



PROFILE: MICHIGAN SENATE MAJORITY FLOOR LEADER DAN LAUWERS

‘The other four days’: Lauwers has found some of the most rewarding legislative work to be outside the Capitol — at home with constituents

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Glance at Michigan’s legislative calendar, and the job may appear to be more half-time than full-time for the state’s 148 representatives and senators.

You’re in Lansing for session and committee hearings on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, then back home most of the rest of the time.

That’s what Dan Lauwers saw and thought when he first ran for a legislative seat a decade ago.

“What I missed was the other four days a week,” he says. “That’s all of your local work [in the district] trying to solve problems.”

As it turns out, the “off days” have in many ways been the busiest, most gratifying part of the job for Lauwers.

“If you have good staff, and if you’re willing and able to put the time in, you’re really able to help a lot of people,” he says.

“I can’t believe how many times, almost every time when I’m out in public, someone will walk up to me and say, ‘I just want to thank you for doing this or doing that.’”

“Those are the real rewards of the job.”

That’s not to say Lauwers doesn’t get satisfaction from work inside the Capitol.

A few years ago, when Michigan farmers were facing staggering, weather-related losses, he became the point person on creation of a new low-interest disaster-loan program.

When a repeat-offense drugged driver took the lives of young people in his home district, Lauwers pushed for bills that strengthened penalties, closed loopholes and improved the processing of toxicology reports.

He refers to measures like those as the “95 percent” — the vast majority of bills that are not strictly partisan, can gain widespread support, and can make a positive difference in people’s lives.

Pick your battles. Manage your time wisely. Commit to solving the everyday problems of your constituents.

Those are some of the lessons that he has gleaned from 10 years of legislative service, including stints as majority leader in the House and now as majority floor leader in the Senate.

UNEXPECTED TURN TO POLITICS

Lauwers came to politics unexpectedly.

When Bill Schuette, then a member of the U.S. Congress, was looking to fill a staff position, he said in exasperation to a friend, “I wish I could just hire someone who understands Michigan agriculture.”

That friend knew just the person: Lauwers, a nearby farmer.



BIO-SKETCH: MICHIGAN SEN. DAN LAUWERS

- ✓ is Senate majority floor leader; previously served as House majority floor leader
- ✓ first elected to the Michigan Legislature in 2012 (House from 2013 to 2018, and Senate beginning in 2019)
- ✓ founded Eastern Michigan Grain in 1993 and led the company through 2013
- ✓ he and his wife, Kellie, are the parents of three children: Jon, Lauren and Nick
- ✓ graduate of Michigan State University

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Lauwers got the job and moved to Washington, D.C., knowing little about politics but caring deeply about agriculture — a policy area that he ended up working on in the nation’s capital during the farm credit crisis of the 1980s.

He eventually returned to eastern Michigan, raising three children with his wife, Kellie, while also starting his own grain-elevator business.

When he was elected to the Legislature, Lauwers had to hand off day-to-day operations of that business, once he discovered that the job of legislator was much more than “half-time” work.

In an interview with CSG Midwest, he shared his perspective on legislating and leadership. Here are excerpts.

Q Looking back at your initial decision to run for the Legislature, why did you do it and what were your goals?

A At the time I decided to do it, at every gathering with friends and family, we heard over and over again: “My kids are graduating and moving to California” or “My kids are moving to Chicago.”

Well, my kids were just hitting the high school years, and I knew they were going to be in that same boat soon. And I was really hoping that if we provided enough opportunity, maybe they would choose to remain close to home.

Because at that time, everywhere I went on the campaign trail, the question was, “Where can I find a job?” Today, everywhere I go, the question is, “Where can I find an employee?”

Q Has state policy made a difference in terms of providing more opportunities?

A I think we’ve made the state a more inviting place, a little more customer-oriented, if you will. In my first term, we deleted more laws from the books than we put on. I think that has made a difference, enabling more people to consider Michigan as being a good place to live and work.

Q In the area of agriculture, in particular, how much emphasis do you place on being a voice for Michigan farmers?

A It’s extremely important. On the production side, on the farming side, we’re down to 1 or 2 percent of the [total] population. So it’s not understood and not familiar to a lot of people. And all legislation is really about education.

So on agriculture, it’s important to share that firsthand knowledge you have so people can make a sound decision. That’s been my experience in the Legislature.

We’ve had good support for pretty much every agricultural issue that has cropped up in the almost 10 years that I’ve been serving.

Q Michigan has legislative term limits, so you’re now one of the more tenured members. What lessons on legislating have you learned over the past decade that you try to pass on to newer members?

A I’ve noticed that a number of people come to the Legislature almost swinging, ready to fight. Something got them fired up and they become elected. But with that, I think it’s important to observe how others are getting things done, and to know your legislature. Have some humility, then apply your own skills to be effective.

It’s interesting, too, that one thing I’ve observed about good legislators in general, and most of the people in leadership, is that they have experienced a fair amount of loss in their lives. They’ve lost a job or a business or a spouse or a brother. They’ve survived loss, and that seems to focus their energy on what’s important.

So they’re better able to make those decisions about what’s worth fighting for and what isn’t.

Q You’ve served in leadership in both chambers. What are some of the leadership attributes that you believe are important in the legislative arena?

A It’s some of the same skills that I’ve used in my business, or really we all use in raising family.

Make your expectations clear, make sure they’re understood, be consistent and hold people accountable. I think everyone appreciates that understanding of what’s expected of them, and seeing that everyone’s treated equally and held accountable.

Then, if there’s a problem, you just find out what expectation they’re not understanding. Get it cleared up and move on.