

## Kansas Senator Jeff King

Since joining the Legislature in 2007, native of southeast Kansas has emerged as leader on tax, pension and economic growth policies

by Laura Kliewer ([lkiewer@csg.org](mailto:lkiewer@csg.org))

As a college student, Kansas native Jeff King spent close to a decade away from home, living on the East Coast and in England while successfully earning multiple degrees.

First came a bachelor's degree in international relations and economics from Brown University, then a master's in agricultural economics from Cambridge University, and finally a law degree from Yale.

"More degrees than I should probably care to admit," he now jokes.

But throughout his travels, King always knew he would return to southeast Kansas, which his family has called home for six generations.

"The ability to bring two children into the world in that place, and to give something back to a community that gave so much to me, that's an opportunity few people have," he says.

Upon his return home, King worked for the Kansas attorney general, served as a law clerk in the U.S. Court of Appeals, and ultimately entered private practice in his hometown of Independence. In 2005, he defended the state (and its Legislature) in a historic school-finance case before the Kansas Supreme Court.

One year later, he was running for a seat in the Kansas House.

King had always wanted to pursue some kind of role in public service, but wasn't sure how — until legislators at the time passed a tax plan that he says led to double-digit increases in local property taxes.

"The main part of my original legislative campaign was to provide real tax remedy," he recalls. "Not just for some, but broad, across-the-board tax relief that could lower the rates for all taxpayers."

Nearly 10 years later, King now serves as vice president of the Senate and has emerged as a leading voice on state and local economic growth policies. He also is the co-founder of Project 17, a 17-county coalition in southeast Kansas working to develop a regional economic identity and plan.

"If my hometown doesn't get a new business, but the town next door does, that helps all of us," King says about Project 17's vision.

That is not always an easy outlook for community leaders to embrace, though, after decades of competing with each other for jobs and industry. But King, the son of two local public school teachers, views part of his job as a legislator to be an educator about Kansas' new economic realities.

During a recent interview with CSG Midwest, King reflected on his legislative career, leadership role and priorities for the 2016 session. Here are excerpts.

**Q: What have you enjoyed most about serving in the Legislature, and what do you view as some of your most important accomplishments?**

**A:** I've really enjoyed being able to learn about the people I serve, and to help them achieve their dreams and help protect them from their fears.

Personally, I am most proud of the work we did to help save our state's pension system. We had a pension system that was well on the road to insolvency, and now we have one that is well on

### Bio-sketch of Sen. Jeff King

- ✓ first elected to Kansas House in 2006, appointed to Senate in 2010 and elected in 2012
- ✓ has been vice president of the Senate since 2013
- ✓ serves as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee
- ✓ member of the 2011 class of The Council of State Governments Toll Fellowship program



"Active listening is the most important skill a leader has."

the road to recovery. One-tenth of the population of our state depends on the health of that pension system. My parents, my brother and my sister depend on the health of that pension system. And being able to sit at the dinner table at my family reunion and tell my family members and my constituents that their pensions are safe and protected, that speaks of work well done.

On the other end, I serve as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and one of my main responsibilities in that position is to protect those who are least able to protect themselves. We passed a bill lifting the statute of limitation for rape and sexual abuse, so that victims don't have to fear that their perpetrators will go scot free if they can hide long enough. The clock should never run out on convicting someone of that heinous crime.

**Q: How would you describe your leadership style as vice president of the Senate?**

**A:** I think of the old adage that my grandfather taught me — that the Lord gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Use your ears twice as much. Active listening is the most important skill a leader has. Couple that with the ability to allow others to have the credit, but to freely admit our own mistakes. I have certainly been far from perfect in working as one of the leaders of the Kansas Senate, and I hope and I have striven to admit my imperfections and accept the advice of my colleagues.

**Q: How have your family background, education and work experiences contributed to your perspective as a state legislator and leader?**

**A:** I'm a big believer in state government. Our founding fathers did a whole lot right, and I think one of the best gifts they gave us was a federal system of government that preserved great power to the states. Why do I think that is so important? The diversity of backgrounds, thoughts, experiences and beliefs that show up in a state legislature are, if not unprecedented, then extremely rare.

I hope I bring a set of experiences that are

uncommon in a state legislature, and many of my colleagues do the same. And I hope they learn half as much from me as I learn from them.

Part of my job is to teach the rest of my colleagues the experience of my district, my background and how that can inform state policy. We have the ability to do that in an intimate, personal setting, and I think that provides the ability for great policy to be the result.

**Q: What are some of the big issues and policy priorities for you in the legislative year ahead?**

**A:** We've had very tight budgets for a number of years. We undertook the most aggressive tax-cutting policy in the nation over the last five years. Much of that policy was very good, and I am very supportive of it. I think we made a mistake in exempting all of our LLCs, S-corporations and sole proprietorships from any state income tax. That's been a hole in our tax code that has cost us about \$300 million a year, and we are seeing that we can't afford it. So we want to continue the discussion about having the lowest tax rate in the region — and we should and we are going to do that — but to do it in a fair and equitable manner.

Secondly, on a personal level, I had the joy of watching my children be born in my hometown. But the hospital they were born in, the hospital I was born in, was closed two weeks ago. We are now the largest community in the state without a hospital. We can acknowledge that Obamacare has let down rural America and, at the same time, realize that saying "no" to every new alternative is not an option.

I am advocating for an Indiana model of Medicaid expansion in Kansas — emphasize private insurance, emphasize work and emphasize personal contributions, but make sure that we are covering the people that deserve it and that need it.

And third, over the next year and a half, we are writing a new school finance formula. There is a court case on school finance pending as well (not one that I am involved with this time except for being in the Legislature). The outcome of that case will have enormous implications. ★