

---

# EXCELLENT LEADER

Washington House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler is the recipient of this year's top legislative leadership award.

BY EDWARD SMITH

**W**ashington and bipartisan are not words often found together these days.

But that's because so much of the nation's political focus is on the nation's capital.

In the capital of the Evergreen State, however, bipartisanship has been the watchword for the tenure of retiring Washington House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler, the recipient of this year's Excellence in State Legislative Leadership Award, the nation's top legislative honor.

In an era when fighting tooth and nail across the aisle has become the norm in Congress and some statehouses, Kessler is regarded as a leader who understands the value of giving everyone a stake in the legislative process, a sense that they can have an effect on the citizens of the state regardless of party.

"What I've always thought is you can work with all people," says Kessler. "You don't need to have any enemies."

Washington Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos, who nominated Kessler for the award,

---

*Edward Smith is the managing editor of State Legislatures magazine.*



calls this ability to bring all sides together the defining trait of Kessler's 12-year tenure as majority leader. "Her ability to do this constructively," Santos says, "is what inspires public confidence in the legislative process."

The award is made annually by the National Conference of State Legislatures and the State Legislative Leaders Foundation.

It honors leaders whose careers embody the highest principles of leadership and have shown a commitment to protecting and strengthening the institution of the state legislature.

William T. Pound, executive director of NCSL, calls Kessler's efforts "an example of the commitment to maintain and enhance the legislature as an effective institution of government. She is recognized in Washington for her outreach to all regions, parties and groups."

Stephen G. Lakis, president of the foundation, said the selection committee was enthusiastic in its choice. "By reaching across the aisle and making sure that things got done, Representative Kessler exemplifies the very spirit of this award," he says. "Her leadership and her commitment to forging compromises and working in a bipartisan and nonpartisan fashion for the people of Washington represents the finest of legislative leadership."

Kessler acknowledges her efforts at bipartisanship seem increasingly out of step with the national political mood.

"I've watched the discourse changing and I'm finding that change disturbing," she says. "It's switched from worthy adversaries to enemies. There is less congeniality and less and less working together on big issues. That's



*Washington House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler with Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna at a bill signing ceremony in 2007.*

what I've experienced in Washington, and from what I see on the news, it's taking place in other states and in Washington, D.C."

She says her attitude was forged by her experience when she entered the Legislature in 1993.

"When I came, the Democrats were in super majority. I was so new that I don't know if we were treating the minority fairly. But just two years later, the Republicans were in the super majority, and they treated us just awful. I learned how it felt when the majority party ruled over you like that. I made it a point to try to ensure that the minority party

felt like they had something."

Much of the political divide in Washington is along the Cascade Mountains, which separate the urban west from the rural east. But Kessler appreciates that divide in an unusual way because she represents a rural district on the Olympic peninsula, west of Seattle.

"It was urban vs. rural, it was east vs. west. It seemed like a no-win situation for those of us who lived in rural areas," she says.

As a result, she and other legislators have championed a "One Washington" approach, an effort to unite all the regions of the state. House Speaker Frank Chopp points out that

Kessler has gone so far as to make sure each new member of the minority party had at least one piece of legislation enacted. So long, Kessler adds, "as it wasn't anything too crazy."

She's also received high marks from a group not always likely to praise a lawmaker: the press. In 2007, she received the Freedom Light Award from the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association. Frank Blethen, publisher of The Seattle Times, calls her "an indefatigable champion of the First Amendment and open government laws."

"She has been the sponsor of every major bill advancing the interest of the free press, the First Amendment, and the people's right to see and access the working of their government."

The reason is simple, Kessler says. "I'm kind of an average person. I really believe the government works for us, that we do not serve the government."

While women have previously received the leadership award together with a male lawmaker, Kessler is the first woman to be the sole recipient. That's appropriate, she says, given the advances women have made in her state.

"When I came in, the leadership was all men, even though we had 40 percent of women in elected statewide office. I looked at the guys and thought there was not much balance at the leadership table," she says.

She decided she wanted a seat at the table and the result has been "just amazing. Frank [Chopp] is a very collaborative speaker. We struck a compact that we would lead together, work as a team and we have." 

## Connect

with one of NCSL's 11 Legislative Staff Networks and expand your professional skills with colleagues from across the country.



## Join us this Fall

September 6-11, 2010  
Milwaukee, WI

[American Society of Legislative Clerks and Secretaries \(ASLCS\)](#)

September 8-11, 2010  
Raleigh, NC (meeting jointly)  
[Leadership Staff Section \(LSS\)](#)

[Legislative Information & Communications Staff \(LINCS\)](#)

October 3-7, 2010  
Baton Rouge, LA (meeting jointly)  
[National Legislative Services & Security Association \(NLSSA\)](#)  
[National Legislative Program Evaluation Staff \(NLPES\)](#)

September 29 - October 2, 2010  
Charleston, WV

[National Association of Legislative Information Technology \(NALIT\)](#)

For other professional development opportunities visit

[www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)

