

# Michigan Sen. Goeff Hansen

For assistant majority leader, working on the ‘little things’ for his district and constituents remains a big part of the job

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

For Michigan Sen. Goeff Hansen, legislative accomplishment has never been measured by public accolades or media attention.

Instead, when reflecting on his career in public service, he rattles off a list of the “little things” that he hopes have made a difference.

“They don’t get top billing,” Hansen says, “but they give you the feeling that you got something done to makes people’s lives better, and to make your district a better place to live.”

From the start, that has driven Sen. Hansen’s unexpected legislative career.

The northern Michigan native had never planned to get involved in politics or elective office. But he was well known locally for his community involvement — as an assistant fire chief, emergency medical technician and first-responder — and for his family’s successful grocery store. So when a vacancy on a village council in Manistee County needed to be filled, Hansen was asked to serve.

He agreed, and it didn’t take long for him to develop a passion for the work.

“As the new guy on the council, I was given jobs to do,” Hansen recalls. “So I ended up getting our boat launch rebuilt. And it kind of hooked me, because you could see the good things you can do for people.”

He’s had the same focus as a state legislator, first as a representative and now as a senator.

For example, when he discovered problems with how Michigan’s nursing homes were being regulated, Hansen vowed to fight for reform.

“It took many months of us butting our heads against the wall, but we finally got it done,” Hansen says.

“It didn’t make front-page news, but I considered it a huge accomplishment to get that legislation passed. Because what it did is say regulators just can’t go in and report when something is wrong; they have to go in and help make things better. The state needs to be the advocates of residents living in those facilities.”

In recent years, too, Hansen has been instrumental in helping open a charter school in his home district for high school dropouts and homeless young people, as well as launching a pilot initiative that gives adult learners seeking their GED the chance to take a 18-week course in welding and machining. And he’s helped secure funding for cleaning up Muskegon Lake, long listed as a Great Lakes “Area of Concern.”

All the while, too, Hansen has been part of a broader transformation in Michigan government. When he entered the House, partisan control of the state’s legislative and executive branches was split. But since 2011, Hansen and fellow Republicans have had legislative majorities and held the governor’s office.

His time in the Legislature also has been marked by personal joys and tragedy for him and his wife, Tamara — the arrival of four grandchildren, but the heartbreaking loss of their oldest son to cancer.

One group of friends that Hansen leaned on to get through this loss are his legislative colleagues, from both sides of the aisle.

“Unbelievably supportive,” he says about how fellow legislators responded after his son’s death four

## Bio-sketch of Michigan Sen. Goeff Hansen

- ✓ Member of state Senate since 2011; currently serves as assistant majority leader
- ✓ Previously a member of the Michigan House
- ✓ Former township supervisor
- ✓ Has served as an assistant fire chief, emergency medical technician and first-responder
- ✓ Was co-owner and partner of Hansen Foods in Hart, Mich.



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years ago. “Just to think about the number of people who came to the funeral, or the card that I got from the Democratic Caucus. It will always mean a lot.”

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Hansen reflected on his legislative career and his priorities for the next two years, before he must leave the Senate due to term limits. Here are excerpts.

**Q: What do you view as some of the big changes in Michigan and its state government since you joined the Legislature?**

**A:** We’ve looked at ways to make the state stronger. How do we make it more business-friendly and get people back to work? How do we lower costs and make government more efficient? We’ve had some important successes. Right now, we have all kinds of businesses that are looking for people to work. That’s been a big change for us.

And I think you can point to things we did in the Legislature, like getting rid of the personal property tax on equipment and going away from the Michigan Business Tax. That tax had a book of rules and regulations about an inch-and-a-half thick, and we replaced it with a much simpler corporate income tax. It said if you’re a corporation, you pay 6 percent. If you’re not a corporation, you pay a personal income tax. So we went from a tax structure and regulations that were really difficult to understand to pretty much one page.

**Q: What do you see as some of the big challenges or legislative priorities that lie ahead in Michigan?**

**A:** I think we really need to look more closely at addressing our water infrastructure. We fell so far behind on upkeep because of the [economic and fiscal] problems of the 2000s and before. So we got

to the point where you put something underground, and it was out of sight, out of mind.

Flint was the canary in the coal mine. There are a lot of cities that have these issues, along with rural areas where we need to upgrade the infrastructure. Because when we do replace, we’re finding things like wooden water pipes. It’s time to take a good, hard look at what’s underground across the state.

**Q: The Michigan Legislature has an interesting dynamic because of the state’s term-limits law, which institutes a lifetime ban after six years in the House and eight years in the Senate. As a result, many state senators have previous experience in the lower chamber. Does that help provide some continuity?**

**A:** It makes a big difference. I believe all but three of the members [of the Senate] previously served in the House, usually for at least four years before they came here. Having a little experience under your belt helps quite a bit. It keeps things more calm.

**Q: Has it helped build bipartisan relations as well, the fact that many of you — Democrats and Republicans — have served together for a longer time?**

**A:** There are quite a number of us Republicans in the Senate who remember being in the minority. So with that — “there but for the grace of God go I” — you need to make sure you’re not creating a bad atmosphere. Plus, Democratic members have been elected the same as we have, and they represent the same number of people. There are certain things we are not going to agree on, but one thing to remember: Probably 80-percent plus of the votes that we take are unanimous. ★