



PROFILE: KANSAS SENATOR, AND MLC VICE CHAIR, CAROLYN MCGINN

From the family farm to a place in leadership: Longtime legislator values chance to ‘deepen my world’ by bridging rural-urban divide, cultivating new relationships

by Laura Kliewer (lkiewer@csg.org)

Carolyn McGinn already knew the agriculture side of the rural-urban district that she represents. Along with her husband, Mark, she owns a family farm and raised two sons there.

But the longtime legislator also has made it a point to get to know people in the largely Black and Hispanic communities that she represents in Wichita, the largest city in her home state of Kansas.

She built relationships of trust. Constituents became friends.

And that experience has deeply impacted McGinn, inside and outside her work in the Legislature.

“Individually, I think that is one of the biggest blessings I ever received in my life,” she says. “I have a lot of good friends in those communities, and I’ve learned a great deal from them.”

That relationship-building began decades ago, first as a county commissioner and then as a state senator. She was first elected to the Legislature in 2004, and along with being a longtime leader on fiscal issues, she has made many rural-urban issues a top priority — landowner rights, water quality and quantity, and land development.

“Urban folks and rural folks want the same thing,” she says. “We want clean water and we want to sustain our land for future generations.”

McGinn is now vice chair of The Council of State Governments’ Midwestern Legislative Conference, the nonpartisan association of legislators from 11 U.S. states and four Canadian provinces. Next year, as MLC chair, she will welcome those legislators to her home state and community. The MLC Annual Meeting will be held July 10-13 in Wichita.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. McGinn reflected on her legislative career to date and looked ahead to her year as chair of the MLC. Here are excerpts.

Q What issues initially led you to run for the Legislature?

A I wanted local government to be respected. I noticed as a county commissioner that we would take legislation and issues we had vetted at the local level to Topeka. You get to Topeka, and legislators had either a distrust of local government or they thought they had a better idea. I am someone who believes that local control is best, as it is closest to the people.

And it didn’t take me long to understand that investing in mental health prevention and assistance pays back a lot more than if you don’t. Once you help the individual, you



BIO-SKETCH: KANSAS SEN. CAROLYN MCGINN

- ✓ first elected to Kansas Senate in 2004
- ✓ serves as chair of Senate Committee on Local Government
- ✓ served as a Sedgwick County commissioner from 1998 to 2004
- ✓ is a 2010 graduate of The Council of State Governments’ Henry Toll Fellowship Program
- ✓ elected by fellow legislators from region to serve as chair of CSG’s Midwestern Legislative Conference in 2022
- ✓ lives on her family farm outside the city of Sedgwick; she and her husband, Mark, have two adult sons

“People seem to label you as one thing or another. What they don’t seem to realize, because of the lack of conversation, is you have more things in common than you realize.”

also help the whole family. You save your community money because [individuals] are not just revolving through the emergency room or your local county jail.

Those two issues, along with water quality and quantity, are something I keep an eye on.

Q How has serving in the Legislature changed or helped you?

A Starting as a farm wife, to having a family, to winning a county seat that no one thought was possible, I met so many great people in the community — whether they were in the neighborhood or community leaders.

It expanded my world. Then I went to being a state senator, and I met so many great people that taught me many things over the years across the state. I also love being involved in CSG and the MLC because of the people I meet outside the state who have similar issues to Kansas who are trying to solve problems for their constituents and states.

My world has deepened and grown through the opportunities I have had to meet people of diverse backgrounds.

Q What has been your most important or satisfying legislative accomplishment?

A The year COVID hit, I was trusted [by legislative leadership] to

chair the Transportation Task Force and to develop our 10-year plan. ... We came back for one final week before the Legislature was going to adjourn because of COVID. The bill was overwhelmingly approved and passed.

It was an area outside of my normal expertise, but the seed was planted when I was a county commissioner. I had seen how important infrastructure was. I got to watch a transportation plan when I was a county commissioner and early on in my Senate career.

But this time I was given the opportunity to actually carry the bill. We are right now seeing the results all over the state. It is something I can appreciate — the safety that it provides all our citizens and people who travel through our state.

We put more into public transportation and pedestrian/biking. We also believe there is a great excitement with Amtrak. [Editor’s Note: Amtrak plans to extend service from Oklahoma City to Wichita and Newton, Kan.]

Every two years, projects will be re-assessed. In the past, it was more a 10-year scale plan: projects were announced and that was it.

Q What do you view as some of today’s important challenges to overcome as a legislator?

A We have made ourselves into identified groups, rather than individuals who represent different parts of the state and have similar goals. There is a lack of trust and interpersonal

conversation, working toward solutions for all. People seem to label you as one thing or another. What they don’t seem to realize, because of the lack of conversation, is you have more things in common than you realize. Sometimes we have to put those differences aside and work on those things that we have in common.

Q How has your involvement with CSG and the MLC impacted your legislative service?

A It certainly helped me grow as an individual and as a public servant. Having an opportunity to network with people from other states, and not only that — Canada — helps me look at issues differently. You can’t learn it all. And sometimes there are things you may have learned 10 or 20 years ago that you get reminded of. Having that conversation and that crew of people to network with I think helps all legislative leaders in our states.

Q As incoming MLC Chair, what are you looking forward to doing in 2022?

A Hosting all my MLC colleagues in Wichita, the largest city in Kansas. The MLC Annual Meeting hasn’t been held there in 50 years. I’m ready to show off Wichita, and not just the things that make the city beautiful, but what makes our economy tick. We’re the “air capital of the world.” ... When Air Force One has a problem, they bring it to Wichita to fix it.