

## Ohio Senate Majority Floor Leader

# THERESA GAVARONE



Keys to legislative success? 10-year lawmaker believes in bringing a mix of humility, listening and flexibility to the work

Theresa Gavarone knew lives were being lost and families torn apart by drug addiction and a lack of adequate mental health resources. She saw it time and again in the cases at her law practice in the northwest Ohio town of Bowling Green.

“A lot of things were happening all at once, just seeing so much and wondering what more I could do,” recalls Gavarone, who was serving on the City Council at the time. “I thought, You know what? I can have a bigger impact in Columbus.

“And that’s why I ran for that seat.”

But once elected to the Ohio General Assembly, how could she make a bigger, and positive, impact? One of her early lessons as a legislator was acknowledging she didn’t have all the answers.

“It’s the people who deal with the issues, day in and day out, who can identify where there are gaps, what we need to address. So you listen to them to know where the barriers are. And you try to find ways of making their jobs easier.”

To address the crisis of drug overdoses, law enforcement officers told Gavarone, they needed access to more data — where the incidents were occurring and why. The policy answer: requiring more local data collection and information sharing at the state level so police could analyze trends in overdoses and work to prevent them.

From local mental health professionals, she learned of obstacles that stood in the way of nonviolent offenders getting mental health care. Those conversations turned into SB 2, a 2021 law that has changed Ohio’s requirements for competency evaluations in order to improve access to treatment.

Gavarone is 10 years into her work as a state legislator, having first been appointed to the House in August 2016 (subsequently elected three months later) and moving to the Senate in 2019. She became Senate majority floor leader in 2025.

During her decade of public service, Gavarone has sponsored numerous bills (many now law) that aim to improve mental health policy and addiction services, the two issues that helped lead her to seek office in the first place. But Gavarone also has sponsored successful legislation on elections security, water quality, religious freedom and more.

Across policy areas, she says, “it seems like the best legislation really comes from constituents, from having those conversations with people you represent.”

In an interview with CSG Midwest, she spoke about what she has learned and observed about the keys to legislative success: listen to constituents for ideas; commit to being open to change during the legislative process; and offer a helping hand to your legislative colleagues when you can. Here are excerpts:



**“You’re not the expert on most things. It’s the people who deal with them, day in and day out, who can identify where there are gaps, what we need to address.”**

**Q:** Generally, what is your strategy for taking those ideas that you get from constituents and getting bills to move through the legislative process?

**A:** I usually approach legislation with a goal in mind: What am I trying to achieve? Then I’m usually open to a number of different ways of getting there. If you can be flexible while still achieving your goal, I have found that it really helps.

So when there’s a bill that I introduce, if there are people who oppose it, they’re usually the first people I want to talk to. What are you seeing that I’m not? Is there another way we can get to that goal, achieve the purpose of the bill? How do we minimize the effects you’re seeing? At the end of the day, we may not agree, but I certainly want to make sure I know what’s out there to make sure we’re doing what we can to get the best piece of legislation.

It’s easier to get things done that way, and then you get a final bill that is solid. In Ohio, our bills are going to impact more than 11-and-a-half million people. You want to make sure you get the language right.”

**Q:** As a legislative leader, and with now a decade of experience in the General Assembly, what advice do you give to newer legislators?

**A:** Listening I think is one of the most important things — to the people you represent, to the people impacted by a piece of legislation, to your colleagues. That comes from being humble enough to recognize that you are not the expert and should be listening to those who work in that space.

Then focus on good communication. When you have a bill in committee, you’ve got to make sure that all the members fully understand the bill and why you believe it’s important. That’s also when it helps to be open and flexible.

**Q:** How do you approach building or strengthening relations with your colleagues in the legislature?

**A:** I think it’s important that we recognize that everyone in the General

Assembly represents a different part of a very diverse state. ... We’re all there to work for and represent our people back home. And so keeping that in mind when you’re working with colleagues, whether they’re working their bills through or you’re working your own bill through. Someone may have concerns because of the people they represent.

So how can we work through that and recognize that we’re there representing our constituents?

You also can try to help [colleagues] get their legislation done. Sometimes there’s a House bill, and someone’s working on it and we’re running short on time because the General Assembly [session] goes by quickly. I’ll sometimes offer to sponsor a companion bill in the Senate, so at least it’s had hearings in both chambers.

**Q:** Let’s go back to your work on mental health policy and addiction services. One of the most recently enacted measures was a first-in-nation

law creating a new state-certified position of mental health assistant (SB 95, signed in 2025). What is the goal of this measure?

**A:** We have an extreme shortage of mental health professionals and psychiatrists in Ohio, and I think that’s common across the country. This is a new mental health professional that serves under the supervision of a doctor.

This professional doesn’t diagnose. But after someone goes and sees the doctor and gets stabilized on medication, the doctor can turn this patient over to a certified mental health assistant who can see the patient more frequently, freeing up the doctor to see new patients and get people stabilized.

If something is going on with a patient, the certified mental health assistant can alert the doctor right away. The assistant also can help refill prescriptions so no one has a lapse in their medication, which we hear about all the time, and can help with medical-assisted treatments [for substance abuse].

Interview by Tim Anderson ([tanderson@csg.org](mailto:tanderson@csg.org))

## OHIO SENATOR THERESA GAVARONE

→ Elected Senate majority floor leader in 2025 and has served in Ohio General Assembly for 10 years (House from 2016 to 2019, Senate since 2019)

→ Has a law degree from the University of Toledo College of Law and has practiced law in Bowling Green

→ She and her husband, Jim, live in Bowling Green and have three children

→ Together, while still in college at Bowling Green University, the couple opened a local family restaurant, Mr. Spot’s (named after Jim’s cat at the time); the family-run business is now in its 40th year of operation

→ She is a 2017 graduate of the CSG Midwest Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD) and an at-large member of the CSG Justice Center Advisory Board

## Saskatchewan Speaker

## TODD GOUDY



PROFILE

How he approaches the unique role of impartial presiding officer, and why he cherishes it

**T**odd Goudy has gone from working the farm fields of Saskatchewan as a young man with his father and brothers to serving as the presiding officer of his home province's Legislative Assembly.

Between then and now, his faith and a belief in service to others have taken him around the world.

Goudy lived in Alberta for a time before spending several years in post-communist Albania, relocating there to help rebuild the country's democratic, economic and Christian faith communities.

He eventually returned to Saskatchewan, raising six children with his wife, Tannis. Goudy owned and operated a furniture manufacturing business and spent 10 years on the local school board while also serving as a minister in the Baptist church.

The next step in his journey: running in 2018 for a seat in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, in large part because he thought it was the best way to influence the future of education policy in his hometown of Melfort.

But his work and advocacy on any issue, education or otherwise, changed dramatically in late 2024 when he became speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan.

It is a position in Canada's parliamentary system unlike leadership posts in most state legislatures.

Saskatchewan's speaker does not take part in legislative debates, does not ask or answer questions on the floor, and only votes to break a tie. Instead, the speaker is expected to maintain impartiality while presiding over session, controlling debate, and ensuring rules are followed.

"I was quite upset at first when I was asked by my colleagues to consider becoming the speaker," Goudy says. "My thought was that as speaker, you can't be focused on something. You don't get to be a part of debate. You don't get to pitch visions. You don't get to pursue some of the goals you came to Regina for.

"So I really struggled with [the decision] for a couple of nights."

Goudy now looks at this leadership role as one of the great honors of his lifetime.

He explained why in a recent interview with CSG Midwest, while also reflecting on his views of public service and leadership. Here are excerpts.



Saskatchewan Speaker Todd Goudy played an integral role in hosting the 2025 Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting in Saskatoon. He is pictured here introducing a dialectic-style session on the future of energy policy.



**We have 61 members. I see my job as helping them succeed in their jobs. That is a far greater role than being one person pursuing his own visions, his own dreams, his own ambitions.**



**Q:** At first, you weren't sure you wanted the role of speaker. What changed your mind, and how have you come to embrace this leadership position?

**A:** When I thought more about it, what better way to serve in government than to be the armor bearer for all the other members? By armor bearer, I'm thinking back to the person in an army of biblical days who bore the armor for the soldiers. I'm sure there was not fame in being the armor bearer, but it was essential.

We have 61 members in Saskatchewan. I see my job as helping them succeed in their jobs. That is a far greater role than being one person pursuing his own visions, his own dreams, his own ambitions.

I have the chance to help 60 others fulfill their roles and pursue their ambitions to the best of their ability and the best of their capacity. And the better they serve, the more they succeed in their job, the better it is for our province.

**Q:** You oversee the debate in the Assembly among different members and competing parties, making sure rules are followed and individuals can participate. Why do you value that role, in particular?

**A:** What's the best way to come to good policy? What's the best way to represent different people and groups, different factions, different opinions, and to come together as a nation?

This all started being built thousands of years ago and we've inherited it — the rules, the dialectic discussions [in democratic legislatures].

I think sometimes we forget the value of dialectic discussion. It's about putting our heads together, critically thinking, and humbly accepting good arguments that might show that our arguments were not as valid as we thought they were, or maybe needed some refinement.

And so my role is to help others have those dialectic discussions and giving everyone a chance to be heard.

**Q:** How did your time in post-communist Albania impact your perspective on living in and being an active part of a representative democracy?

**A:** When you see what years of communism have done to people, that affects you for the rest of your life. There was a lack of ambition, a lack of vision in everything, because [the people] were being told what to think and what to do. It was just devastating to see.

So when I came back to Canada, I got involved in education because I saw the need for good education — the value that it has for individuals and for their society.

**Q:** How do you view the role of political leadership and legislative service?

**A:** Throughout my life, I have found beauty in mentorship. Mentorship is one generation pouring its life into the next generation — the wisdom of the old working with the strength of the young. I see the same need in politics. I believe the most important component in leadership is serving others and helping them succeed.

For me, being chosen to serve the ones who raised you, there is a real humbling factor to that. These are the people who taught and cared for you. Now they've sent you to represent them and it's your chance to serve them back.

**Q:** Last year, you and your colleagues in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan hosted hundreds of state legislators for The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting. What were some of your takeaways from that binational event?

**A:** You look at the rest of the world, and I am so very thankful to have the relationships with the Americans that we do. We maybe have bumps in the relationship, but meeting at those types of events just reminds us that we have the same goals and ambitions.

There are so many issues, like trade corridors, energy, labor force development and food and water security, etc. So many opportunities to work together and learn from each other.

Interview by Tim Anderson ([tanderson@csq.org](mailto:tanderson@csq.org))

SASKATCHEWAN SPEAKER  
TODD GOUDY

- Elected speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan in November 2024; has been a member of the Legislative Assembly since 2018
- Lives in the northeast Saskatchewan town of Melfort with his wife, Tannis; they have six children
- Raised on a farm outside of Melfort
- Served many years as a pastor at a Baptist church in Melfort, was a chaplain for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and served 10 years on his local school board
- Spent many years building Christian faith communities and churches, from Albania to northern Manitoba
- Owned and operated a furniture manufacturing company