

# Michigan Sen. Jim Ananich

With friends, family and 100,000 constituents affected by water crisis, Flint native has crucial role in trying to find policy fixes

by Tim Anderson ([tanderson@csg.org](mailto:tanderson@csg.org))

**B**orn in Flint in 1975, Jim Ananich grew up watching the economic decline of his hometown — a place once known for being a hub of car-making but that became an example of the effects of deindustrialization and a downsized domestic auto industry.

“I wanted to help Flint and make an impact on policy,” Ananich recalls about his decision to run for the Legislature, “and what better place to do that than in Lansing?”

But instead of a turnaround, Flint recently has been turned upside down — by an unforeseen, almost unimaginable crisis for an American city. The town’s lead-tainted supply of public drinking water has impacted approximately 100,000 of Ananich’s constituents.

“They’ve been affected to a level that’s almost hard to put in words,” he says. “It’s basically touched every aspect of people’s lives — damage to their health, stress levels, their school systems, their property values.

“We want to get to a point where we bring back some normalcy first and then try to come out of this better — if there is a possible way of doing that.”

One thing is for sure: He wants to be in the middle of finding and helping implement the policy solutions.

“It’s very personal to me,” Ananich says, noting that his family — including his recently adopted 1-year-old son — relies on the Flint water supply. “That helps with the credibility among the people in Flint, and I think I have credibility among most people in Lansing as well.”

Building that bridge between Flint and Lansing is critical, because while trust in government may be broken among many people in Ananich’s hometown, they also need the state’s help to recover.

And some positive steps are being taken.

Old underground pipes are being replaced with state assistance, while a mix of public funds and private-foundation support has led to the opening of new early-education centers and the start of other initiatives to address the potential long-term effects of lead exposure.

“There are some remedies that we know work, like early education, nutrition and health screenings,” Ananich says. “You’re never going to hear me say ‘I’m happy’ with the situation, but we’re at least headed in the right direction in some of those areas.”

He came to the Michigan Legislature in 2010, after previously having served on the Flint City Council (including as its president) as well as working as a teacher and as a congressional staff person.

Ananich moved from the state House to the Senate in 2013 and, soon thereafter, was chosen by his fellow Democrats as minority leader — during the same year the water crisis hit Flint.

In a recent CSG Midwest interview, Ananich talked about dealing with crisis, working across

## Bio-sketch of Michigan Sen. Jim Ananich

✓ Has served as Michigan Senate minority leader since 2014

✓ First elected to state Senate in 2013 in a special election; previously served in House

✓ Once served on Flint City Council, including as president

✓ Former teacher for local schools and education coordinator for Priority Children

✓ Lives in Flint with his wife, Andrea, and son Jacob



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the aisle to help his hometown, and leading what he calls a “strong, close” party caucus in the Senate. Here are excerpts from the interview.

**Q:** As a state legislator from Flint, what do you view as your role in addressing the city’s drinking water crisis?

**A:** I’m an advocate, whether that means being a spokesman for the community, keeping this in the news, helping open doors [for new public or private funding], or making sure the things that need to be fixed get funded.

I also know the local institutions that are strong and the ones that don’t have the capacity. That helps in making decisions on where state dollars or resources would be best used. People’s health and lives matter too much, and the taxpayers matter too. We shouldn’t be wasting people’s money; the state’s resources need to be used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

**Q:** In your capacity as Senate Democratic minority leader, how important has it been for you to work with Republican leaders and legislators?

**A:** I came to Lansing in the minority as a member of the House and now the Senate, so it’s something that I’ve always had to do. But it’s also just my nature — focus on getting things done, don’t take anything personally. And especially when it comes to Flint, it has to be about getting results, not about playing politics.

I had already worked on developing strong relationships in both the House and the Senate, as well as the executive branch. Through my work, too, I hope I’ve developed a reputation of someone who can be trusted and who is focused on getting results. I stand up for what I believe in and people know where

I stand, but I make a point of not taking cheap shots or doing things in a disrespectful way.

**Q:** You are leading a small caucus, currently only 10 Democratic senators. How has it tried to have a voice in the state Capitol?

**A:** We’re united and strong, and we have the benefit of some subject-matter experts in our caucus who are well-respected in the legislative committees that they are on. They’re in a position to make changes to bills because their voices are respected.

When you’re in the minority, it’s easy to always say no. You can always find a justification for it. But leadership is trying to find a way to get to yes, so long as you don’t compromise your principles. So there probably isn’t a Republican in the Senate that I haven’t spent time with, whether it’s through something like a [legislative] sportsmen’s caucus or after work at dinners. I respect them, and try to keep in mind that everyone has been elected and is serving in Lansing for a reason. Their constituents thought enough of them to send them to Lansing. I try to listen and get to know them.

**Q:** What are some of the next steps that you hope to work on with your legislative colleagues in addressing the Flint water crisis?

**A:** The framework for helping Flint is there now. We just need to make sure it gets implemented, but then there’s other things to make sure this doesn’t happen again in Michigan and to make sure that people are protected — whether it’s strengthening our lead standards, making sure there is better notification [about threats to public health], stronger oversight, and new [water] testing protocols.” ★