# **PROFILE:** ILLINOIS HOUSE MINORITY LEADER TONY MCCOMBIE

## Former mayor and small-business owner says a minority caucus is best heard and most effective when listening to and amplifying the voice of constituents

by Derek Cantù *(dcantu@csg.org)*

Whether it was her time as a local restaurant owner navigating local regulations or her current role as a caucus leader of 40 members in a legislative chamber of 118, Tony McCombie has grown accustomed to articulating a minority position to those in power.

She has found her share of successes along the way.

"Being in the superminority, we let [our constituents] know what's going on," McCombie says, "and they've been instrumental in helping stop things like the [proposed] delivery tax, the mileage tax, taxing retirement and, most recently, the homeschool bill."

Years ago, it was a disagreement over commercial signage that put her on an unexpected path to serving in local and, eventually, state office.

"As a small-business owner on Main Street, the city told me I couldn't put a sandwich board on the sidewalk to [advertise] specials," she says.

"When you have an issue, you go to the place to solve it. So I decided to join the City Council to change the ordinance."

Once on the council, she led efforts to improve government transparency and eliminate backroom deal-making. City residents ultimately voted her mayor of Savanna, a town of about 3,000 people in the northwest part of Illinois.

The city faced economic challenges, people and businesses were leaving for nearby Iowa and Wisconsin, and McCombie was dissatisfied with the response from the state legislature and Savanna's local representative.

"We'd lost our hospital, our Army depot, our railroad hub, manufacturing — we can't be forgotten," she recalls of her thoughts at the time.

McCombie decided to challenge her incumbent state House representative in the 2016 election.

She won, and eventually began managing campaigns for the entire House Republican caucus. McCombie then sought on two different occasions to become minority leader. She was successful on her second try, becoming the caucus's first-ever female leader.

Here are excerpts of a CSG Midwest interview with Leader McCombie, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

### **BIO-SKETCH:** ILLINOIS REP. TONY MCCOMBIE

✓ elected House minority leader in 2022; first elected to House in 2016

✓ is the first-ever female to lead a caucus in the Illinois House

✓ served as mayor of her hometown of Savanna in northwest Illinois; resides in Savanna with her husband, Curt

✓ has owned and operated several small businesses and also practiced real estate

✓ has a bachelor of arts degree from Western Illinois University

> "You can't make anybody respect me or anybody on the leadership team. You certainly have to earn that. It might be different voices [within the caucus], but it's not different principles."

**Q** Along with emphasizing the importance of messaging among constituents and caucus members, what have been some of your other approaches to legislative leadership since taking the position?

**A** When I put my team together, not only did I want a team that was geographically diverse, but also a strong group of people who weren't going to be telling me "yes" all of the time. I wanted people who were going to challenge me, and, oh boy, do they sometimes challenge me.

It's how I learn, and I think the end result is better. I also don't try to do everything by myself. It comes to even managing some of the staff, asking some people that have experience: "Hey, what are your ideas? What are some things that we can do to make their jobs better? Make their quality of life better?"

We're lucky. We have in our caucus doctors, teachers, bankers, insurance folks, law enforcement, public sector workers, accountants … and to have that with only 40 people.

I feel pretty blessed, and I wish the speaker and his team used us more and used our staff more. Nobody needs to be the wiser. If we're able to help the people of the state, we are firm believers in people before politics. Now, do we get political sometimes? Yes. But the priority is always making sure that people can succeed.

**Q** There is ideological diversity among those 40 members. How do you balance making sure perspectives from members are heard while simultaneously ensuring all members respect leadership?

**A** You can't make anybody respect me or anybody on the leadership team. You certainly have to earn that. It might be different voices, but it's not different principles. We agree on what's important for the state of Illinois. How we get there is sometimes the issue.

I don't think there's ever been a leader, Republican or Democrat, that hasn't had a disagreement with a member. I mean, I had a disagreement with my leader and ran against him.

It really is like a family. You're going to have fights; you're going to have arguments. Sometimes those aren't behind closed doors, which is unfortunate. But I think, rhetorically speaking, it's "How do I get what I want and what is that structure to do that?" And that's where we differ sometimes.

**Q** How has your own background, particularly as the former mayor of a small town, informed your approach to public service as a legislator?

**A** One of the things that I knew was going to be extremely important when I became mayor was to be transparent about what I'm doing and why. That meant being more active within the community at local events, just being there for people to ask me questions: "What's going on?" "Why are you doing this?" "What's the decision-making process?"

I took that commitment to transparency to a higher office. … Whether [my constituents] liked or didn't like what my views were or how I was voting, they were glad I was telling them.

Also, be honest. I learned that as a business owner. There was a gentleman who was running for mayor when I had a café, and he would literally tell somebody on one side of him one thing, and when they left, he would tell the person on the other side the complete opposite.

"You can't do that," I told him. And he said, "Well, that's what we do in politics." And I responded "No."

**Q** There has been a lot of attention in Illinois on potential new laws on legislative ethics, particularly in light of the criminal conviction of a former House speaker. What sort of changes do you and your caucus believe need to be made?

**A** There are several things, whether it's tightening up required lawmaker declarations of economic interests or what we permit in terms of lobbying. As much as I appreciate the other mayors in office, can you be a mayor, a state representative and a lobbyist? Probably not a good idea.

And let's put some teeth behind ethics reform. Let's put some penalty enhancements behind that.

One of the bills that I suggested was if [elected officials] do something criminal, they shouldn't be able to spend campaign dollars to fight their way out of a criminal case.