

Wisconsin Rep. Joan Ballweg

Lawmaker reflects on public service, looks forward to welcoming Midwest’s legislators to Milwaukee for next year’s MLC meeting

by Laura Kliewer (lkiewer@csg.org)

As a young woman headed to college, Joan Ballweg thought she had a pretty good idea of her life ahead: Get an education degree, return home to the Milwaukee suburbs where she was raised, and embark on a career in teaching.

But she soon learned what has proven to be a lifelong lesson: Be ready to move in entirely new directions — and embrace the opportunities that come with them.

For Ballweg, that has meant moving from the suburbs to a rural part of Wisconsin, owning her own business rather than pursuing a career in education, and enjoying a successful run as a local and state political leader.

She is now serving her 11th year in the Wisconsin State Assembly and will soon take on a new leadership role, as chair of the nonpartisan, binational *Midwestern Legislative Conference*. (CSG Midwest provides staffing services to the MLC.)

Her legislative service comes after years of being both a business and civic leader in south-central Wisconsin. She first moved to the area after meeting a special someone in college: her future husband, Tom, who was raised in rural Wisconsin.

“We ended up buying the John Deere dealership out in the country,” Ballweg explains, “which we’ve now had for 40 years come December.”

That experience, in turn, led to participation in the local Chamber of Commerce and a growing interest in helping revitalize the area.

“Several of us saw that in order to continue this process [of revitalization], we needed to get involved in local government,” she says.

Business to government leadership

Ballweg won a seat on the Markesan City Council, and four years later, she successfully ran for mayor.

She decided to leave local elected politics in 1997 because of her growing family and business. But a few years later, the Wisconsin Assembly seat opened up. Her husband encouraged her to run.

“I told him no,” Ballweg says, “so then he called a couple of my friends from the City Council. One volunteered to be my campaign manager, and the other volunteered to be my treasurer.

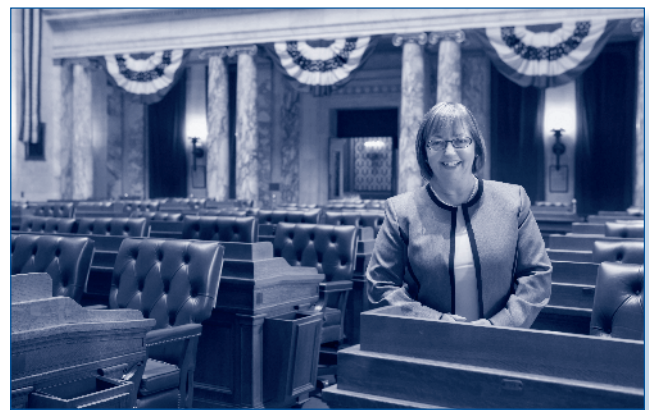
“I then spent about three months making contact with a lot of the folks that I had gotten to know as mayor, going down to the state Capitol to observe committee meetings and the legislature. And after about three months, I decided, ‘Yeah, I’ll give it a try.’”

She ended up in a nine-way Republican primary (the largest primary in state history) and won her 2004 race. Ballweg has been a member of the state Assembly ever since.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Rep. Ballweg reflected on her legislative career to date and looked ahead to her new leadership role as MLC chair.

Bio-sketch of Wisconsin Representative Joan Ballweg

- ✓ first elected to Wisconsin Assembly in 2004 and current co-chair of the Joint Legislative Council and the Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules
- ✓ served as mayor of Markesan, Wis., for six years
- ✓ co-owner of farm equipment business with husband, Tom
- ✓ graduate of *Midwestern Legislative Conference’s (MLC) Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development* and will serve as MLC chair in 2016



Q: How has your experience as a business owner impacted your approach to work in the legislature?

A: As business owners, we’ve always bought into the idea of strategic planning, and then having our employees understand and buy into the decisions that we make in the business — to see that they are real partners. I try to do that with my legislative staff and with the committees that I work on: Get people to see the end goal as positive, not just someone’s idea.

Q: How have your legislative priorities changed and expanded over the years?

A: What I’ve learned over the years is that sometimes different things happen that get you to move in other directions.

My first real commitment had to do with emergency preparedness, because in my first term, folks were very worried about avian influenza. The speaker of the Assembly at the time had a task force looking into what we could do, and I volunteered for that task force. Coming from a rural area, this is something that could affect our economic viability. The person who was chair of the task force suggested that I lead the Legislative Council study committee that following summer, which I did.

I am now, for the third term, co-chair of the Legislative Council, which means I get to pick the topics and the members of the Legislative Council study committees. I have now served as chair or vice chair of one of these study committees every term since I’ve been in. I just love doing that as part of the process.

Lately now, this has turned into an emphasis on early-childhood development. I’ve led a study committee on trying to better understand trauma-informed care and ACEs, or adverse childhood experiences. So I have been working on that, and I have now been appointed to the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board.

Q: How did you become interested in the state policy issues surrounding early-childhood development?

A: I was asked to be on First Lady Tonette Walker’s “Fostering Futures” Policy Advisory Council. By being a member of that council, and going through the process of studying the issue, you better understand what children are going through — from the time they are born, there are actual biological changes that happen when they are subjected to trauma.

So from that, what can we do to try to prevent that trauma or to intervene? And from that, too, how do we try to make Wisconsin as a whole a “trauma informed care” culture — to understand where people are coming from, why they may have some of these problems in school and are unsuccessful, and why we have them incarcerated. Through a better understanding, we can hopefully mitigate some of those problems, so it’s prevention as well as understanding

Q: You are also now heading up a special project in the Wisconsin Assembly known as the “Red Tape Review.” What does that entail?

A: We have a very aggressive plan to have all the standing committees review all the 1,700-and-some chapters of administrative code to either update or expunge chapters that are no longer needed.

Q: What are you looking forward to as the chair of the MLC in 2016?

A: I think an organization such as this is key to helping legislators bring best practices to their state. And I also really love being able to showcase the local area [through the MLC Annual Meeting, which will be held July 17-20 in Milwaukee]. Almost every weekend throughout the summer, we have some type of ethnic festival: Italian Fest, Indian Summer Fest, Polish Fest. Every kind of ethnic group has some type of representation. So Milwaukee is quite a mosaic — not quite a melting pot, but quite a mosaic. ★