



Kansas Speaker Ray Merrick

Veteran lawmaker brings his business experience to Legislature; currently helping lead state through major tax reforms

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

When Kansas Speaker Ray Merrick looks back on his start in the Legislature, he thinks of a decision that seemed insignificant at the time — but one that ended up putting him on a path to leadership.

Merrick joined the Legislature in 2000, and he began commuting each day to and from his district — well over an hour away. But he found the travel to be exhausting.

So Merrick accepted an invitation to share a house in Topeka with three veteran legislators. And what began as a practical decision grew into a key influence on his career.

“It was probably one of the best things I ever did,” he recalls, “because we talked about issues every night.”

“We talked about legislation that was coming up. I had a kind of education every night on the legislative process.”

He also took to heart one piece of advice from a house mate: Get into leadership, and do it early.

After just three years in the House, Merrick was elected assistant majority leader. He went on to serve as speaker pro tem and as majority leader before moving to the Senate for two years.

Merrick returned to the House this year and became speaker.

His leadership style includes a literal “open door policy.” He opens up his office at 7 a.m. for coffee — and each morning he’s joined by members of both the House and Senate who come by to talk.

As someone who was mentored by several experienced legislators himself, Merrick also takes care to motivate newer legislators and get them up to speed with the legislative process.

In fact, his philosophy on awarding committee chairmanships is a little unusual; it’s based on experience with the issues, not tenure.

“I don’t care how long you have been in the Legislature — if you are qualified for the job, you are going to get it,” he says.

Kansas revamps its tax system

During this past legislative session, Merrick used his 12 years of experience to lead colleagues through some tough issues, including a debate about the fundamental structure of the state’s tax system.

Legislators voted, for example, to make permanent most of a 1-cent sales-tax increase passed three years ago. Over the past two years, lawmakers have also made changes to the income-tax structure — consolidating three brackets into two and significantly decreasing rates.

Debate is expected to continue about eliminating the state income tax entirely. And Merrick has other goals as he looks ahead to the 2014 legislative session.

“You can only make state government skinny to a point,” he says, “but I think there is still some room to make state government in Kansas smaller and less intrusive.”

Earlier this year, CSG Midwest spoke to

Bio-sketch: Speaker Merrick

- ✓ served in Kansas House and Senate since 2000
- ✓ currently serving as speaker of the House
- ✓ graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD)
- ✓ co-chair of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Midwest-Canada Relations Committee
- ✓ represents a district on east end of the state, near Kansas City
- ✓ graduate of Washburn University and U.S. Marine Corps veteran
- ✓ father of two children with wife, Phyllis

Merrick about his insights on leadership and his proudest legislative accomplishments. Here are some excerpts from the interview.

Q: During your business career, you went to work for a food company nearing bankruptcy and turned it around. How did it shape your views and legislative work?

A: You learn some valuable lessons when you have 385 employees and you’re trying to make payroll. You pay attention to details, you count the money [carefully], and you rely on the people around you. It has to be a team effort where everyone is pulling the wagon in the same direction. If you don’t have that, then at the brink of bankruptcy, you don’t have a lot of chance to recover. I had 385 people that were dependent on me to make this thing work, and we were successful. So I do not accept it when people say, “We can’t do that, it’s impossible.” That’s not me.

I am very fiscally conservative, and that was my [strategy] when I was pulling that company back together. You have to pay attention to the finances, because in that situation, you don’t really have a second chance. [In the same way,] the taxpayers’ money is very important. We need to learn to do more with less, and that is just the philosophy I have. It’s always easy to say, “We need more money.” But are you being efficient with the money you have now? Having more money is not going to make you more efficient.

Q: When you look back on your career so far, what is the bill that stands out as your proudest accomplishment?

A: The piece of legislation I am proudest of is getting an initial \$5 million in the budget, in an amendment on the House floor — against the

speaker when I was majority leader. I am a fiscal conservative, so there was a gasp in the room that I wanted to put \$5 million in the budget. But it was to put seed money into the University of Kansas Medical Center to start their national cancer program. ...

Now [the university] has got a National Cancer Institute designation and is well on its way to great things because I stood up. At the time it was gutsy — and very important, because it helped KU.

Q: What have you learned about being the top leader in the House and your role in passing legislation?

A: I like to remind people that I have one vote. I am just like everyone else in the Legislature. I wish I had the power to just wave a wand and make things happen, but I have to vote like everybody else does. I may have more authority on when that vote is taken, or if a bill comes up — but I still have just one vote.

In state government, you can’t do anything by yourself. You’ve got to convince other people to come along and that your idea is a good idea. If you have the attitude, “I can do this on my own, I can guarantee you’re not going to be successful.

Q: You are a proponent of strengthening property rights and passed legislation to protect those rights in the state’s rural areas. Can you talk about the issue and the bill?

A: I live in a rural area that is being gobbled up by the city. People out here had no voice in what was going on; the city just came out and said, “We’re going to take 15 square miles, and aren’t we good for you?”

Well, there are a lot of my constituents out here who didn’t like it. There is a more incremental way to do it. Why do you need such a big slice all at the same time when you can’t handle the infrastructure you have now? I got a bill passed saying that for any more annexations, the city has to hold a vote of the people. That is probably No. 2 on the list of the things I am proud of.

I strongly believe in the people’s right to their property and to have some say-so, not just the government saying it’s got the answers to everything.

Q: As a fiscal conservative, what are your views on the recent income-tax debate in Kansas?

A: Smaller government and lower taxes: That is where Kansas is trying to go right now, including reducing the income tax. There are some policy things that need to make that goal happen. If you are going to eliminate one revenue source, you need to come up with something else. [We could] go to more of a consumption-based tax model. ... The sales tax is regressive, I understand that, but at least everybody is paying it. There is some fairness factor in that.

We are seeing growth in businesses coming here, so I think [reducing the income tax] is the right model and the right direction to be going. ★