



PROFILE: MICHIGAN HOUSE DEMOCRATIC LEADER DONNA LASINSKI

‘Chance for transformational change’: Third-term lawmaker believes the Legislature has a unique opportunity in the months ahead to leave a lasting legacy

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

In her desk drawer at the Michigan Capitol, Donna Lasinski keeps a list of policy goals, a regular reminder for her of the legacy she wants to leave behind as a legislator and as one of the state’s top political leaders.

The list isn’t long, but neither is the time she has left to accomplish those objectives in term-limited Michigan.

“We have the chance to create transformational change for our state, and that will set us up for success for the next generation,” says Lasinski, now in her third, and final, term as a state representative.

The reasons for her optimism: One, federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act are giving the state once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to invest for the future; and two, she has seen firsthand the ability of her and other leaders from the two parties to work together.

For instance, that list in Lasinski’s desk includes closing achievement gaps and working to get every student ready for success from his or her first day in kindergarten. To that end, Michigan is making an unprecedented commitment to early learning, with enough funding now to offer high-quality preschool to all 4-year-olds from the state’s middle- and lower-income families.

She’s hopeful for similar successes in closing the state’s digital divides, shoring up local water infrastructure systems, and providing direct supports to small-business owners.

“Those are all fundamental, underlying issues for our state to address,” she says, “and we have a big bipartisan opportunity to address them.”

‘FIGURING A PATH FORWARD’

Lasinski has always thrived on trying to solve problems. “I love looking at complicated issues and figuring a path forward,” she says.

It’s what she did professionally as a business management consultant, as well as how and why she first got involved in her three children’s local schools. The problem then was addressing learning loss, and her solution was development of a high-quality academic summer program for families.

Hatched at her family’s kitchen table, the program grew and grew, turned into a successful company, and now operates in many states across the country.

Meanwhile, Lasinski emerged as a local and state leader on education policy.

“I had already run and won a seat for the school board [in Ann Arbor], and I thought, OK, there is a chance to make an even bigger difference at the state level,” she says.



BIO-SKETCH: MICHIGAN HOUSE DEMOCRATIC LEADER DONNA LASINSKI

- ✓ first elected to House in 2016; chosen top caucus leader in 2020
- ✓ is founder of ThinkStretch, LLC, a successful K-12 education company that operates in 38 states, emphasizing summer learning and retention
- ✓ has been longtime leader on education policy in her home district, including serving as treasurer of Ann Arbor School Board
- ✓ has bachelor’s degree in business administration from University of Michigan and MBA from Northwestern University
- ✓ is proud parent of three children with husband, Mike

“My advice is to pick one thing that inspires you, that you think your community and our state needs. Then become an expert on it. That is the quickest path to making meaningful change.”

She first won election in 2016. Four years later, Lasinski was chosen by her Democratic caucus to serve as leader. It marked the first time in Michigan history that the top post in a legislative caucus had been handed to one female legislator (Lasinski) from another (Christine Greig, the former Democratic leader who was term-limited out of office).

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Lasinski shared her views on leadership, what she has learned about serving in a term-limited legislature and her policy goals. Here are excerpts.

Q You are part of the first-ever female-majority Democratic caucus in Michigan history. What is the significance of that legislative “first”?

A Twenty-seven of our 52 members are women, and 25 of our members identify as Black or Brown. Those are historic numbers in terms of diversity. It’s important to me to honor that diversity and value it.

For example, it was imperative to me that the leadership team of our caucus — the group that I get together with around the table every week when we have session — looks like our caucus. We want to have people in decision-making positions that reflect the concerns, needs and diversity of the people of Michigan.

And that diversity of having members from all across the state helps me learn. So on high-speed internet, for instance, based on my district’s experience, I understood the problem as mostly being a lack of wires, the lack of an infrastructure to hook up to.

Now, through deep conversations with my colleagues, I understand it’s about much more than wires. It’s also about affordability and digital literacy.

Q You are a party leader in a state where powers are shared — Republicans have majorities in the legislative chambers, but the governor is a Democrat. How has that shared-power dynamic worked?

A There are places and spaces where leaders on the other side of the aisle and I will likely never come together. We have sincere value differences in a few key areas.

However, there is no uniform Republican caucus, and there is no uniform Democratic caucus. And the vast majority of bills that we consider are not particularly partisan. I would say 90 percent of the bills that pass through the House have bipartisan support.

So most of the work that we do is bipartisan. I’m glad to have a relationship with the speaker of the House [Jason Wentworth] that is open. We have regular conversations to find the places and spaces where we can work together. And then we’re open with each other about the places that aren’t going to work.

Q Your state is unique in terms of the stringency of its term limits, specifically the lifetime caps on legislative service. What advice do you give to legislators

about making the most of their limited time in office?

A For almost all of the legislators who come to Lansing, they got here because something inspired them to run. Maybe it was an education issue in their district. Or an environmental concern. Or social justice issues. My advice is to pick one thing that inspires you, that you think your community or our state needs. Then become an expert on it. That is the quickest path to making meaningful change.

Q On that theme, what inspired you to run for office and informs your policy goals as a leader and legislator?

A I want all Michiganders to be able to achieve their potential. That often starts in our education system, because when you start behind, you rarely end up ahead. But it goes to other issues such as investing in our water infrastructure and high-speed internet [access and affordability]. It’s also why I see it as so important to provide direct support to our small businesses. I’m a small-business owner, and I’ve also seen how much small businesses contribute to every community — by being good neighbors and by being folks who are deeply invested in their communities.

Those are the people and areas [in which] we need to invest in order for Michigan to be a place where our children and grandchildren can grow and thrive and want to live.