



Michigan Rep. Aric Nesbitt

Majority floor leader has been part of big policy changes in his home state, and now wants to help pass new energy plan

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

When he thinks back to when his interest in politics began, Aric Nesbitt first recalls a single page in his seventh-grade history textbook.

On it was information about the U.S. Congress' centuries-long page program for young people. For the son of a sixth-generation farming family from southwest Michigan's Porter Township, the nation's capital seemed a world — or many worlds — away.

But the chance to get an up-and-close look at the nation's legislative process intrigued Nesbitt, and a few years later in high school, he successfully applied to be a congressional page.

Those few months in Washington, D.C., changed his life.

"I had come from a poorer family and a farming background, and my parents had never given to a political campaign," he says. "Being there [on Capitol Hill] really opened my eyes. It made me realize that these members came from varied backgrounds."

It was the first of many experiences that uniquely prepared Nesbitt for a legislative career of his own.

After working his way through college, he went on to serve as a legislative director for two members of the U.S. Congress, ran the campaign of a former Michigan state legislator, and visited state capitols around the country through his work on behalf of Americans for Tax Reform.

Then, in 2010, a state legislative seat opened up in Nesbitt's home district, an area that his family has called home since the early part of the 19th century.

"After traveling internationally and to other states, I felt like I could come back and make a difference at home," he says. "At the time, too, we were coming out of a 'lost decade' in Michigan [due to the poor economy]."

"This really was a once-in-a-generation opportunity for me to make a difference."

As it turns out, too, his party took full control of the governor's office and state Legislature.

"I have not been disappointed in the past four years over what we've been able to do," he says.

He cites a long list of big policy accomplishments and changes: balancing the budget, paying down some of the state's long-term liabilities, reforming Michigan's business tax and adopting "right-to-work" legislation.

Now in his third and final term in the Michigan House (because of the state's term-limits law), Nesbitt is serving as majority floor leader for the Republican caucus. He still has plenty left to get done, and at or

near the top of that list is creating a new long-term energy plan for Michigan.

CSG Midwest recently interviewed Nesbitt about his legislative career, his role in leadership, and his proposed new energy plan for Michigan.

Here are excerpts from the interview.

Q: What did you learn from that previous experience of traveling to and working in different state capitols around the country?

A: It was really eye-opening to see how the states operate and how the legislatures work so differently in order to get things done. You travel to Utah, and you see the early mornings and long nights that it takes to get things done in a 45-day session. We don't have the rushed activity here in Michigan, where we meet throughout the year. And then you see the hybrid approach taken in states like Minnesota.

I don't think any of the approaches are either right or wrong. But it is a reminder about the importance of the idea of states being laboratories of democracy, and they're laboratories of policy as well. You see different ideas being tried across the country, and you grow an appreciation that not everything should be solved at the federal level. Having things decided closer to home can be really beneficial.

Q: Since you took office in 2011, what are some of the things you've learned about what it takes for a party caucus and individual legislators to be successful?

A: First, I think you need honesty and open communication with the entire caucus. You don't want to surprise people; you want to draw people in and work with them.

But the other thing is, Don't be afraid of the next election. Instead, look to the next generation and focus on the generational changes that you want to see. A lot of times, I think there can be a fear of action. If you feel it's the right thing to do, stand up and do it. I saw that in my first year, when we balanced the budget, reformed our tax system and started taxing pension income. That impacted a lot of individuals.

But in my district, even if they don't agree with me, I've found that folks will respect you if you're willing to make decisions, and then be honest and accessible to them.

Q: In addition to your caucus leadership role, you're serving as chair of the House Energy Policy Committee and leading efforts to develop a

Bio-sketch: Rep. Aric Nesbitt

- ✓ first elected to Michigan Legislature in 2010
- ✓ majority floor leader and chair of House Energy Policy Committee
- ✓ former legislative director in U.S. House of Representatives and former staff person in the Michigan Legislature
- ✓ raised on a farm in southwest Michigan
- ✓ a 2012 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development

new long-term energy plan for the state. Why does Michigan need a new approach to energy?

A: Part of the challenge is the federal rules coming down that will likely mean the closure of nine coal plants in Michigan over the next year and a half. With that change, how are we going to build a "Michigan-centric" policy on energy that ensures we have a reliable and affordable supply of energy — and an adaptable energy plan — for the future? That is the challenge.

Q: Part of your solution is for Michigan to return to a "fully regulated" electricity system, as opposed to the system now where some generation can come from alternative electric suppliers, including from out of state. Why do you prefer the "fully regulated" model?

A: I believe that is the best way to ensure reliability over the long-term for the state [by providing the in-state, regulated utilities with the market certainty they need to invest in and build capacity]. In other states that have gone to a deregulated model, the experience hasn't been as successful as people had claimed or had hoped. You see states such as Virginia, Arizona and Montana going back to a fully regulated model.

Q: You also propose keeping the state's renewable portfolio standard at 10 percent. Why not raise it?

A: The idea now is for those industries to stand on their own. We're going to look at the most competitive fuel options for Michigan. What gives us the best value? If those industries are competitive, they'll be part of the mix.

There are many other parts of the plan as well. We want to improve the type of advocacy provided to residents [in disputes with utilities over rates]. We also want to find ways to get more natural gas lines to rural communities. That will secure better economic opportunities in those rural areas, because they will have access to a more secure fuel at a lower price. ★

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