

PROFILE: ILLINOIS SENATE MINORITY LEADER JOHN CURRAN



New leader explains why he puts a premium on collaboration, inside and outside his caucus, and how a bipartisan approach to legislative committees could help

by Mitch Arvidson (marvidson@csg.org)

When he came to office in 2017, John Curran needed to hit the ground running.

Not only had he been appointed to replace a retiring, well-regarded, history-making legislator (Christine Radogno, the first-ever woman to lead a party caucus in the Illinois legislature), parts of his district in suburban Chicago were soon dealing with an environmental health emergency.

A local company (one that sterilized medical equipment and other products) was releasing ethylene oxide into the air “at very alarming levels,” Curran says.

The challenge for the district’s new legislator: how to deal with a toxic air situation that was alarming constituents and threatening their health.

Curran says he looks back on the experience now as an enduring lesson on the value of working with officials across all levels of government, and as a reminder of the difference you can make as a state lawmaker.

“Getting that facility closed [in 2019], and seeing the area beginning to heal from that, was probably my greatest accomplishment to be a part of,” he says.

This year, Curran is taking on perhaps his greatest legislative challenge yet: minority leader of the Senate Republicans.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, he discussed his approach to leadership, how his background in government in Illinois’ two most populous counties brought him to Springfield, and his legislative priorities for this year and beyond.

Q In addition to the work you did in addressing the air toxin problem in your district, what would you point to as your most valued accomplishments since joining the General Assembly?

A I am very proud of leading our caucus in negotiating and bringing about more-stringent ethics laws in the state. We were able to get some good upgrades and a strengthening of our ethical standards here [for legislators].

I also would point to receiving the 2021 Defender of the Innocent Award from the Illinois Innocence Project for my work on reforming the juvenile interrogation standards in the state in order to reduce the risk of false confessions from minors.

Q You came to Springfield steeped in experience and service at the county level

BIO-SKETCH: ILLINOIS SEN. JOHN CURRAN

- ✓ unanimously chosen by his caucus in November 2022 to be Illinois Senate minority leader
- ✓ first appointed to the Illinois Senate in 2017
- ✓ is an attorney with a private law firm; previously worked for 19 years as an assistant state’s attorney for Cook County
- ✓ served nine years on the DuPage County Board, including as vice chair
- ✓ lives in suburban Chicago town of Downers Grove with his wife, Sue; four daughters; and a niece

— an assistant state’s attorney in Cook County and vice chair of the DuPage County Board, for example. How have those experiences informed your work?

A All politics is local, and local policy was very important to me.

In my 19 years in the Cook County state’s attorney’s office, I handled a lot of litigating that involved public policy that wasn’t quite right. At the same time, I was on the DuPage County Board, which is a county of nearly one million people; it’s bigger than five states. It was an opportunity to really work on policy affecting lives in a daily [way]. I think that gave me a great background for the work I do now. ...

I came in with a specific focus on public safety, public health and economic development. Those were issues very important to me and my prior work, and I was looking to continue those at the state level.

Q Did that emphasis on public safety come from specific experiences you had working in the state’s attorney’s office?

A Yes, I was a prosecutor for six years and then I worked in the civil division of the state’s attorney’s office for 13 years. That involved representing the sheriff and the difficulties with the jail system at the time, bringing the Cook County juvenile detention center into constitutional compliance.

For a period of time, the detention center was run by a federal monitor. [Cook County] actually had to cede control of the facility as we worked with the federal monitor to come into compliance with the constitutional standards.

It gave me a lens on public safety from a couple of different vantage points.

Q You’re now in your seventh year in the General Assembly, but first as a top legislative leader. From your experience, what are the most important characteristics of an effective legislative leader?

A To me, the most important characteristic is the ability to listen and comprehend the problems and challenges that legislators from around the state and different districts are working on.

It’s really that ability to listen, as well, that helps focus our caucus to have a more collaborative work environment and process, and really having an organized plan to implement good, sound public policy. I think those are the characteristics that I most focus on trying to bring to this job.

Q You have a geographically diverse caucus, one with members who likely have many different priorities. How do you go about developing cohesion among the caucus?

A Over-communicating is how I approach developing that cohesion. We certainly have diverse districts, and that can create a lot of challenges, so the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively amongst all the caucus members is incredibly important.

Q What are your caucus priorities?

A Illinois families and businesses are facing great challenges. Inflation, unemployment, over-taxation and child care shortages are affecting our job creators and our job seekers.

We need real, substantive and sound economic policies that are going to help improve lives and livelihoods. Senate Republicans have a bold but doable agenda based on helping Illinois families and job creators rebuild and renew opportunities in our state, with a specific emphasis on supporting small- and mid-sized businesses.

Q There has been an interesting institutional development in the Illinois Senate. Members of the minority party, your Senate Republican Caucus, are serving as co-chairs of two committees. How did this happen, and what are the goals?

A It came about in my discussions with the Senate president [Don Harmon] on ways our caucuses could maybe work in a more collaborative manner. The Senate president was soliciting ideas, and this is one of the ideas that I had brought to him.

It’s not only symbolic, but it’s also an incredibly important display of two individuals — two senators, from different, diverse areas of the state and different political parties — working together seamlessly [as co-leaders of Senate committees]. ...

It’s been going well so far, in the Higher Education and State Government committees. These are incredibly important subject matters in this state, so I certainly do appreciate President Harmon’s efforts and reaching out and wanting to solicit ways to work in a more bipartisan manner.

Our participation and inclusion in the process will bring a more balanced public policy result to the state, and I do believe that’s important over the long term. And it’s also important if you’re going to get statewide buy-in [on policies] in this diverse state.

