



Michigan Rep. John Walsh

After early exposure to life as a legislator, Michigan native now finds himself in middle of transformative period in state's history

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Three days a week, a young John Walsh would travel to and from Lansing, splitting time between learning about public policy in the state Capitol and meeting with fellow constituents in his Detroit-area district.

It was a unique chance at job shadowing: a high school student getting the chance to take a semester off from school and work with his local representative.

Little did Walsh know at the time that he was also job foreshadowing.

But years later, disappointed in the direction of state government in Michigan and determined to help make it better, Walsh ran for the Legislature himself. He won that first race in 2008, and has since emerged as a top leader in the Republican-led House.

And to this day, he still carries lessons with him from that unique high school experience.

"When I look back at it now, I realize how lucky I was to have that opportunity," Walsh says.

"I didn't think at the time that I would end up in elected public office, but it — along with my mom and dad — helped instill in me a desire to give back to the community."

Between high school and his 2008 run, Walsh built up a mix of experiences that prepared him for state office: work in the private sector as a corporate attorney, service in local government as a member of the Livonia City Council, and a leadership role as an executive at his hometown's Schoolcraft College.

His return to Lansing and state politics came during a tumultuous period in Michigan's history. Unprecedented state budget problems and split partisan control of government had led to much acrimony, as well as two government shutdowns.

But one term after Walsh was elected to office, he and fellow Republicans found themselves in full control of the Legislature and governor's office. And Walsh himself was elected speaker pro tempore, a position he still holds.

In a recent CSG Midwest interview, Walsh shared his thoughts on the Legislature's most important accomplishments over the past few years, as well as his remaining legislative priorities during his limited time left in office. (Term limits will force him to leave the House at the end of 2014.)

Q: In only your second term in office, you became House speaker pro tempore. Why did you seek this position, and what do you see as your role in the Republican caucus and Legislature?

A: My personality is more of the one that lends itself to being an adviser: listen to someone's bold idea and think about all of the opportunities and potential adverse consequences. That's been my official and unofficial role within the caucus.

I also have the reputation of being unflappable. I can preside [over the House] without much emotion. I don't get nervous, I don't get angry. ... That personality kind of fits being the presiding officer.

In general, too, what I've done is try to be as

Bio-sketch of Rep. Walsh

- ✓ elected to Michigan House in 2008
- ✓ serves as speaker pro tempore and as chair of Michigan House Judiciary Appropriations Subcommittee
- ✓ selected "rising star" of American government by Aspen Institute
- ✓ ranked as most effective legislator in House in poll done this year by Michigan Information and Research Service
- ✓ practiced corporate law for 15 years and served as executive at local community college
- ✓ former member of Livonia City Council
- ✓ married with two children

respectful as possible of everyone's opinion. I want to listen to all sides, to not be close-minded. I'm a proud Republican, but I'll take an idea from anyone with an idea to help our citizens.

Q: What do you hope are some of the lasting policy accomplishments that have occurred in Michigan during your time in office?

A: One of the things that I hope takes hold is the fact that we committed to getting our budgets done several months in advance. That has allowed us, first and foremost, not to get anywhere near a government shutdown. Secondly, it allows us to tell our schools and universities what their budgets are going to be well before their fiscal year starts on July 1.

Another big accomplishment has been finally getting a solution to our state's underlying budget problems. Over a 10-year period, we had I think eight budget deficits of \$1 billion or more. That was because we would put in place stopgap measures; we would move money around; we would enact some temporary collections of taxes.

In 2011, we made the difficult decisions of removing \$1.5 billion from the budget. It was not pleasant, it was extremely difficult, and it affected the lives of every citizen in this state. But three years later, we have a balanced budget, we have a half-billion dollars in our rainy day fund, we've reduced our long-term unfunded obligations in our retirement system by \$20 billion, and we're paying down our long-term debt.

Q: Was it difficult to get those budgetary changes through the Legislature?

A: What made this time around different was that we had a governor who was absolutely unafraid to look at the way we were doing things,

and make the necessary changes whenever appropriate. At the same time, we had in place a group of legislators who shared many of the same frustrations about how things were being done.

They came to Lansing wanting to make a difference and not worried about their [political] futures. I will be term-limited and will return to my private practice or academia, and I'm fine with that. A lot of my colleagues are like that as well. That wasn't always true in the past.

Q: With that said, then, do you look at term limits as being a positive for Michigan?

A: I don't think they're the great thing that some people had hoped, or the bane that some people alleged. In Michigan, it brought in a different group of people — under circumstances that allowed some critical thought and unique bravery, I think.

That being said, I think slightly longer term limits would be better — maybe 10 or 12 years. For a House member now, we're done after three two-year terms. What I find is that you're building your knowledge base and trust during the first two years. You can then become highly effective in your next two years, even three years. But by the end of our terms, we all face certain realities. We all have mortgages, we all have families to raise. ...

So you're preoccupied with a learning curve at the beginning and then have to plan an exit strategy on the way out.

Q: In your limited time left in office, what do you still want to accomplish?

A: What I really want to focus on is getting more money for higher ed. We, like every other state in the nation, have retreated from traditional levels of support for higher education. For 25 years, we are down, down, down — almost annually. I'd like to see a significant reversal of that trend.

The idea right now, and one that the universities have agreed to, is to make a trade-off: more money for the universities in exchange for more [performance] metrics and national measurables — graduation rates, the types of degree programs being offered, the amount of money being spent on administration, how much money is required of employees for benefits. We want to be able to compare these things across the nation to make sure we are getting the most bang for the buck.

Q: Why is it important to have these metrics and tie increased funding to them?

A: Under our Constitution, the universities are completely autonomous. The Legislature can choose to give them money or not. It really is that stark. So these metrics are an enticement. People won't change their behavior unless there is real money at stake. So what we're trying to do is up the ante: Keep the base [funding] in place, and then add more money tied to the metrics. ★