

Minnesota Sen. David Hann

Minority leader came to office wanting to return more decisions to local governments, and 14 years later, that commitment remains

by Katelyn Tye (ktye@csg.org)

David Hann has been interested in politics for most of his life, but it was a concern for his children's education that pushed him to run for elected office. He felt the state school system should assist families, parents and an elected school board in educating children, but that communities weren't being given enough control over the curriculum taught in their schools.

After serving three terms on his district's school board, the father of four realized the changes he wanted to make were really under the purview of the Minnesota Legislature.

Hann ran for the state Senate in 2002 and, after winning, set his sights on finding ways to return local authority to school districts.

His next victory came a year later, when the Legislature voted to repeal the state's curriculum standards, called the "Profile of Learning." Hann says the standards were driven by the federal government, and were an example of the top-down power structure that provoked him to run for elected office in the first place.

"We've had a tendency over the years to centralize government decision-making so that now we make decisions in Washington [D.C.] and in state capitols that shouldn't be made there," he says.

"We need to understand that our form of government relies on citizens governing themselves, meaning you don't make decisions at a higher level that can be made at a lower level."

With the lone exceptions of 2011 and 2012, Democrats have controlled the Minnesota Senate since Hann was first elected. He was elected minority leader by fellow members of the Republican caucus in 2014, a role he pursued with one goal in mind — build a majority that will put Minnesota on track for stronger economic growth.

"I've learned that to really accomplish anything of significance [in the Legislature], you have to have a majority," Hann says. "There have been some reforms that I think have been helpful, but there's still more to be done."

With just six seats between his caucus and majority control of the Minnesota Senate, Hann is feeling optimistic. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, the former businessman reflected on his legislative career to date and what he hopes to accomplish if his party reclaims the majority in November.

Q: Aside from repealing the Profile of Learning, what other policy accomplishments are you most proud of?

A: When [Senate Republicans] came into the majority a few years ago, the Health and Human Services budget was expected to grow by about 17 percent, because Minnesota has built-in inflationary growth in most of its budgets. In the state Legislature, we start with a spending projection, make some assumptions about inflation, and just multiply those numbers out. Every year you come back, and because of those inflationary models, your spending has grown, even though there's been no affirmative

Bio-sketch of Sen. David Hann

- ✓ elected minority leader in 2014 (first elected to Minnesota Senate in 2002)
- ✓ veteran of Vietnam War; received the Army Commendation Medal for his military service
- ✓ born and raised in Minneapolis
- ✓ served eight years on the Eden Prairie School Board before joining the Legislature
- ✓ he and his wife, Anne, have four adult children



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decision to do that. This is something that anybody who has worked on a budget in a private-sector organization knows you typically don't do.

We tried to roll back some of those assumptions so that it would require the Legislature going forward to ask, "Are these the things we want to do? What are they going to cost?"

We also tried to implement some innovative methods of dealing with the health care system. This was just prior to the enactment of the Affordable Care Act, so we were trying to develop policies that would respond to concerns we had with affordability, portability, accessibility. We ended up with a modified, voucher-style approach that changed the growth curve from 17 percent to about 4.

Q: How does your experience working in the private sector compare to a career in the Legislature?

A: It's very different. People think government should be like a business and it really isn't. You have, in our case, 67 state senators and 134 state representatives, all of whom are accountable to the people who elect them. You can't command your colleagues to do certain things, so there's a lot of effort to persuade, reason and debate among ourselves to try and reach agreement.

It's an unusual structure, but one that was designed by some very wise people when our country was formed. I think it serves the interests of the public well by providing not only the opportunity for people's voices to be heard, but also for there to be debate about the wisdom of those things. It can be very frustrating because of the inefficiency of this process, but I do think it's the best way to do it.

Q: How would you like to see the state's governance structure change?

A: I think there needs to be some restraint on the part of elected officials because

the temptation is to legislate on things that really could be taken care of by lower-level jurisdictions. There's no question that one of the biggest problems we have in our country is that the federal government is doing things it was never intended to do.

Part of it is respecting the authority of other levels of government and not usurping their decision-making. I think that would be a big step in the right direction in trying to restore some accountability in what we do. I think the interests of the public are better served if there is willingness on the part of elected officials to respect those boundaries and not expand the scope of what we're called to do.

Q: If the Senate Republicans gain a majority, what reforms would you like to work on first?

A: We want to try to do whatever we can to restore the ability of the state to make decisions on health care. We've seen double-digit growth on insurance premiums, and [they] are driving insurers out of the state — all being driven by federal policy. We are trying to mitigate that.

We also have a very burdensome tax and regulatory structure that we need to modify. We are one of the least business-friendly states in the country, and we need to become more competitive with our neighboring states.

Q: As a leader in your caucus, what advice do you give to newly elected legislators?

A: They need to take as much time as they can to listen to what their constituents say and need.

Also, I encourage people to become very well-versed in at least one policy area. If they find something to develop an expertise in, they can be of help to other caucus members when we take on legislation related to that particular issue. ★