Michigan Sen. Arlan Meekhof

Majority floor leader reflects on first eight years in Legislature, and looks ahead to final four under state’s strict term-limits law

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Eights years ago, it was decision time for Arlan Meekhof: Who should get his vote to be his next state representative? The seat was open because of Michigan’s term limits law, and plenty of candidates planned to be on the Republican ballot.”After looking at some of the choices,” Meekhof recalls, “I thought. It might as well be me.”

Public service wasn’t new to Meekhof. He was a township supervisor, had served as board president for the private school that his children attended, and had long been an active member of his church.

And Meekhof also remembered a lesson taught to him long ago by his high school government teacher. If you don’t get involved, the teacher said, you get the government you deserve.

Meekhof didn’t necessarily like the state government that he — and the rest of his district — was getting, and he wanted to be a part of changing it.

“Michigan was struggling financially, and you could see the things that needed to be done,” he says. “You could see the budgetary constraints that needed to be put in place, but nobody at the higher level was willing to do it. We needed to get on a financial path that was sustainable, and that meant making hard decisions.”

Meekhof decided to run, surviving an eight-person primary during that first race in 2006 for state representative. Since then, he has become part of a Republican leadership team that now has full control of state government in Michigan. He currently serves as majority floor leader in the state Senate.

The turning-point election was 2010, and for the last four years, the GOP-led Legislature and Gov. Rick Snyder have moved ahead with a series of big changes — major budget cuts in 2011, elimination of the Michigan Business Tax, changes in the income tax, implementation of so-called “right to work” legislation (sponsored by Meekhof), and, most recently, phase-out of the so-called “right to work” legislation (sponsored by Meekhof), and, most recently, phase-out of the Michigan state Senate.

Q: What are some of the challenges of managing a legislative caucus?
A: In Michigan, term limits is certainly one of them. This upcoming election will be the last one for a lot of legislators because of term limits, and that leads to some questions about legacy for them.

Many of them have a passion for an issue, something that they may have been running on and working on since they first got elected and that has not yet gotten done. So from their perspective, they are going to want to focus all of their remaining energy on getting the issue resolved before they leave the Legislature.

So because of that, you have challenges in trying to keep some cohesion. You need cohesiveness of the entire group to solve problems in ways that are in the best interests of the whole state of Michigan.

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That member then only gets three two-year terms. You might just be getting effective as a legislator at the end of your second term, and by the third term, you’re looking for some other sources of employment.

Q: After eight years now in the Legislature, what is your perspective on how term limits have worked in Michigan, which has a lifetime ban on service after two three-year terms in the House and two four-year terms in the Senate?
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