THREE LEADERS ON BUDGETS, BIPARTISANSHIP AND "BOOT CAMP"

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—Minnesota Senate President Michelle L. Fischbach

SENATOR STEPHEN SWEENEY
New Jersey Senate President

State Legislatures: What are your priorities for the 2012 session?
Sweeney: The state's economy. New Jersey has had a particularly hard time as a result of the economic downturn. Our unemployment rate is above the national average, and our businesses don't have the ability to hire or expand. The Senate passed dozens of bills last year that we believe will get things moving again, but certainly there is always more that can be done. We also will look at issues regarding education, but really, our main focus right now is getting people back to work and getting the economy moving.

SL: In working on the budget, what's your top priority?
Sweeney: The way we fund education in this state has taken a giant step backward. We had a funding formula where the money followed the child, but because the governor in his last budget shortchanged the formula, the courts have now forced us back into the old system where the money is doled out based on ZIP code. We must not only return to a system where education dollars follow the child, but we must have a system that is fully funded.

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—New Jersey Senate President Stephen Sweeney

SL: How do you facilitate working with the other party?
Sweeney: I have a good relationship with many, if not all, members of the other party. In fact, myself and Senator Steve Oroho, a Republican, were honored together by the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce for our work in making New Jersey a better place to do business. I have co-sponsored legislation with many of my Republican colleagues and believe there is a great working relationship with the minority leader. Do we disagree on some of the key issues of this state? Certainly. But we can always find a way to work with one another for the greater good. That is what being an elected representative should be about.

SL: What do you wish you had more time for?
Sweeney: Spending time with my daughter and my son. I love what I am doing, but nothing beats spending time with my kids.

SL: How do you think members in your party would describe you? How would the other party describe you?
Sweeney: I think they would both describe me as fair. I never force my members to vote for anything; rather, I ask that they simply vote their conscience. There is no reason to impose your will on people. That is not leadership. We can disagree without being disagreeable.

SENATOR MICHELLE L. FISCHBACH
Minnesota Senate President

State Legislatures: What's the greatest challenge facing you in the 2012 session?
Fischbach: This is a non-budget year, and will be an abbreviated legislative session. We still have many government reforms and other legislative initiatives we want to accomplish, so the challenge will be to make sure we work as efficiently and effectively as possible to accomplish our goals in a shorter time period.

SL: Did the influx of new members to your chamber last session make your job easier or more difficult?
Fischbach: As the first president of the Senate from our party in nearly 40 years, I was a "new" member to a degree as well. Every new job has a learning curve and a few bumps along the way, but working with our newest members was a very rewarding experience, and I still enjoy it today. They are a high-energy group that wanted to immediately take on a lot of the issues and problem areas of our government. With the right intentions and right demeanor, they quickly found ways to work with the senior members and be effective in the legislative process.

SL: Looking back at the 2011 session, were you surprised by the challenges you faced or were they what you expected?
Fischbach: We knew well in advance of the legislative session what our main challenges and opportunities would be: a $5 billion projected budget deficit, a new governor, new majorities in the Legislature, and a public desire for government reform and job creation. Even though the citizens elected a divided government, they still expect us to get the job done and continue the business of the state. The goal was to not view our situation at the outset as a challenge or obstacle, but as an opportunity to achieve meaningful, long-term solutions. We set out immediately to find common ground with the minority caucus and the governor to pass historic government reforms and, ultimately, a budget that reflected the means of our economy.

SL: In working on the budget, what's most important?
Fischbach: Our No. 1 priority was to balance the budget while maintaining the services and results our citizens expect. We started with government reforms that laid the foundation for short- and long-term costs savings and started to change how state government operates and delivers services. In navigating the legislative session, it was important to have specific dates and deadlines for spending targets, committee budget drafts, passage of initial budgets, conference committee reports and, finally, making sure the governor received the budget for his review on time and by our constitutional deadline. This clearly defined process allowed both parties, legislators, citizens, and the governor to weigh in on our work as it progressed.

SL: How do you work with the other party?
Fischbach: Our party spent nearly 40 years in the minority, and that experience gives you ample time to consider how you would approach majority leadership as a caucus and as an individual legislator. Setting common goals and maintaining open communication and respect for all view points during the process is the surest way to accomplish your work and achieve the outcomes you desire.

SENATOR BRANDON SHAFFER
Colorado Senate President

State Legislatures: Looking back at the 2011 session, were you surprised by the challenges you faced?
Shaffer: We knew the split in control—House Republican and Senate Democrats—would increase the difficulty in passing our agenda. About 80 percent of all legislation was defeated from the originating chamber in the second chamber.

SL: What are you doing to promote a respect for and participation in our form of democracy?
Shaffer: The Senate has an extensive outreach program. Frequent town hall meetings are held on specialized topics, such as job "boot camp"; how a small business owner can work successfully with the government; how to apply for government scholarships.

SL: What advice would you give to the next leader?
Shaffer: Keep your nose everywhere, limit your fingerprints, move decision-making to the lowest level.

SL: How do you think members in your party would describe you? How would the other party describe you?
Shaffer: Competent, tough, loyal. Partisan, ambitious.

SL: How do you work with the other party?
Shaffer: Not as well as we would like. We try through regular meetings to keep communication open.

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