

Indiana Sen. Tim Lanane

Longtime legislator discusses dual role of serving in minority: Articulate policy differences, but find ways of working across aisle

by Ilene Grossman (igrossman@csg.org)

About to enter his 20th year in the Indiana Senate, Tim Lanane does not know what it is like to serve in a majority party caucus. But over the years, he has learned that being outnumbered doesn't necessarily mean being counted out of the legislative process.

"There are opportunities to get things done," he says.

Over the years, his legislative accomplishments have included being part of new laws to protect homeowners from predatory lending practices (the Indiana Homeowner Protection Act) and to bring a casino to a horse-racing track in his home district.

Most recently, based on the idea of a constituent, Lanane helped get legislation passed in 2016 to expand the availability of concussion training. Under the new law, Indiana's elementary schools will get the training. (It already was provided for high school coaches.)

"It was really gratifying to get that passed," Lanane says.

But there are admittedly challenges and frustrations for legislators serving in the super-minority (Republicans hold a 41-9 edge in the Indiana Senate). And that goes, too, for being the Senate Democrats' top leader — a position that Lanane has held since 2012. He was recently re-elected to serve in that same position for the coming legislative year.

"We work with the majority where we can," he says, "but where there is a need to speak up and point out differences on policy or opinion, we have a duty to do that and do it in an effective way."

Lanane's personal interest and involvement in politics dates back decades. In college, he volunteered for the George McGovern presidential campaign and then went to law school "with the idea of not just practicing law, but seeing where it led politically."

He later joined a law firm where his local state senator (and, as it turns out, his predecessor in the state Senate) was practicing.

"I began watching what he was doing ... and my interest developed from there," Lanane says.

It eventually led to his appointment to the state Senate in 1997; ever since then, he has been serving his northern Indiana district, which includes the city of Muncie and most of neighboring Anderson.

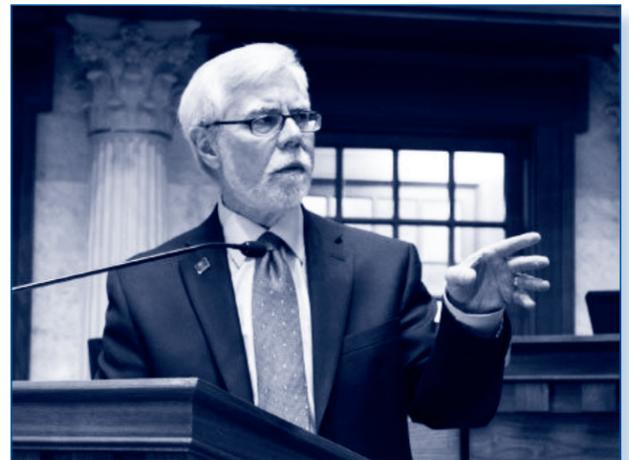
In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Lanane talked about his leadership style, as well as his caucus's legislative priorities and strategies. Here are excerpts.

Q: What are your legislative priorities for the year ahead?

A: This is a budget year [Indiana has a biennial budget], so all of this goes back to our funding priorities. One of the issues that our caucus has been pushing for a number of years is early-childhood education. That again will be one of our key priorities. Indiana has begun this effort, but in my opinion, we have been a bit timid

Bio-sketch of Indiana Sen. Tim Lanane

- ✓ First chosen as Senate minority leader in 2012; recently re-elected to same position
- ✓ Member of Indiana Senate since 1997; served as assistant Democratic leader from 2008-2012
- ✓ Practicing attorney
- ✓ Lives in town of Anderson; he and wife, Cynthia, have three children and one grandchild



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about comprehensively getting these programs implemented throughout the state.

We also are going to continue to pursue civil rights protections for LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] people. We believe that Indiana should be amending its Civil Rights Act to include these protections, and we will be pushing for that.

And we want to help working families and believe we should be raising the minimum wage, while looking at other ways to help as well — whether it is raising the Earned Income Tax Credit or increasing child care tax credits. Lastly, we will continue to be strong advocates for public education, and we want to look at ways to assist struggling local governments. We put the crimps on them with property tax caps. Is there some other way that we can make sure they can provide the necessary local services?

Q: What do you see as the role of the minority caucus, and how do you work with the majority to accomplish your caucus priorities?

A: Our leadership has tried to emphasize the importance of the job of the ranking minority member on a committee. We encourage members of our caucus to work constructively with the committee chair. That goes a long way toward getting things done in the committee. That is true for all members of a committee, not just a ranking minority member. That is a key way we can have input into the legislative process and improve the quality of bills.

It's one thing to be nine out of 50 [total members in the Senate], but in the committees, the numbers are not quite so stacked. You have an opportunity to have input in the process.

Q: How would you describe your legislative leadership style for working inside and outside your Democratic caucus?

A: I want to make sure that everyone in our caucus is heard, that they are respected for what they say, and that the debate is open and honest. My caucus also expects that, when necessary, we will go to the majority leadership and voice our opinions. I want to make our points in a logical way and don't want to base my arguments only on emotion or passion, because that doesn't usually work.

I find that the people on the other side of the aisle are, for the most part, fairly reasonable. They may disagree with you, but they will listen to you if you have a point to make, and that is how I try to approach it. My belief is the first approach should be, "Can't we work this out in this office and see if we can come to an understanding?" When we feel like we are being totally ignored or the public needs to know, that is different. And when it comes time to discuss the actual issues, then debate has to be out in the open.

Q: You've said that one important role for your caucus is to be an effective voice of opposition. What is your approach to accomplishing this?

A: We need to make sure there is a vetting and a public awareness of the issues. That is the most important challenge we have. Of course, how you do that effectively is the issue that faces a minority. ... I know there are some leaders who revel more in sound bites, but that is not really my way. Yes, I want to effectively communicate, but in a way that makes sense and does not just use inflammatory rhetoric. ★