

Ohio Sen. Larry Obhof

Over span of five years, ‘policy wonk’ has gone from political newcomer to helping lead the state Senate as its majority whip

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

Long before he joined the Ohio Senate, Larry Obhof enjoyed thinking, talking and writing about public policy. Over the past five years, he has made the most of the chance to shape and make it.

The self-described “policy wonk” first joined the legislature in 2011, and it didn’t take him long to move from political newcomer to legislative leader.

Obhof had never served in elected office before joining the Senate, but two years later, his legislative colleagues made him majority whip — a position that he still holds today and that ideally fits his wide range of interests.

“I enjoy working on a lot of different issues,” Obhof says.

His interest in politics dates back at least to his teenage years, when he first started volunteering for campaigns and immersing himself in public policy, economics and the law.

A practicing attorney, his most notable legal work came as part of the team of lawyers who argued against implementation of the Affordable Care Act, with the case ultimately ending up before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court upheld the act.

But in the Ohio legislature, Obhof and his fellow Republicans have been enjoying electoral victories — and, as a result, full control of state government since 2011. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, he reflected on legislative accomplishments over that time, as well as some policy priorities for the year ahead.

Here are excerpts from the interview.

Q: Your state was hit particularly hard by the national recession. How is it doing now?

A: Ohio is doing better than it was five years ago when I joined the Senate. Ohio has cut income taxes over the past five years by about \$5 billion — I think that is about the highest of any of the states in the country during that span. We’ve also really tried to change the way we do regulations, so we do cost-benefit analyses and performance audits of state agencies. Those things, combined, have helped turn the state around economically.

When I was sworn in, the unemployment rate in Ohio was about 9.3 percent; now it’s 4.4 percent. ...

But there is still a lot more work to do. The unemployment numbers have fallen significantly, but I always wonder how many of those people who are working are under-employed, who don’t necessarily have the job that they want, or who aren’t necessarily earning the kind of salary that they need to support their family.

Q: Are there other policy changes you would like made to spur economic growth?

A: Our income tax system is fairly complex; we have nine different brackets. I’d like to lower the number of brackets overall while also providing tax relief to average Ohioans.

Bio-sketch of Sen. Larry Obhof

- ✓ has served as Senate majority whip since 2013
- ✓ first appointed to Senate seat in January 2011; elected to first full term in November 2012
- ✓ vice chair of the Criminal Justice Committee
- ✓ practicing attorney focusing on appellate litigation
- ✓ has taught courses on legislation and civil procedure at Case Western Reserve University School of Law
- ✓ lives in northern Ohio town of Medina with wife, Nicole, and their three daughters



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Q: What do you view as some of your most significant legislative accomplishments to date?

A: The things that I’m most proud of have been the efforts to protect women and children from sexual predators. In our state, we had a significant backlog of DNA kits from rapes and other sexual assaults. In some cases, kits had been sitting around upward of 10 years.

We passed legislation to require local law enforcement to get those tested in a timely fashion, and also to require local law enforcement to work together with the state to get rid of the backlog and make sure all of the old kits were getting tested and run against the DNA database.

In the last five years, the attorney general has tested over 9,000 of those old kits, and we get a positive hit rate on more than one out of three.

As a complement to that legislation, we increased the statute of limitations for bringing charges of rape, so if you have been able to evade justice for the past 20 years, you don’t get to escape with just the passage of time. That’s been pretty important in bringing justice for some of the victims of these crimes.

Q: Looking ahead to this year, what will be some of the big issues that the legislature will be trying to address?

A: On the criminal justice side, the thing that is probably most important is combating the opioid epidemic. We’ve had a significant problem in Ohio, and I suspect it’s similar throughout the country with different opioids, particularly heroin and fentanyl.

We’ve taken some steps to try to prevent overdoses by allowing first-responders to carry Narcan and then, in follow-up legislation, to allow family members and friends of someone who is at risk of an overdose to also carry Narcan so you

can prevent overdoses and save some lives. Here in my local community, we’ve had dozens of lives saved [as a result of the new laws].

It’s a complex problem, and we have to attack it from all angles. [We] need to educate kids at the front end and let them know that not only are drugs bad in general, but heroin in particular is something that cannot be dabbled in. It’s incredibly addictive and people just need to stay away from it.

But for people who have unfortunately fallen into that trap, we need to focus as much as possible to get the treatment they need to break the cycle of addiction and get their lives back together. And we want to step up law enforcement efforts and increase seizures and prevent that stuff from being on the street in the first place.

Q: How do you view your leadership role as majority whip in the Ohio Senate?

A: I try to take an active role in legislation in a lot of different areas, even pretty early on, to see what bills are pending in their committees, which ones they want to move, and what some of the potential pitfalls might be with some bills that are pending. And then I sit down and actually try to work those things out. I enjoy doing it.

I also think if you’re in leadership, you have to care about the politics side of things outside — help out your colleagues, go to their districts, and meet with leaders and constituencies throughout the state. You make sure that everybody in Ohio, no matter where you are or which county you are visiting, understand what’s going on in Columbus and understand what we are trying to do to turn the state around.

There is a lot of expertise out there on a lot of different issues, and I think the best thing you can do is keep an open ear and listen to people around the state and try to take good advice when you hear it. ★