don't want them to think of themselves as too great. This is their time and they should make use of it and be effective, but don't lose sight of the institution, because it will go on long beyond them."

Lehman has used that same perspective to guide his own work in the Indiana House, and it carries even more meaning this year as he takes on a new leadership position — that of majority floor leader.

Not so long ago, Lehman was a new legislator himself. An insurance agent from a rural part of northeast Indiana, he was first elected in 2008 after serving more than a decade in local government, including as president of the Adams County Council.

Lehman soon took on roles that fit naturally with his professional background. He became chair of the House Insurance Committee, for example, and successfully sponsored some of the state's major insurance-related legislation.

But along the way, he also emerged as a leader within the Republican House caucus.

"I never set a goal to become a leader," he says. "I put myself out there as an option when leadership positions became available, and I think I have earned the respect of my peers. I am willing to talk about issues and listen to all perspectives, and I think my colleagues found that I have the temperament and personality to serve in leadership."

As he began his new position as majority floor leader, Lehman discussed his legislative career to date, his thoughts on leadership, and the policy priorities for his home state in the year ahead. Here are excerpts from the CSG Midwest interview.

Q: What do you see as some of the opportunities and challenges of your new leadership post?

A: As majority floor leader, I need to understand my peers better and know what makes them tick and why. Then I can help our caucus move toward getting our core goals done. With the large majority we have [Republicans enjoy supermajorities in the House and the Senate], we may be able to occasionally cut some people loose on a few issues and give them some freedom.

As for challenges, with the majorities that my party has in the legislature, and with a governor of the same party, we are expected to get something done. The public is frustrated with the political world and doesn't see the world as working for them. As a large majority, we also have to make sure that we are governing fairly and for the right reasons.

Q: How would you describe your legislative leadership style?

A: I am a good listener, and I don't let a lot of things get under my skin. I am also willing

Bio-sketch of Rep. Matt Lehman

- ✓ elected majority floor leader in October, previously served as deputy speaker pro tem
- ✓ first elected to Indiana House in 2008
- ✓ served as president of the Adams County Council from 2000 to 2008
- ✓ partner in an insurance agency in rural part of northeast Indiana
- ✓ he and his wife, Joye, have three adult daughters



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to talk about issues and compromise when possible. There are certain core beliefs I won't compromise about, but on the whole, we probably don't talk, listen and compromise as much as we should as legislators.

I try to lead people, but do not try to push them. There is a time to be decisive, to be tough, and as a leader, you have to know when to stop the discussion and move the issue forward.

Q: You've talked about that photo you show to new legislators, a picture of that 1899 Indiana House of Representatives, as a way of emphasizing the importance of the institution over self. In general, how important do you think it is for the more-experienced members to pass on their knowledge and perspective to newly elected legislators?

A: I think a mentoring program is absolutely vital. Our caucus has an official mentoring program, and my mentor was particularly helpful in teaching me about procedural issues — how to navigate your bill, who to talk to and work with to get it passed, why things are done a certain way. I have since had several mentees, and I have passed that information on to them.

I also suggest that new legislators understand who they are and what their role is, and to become an expert in an area important to them. One way to gain respect is to become the resident expert on something. We are a part-time legislature, and in some ways, there is an expectation that people will bring some expertise with them.

Q: Above and beyond many of the insurance-related bills that you sponsored in the legislature, are there other measures that you are most proud of having helped get signed into law?

A: I am particularly proud of my role in re-energizing "Indiana Grown," the state

program that promotes products grown in Indiana. The program was created a number of years ago within the state's Department of Agriculture, but it was more of a "desk drawer" program. Producers paid a small fee and received stickers to put on their products.

We passed legislation in 2014 (HEA 1039) to create and support the Indiana Grown Commission [a formal body to enhance the marketing and promotion of Indiana food and products]. So far, we have used a small amount of money to seed the effort, and I would like to see some additional funding for this effort.

We have seen some real success as the program grows. We are promoting in restaurants and farmers' markets, and several supermarket chains now have sections dedicated to Indiana-grown products.

Q: Looking ahead to this year, what will be some of the big issues that the legislature will be trying to address?

A: We will take on the issue of road funding and how to make infrastructure funding sustainable. We have paid attention to infrastructure, but not to the extent necessary.

In the field of education, we are going to have to look at our state test, the ISTEP, which has been plagued by a number of problems. I think we may be testing too much, and are more likely to get tests that measure a student's test-taking ability rather than what the student has learned. Indiana is also faced with teacher shortages, and we have to look at how to get more people to commit to teaching in our state.

We will also be looking at expanding civil rights protections for the LGBT community and others in our state. ★