



Wisconsin Speaker Robin Vos

Fifth-term lawmaker has passion for education reform, fiscal issues; longtime entrepreneur is taking on key leadership role

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

While Wisconsin Speaker Robin Vos had thought about public service for many years, he made the decision to run for the state legislature in less than half an hour.

In 2004, Vos received an unexpected call from his state representative, a woman for whom he had worked as a legislative staffer. She was retiring and was ready to recommend Vos, who had been serving on his county board for 10 years, to replace her.

But she needed Vos's decision before noon. He looked at the clock — and it read 11:35 a.m.

"I walked around the block and I thought about it," he recalls. "I realized I had always wanted to be in public service at the state level, which is my favorite level of government, and I decided to run."

Vos represents a district in the southeastern corner of Wisconsin, which includes the city of Racine and its surrounding areas. Now serving his fifth term, Vos has moved up through the ranks of the Assembly's Republican caucus. He

has served as a member and co-chair of the state's powerful Joint Finance Committee, and was elected speaker of the Assembly earlier this month.

Vos has set many goals in his new role. He is particularly interested in trying to bring Democrats and Republicans together in a legislature that has been embroiled in highly contentious partisan battles. One of his first actions after being named speaker-elect was to appoint two Democrats as committee chairs, which Vos says hasn't been done in almost a generation.

"I am hoping that I can show not just symbolically, but in words and in deeds, that I am willing to work together to see if we can find some common ground," he says. "It is not going to be easy ... but I don't want it to be ever said that we didn't try."

Love of politics spurs call to service

Vos traces his love of politics and policy back to the sixth grade, when his teacher brought him to some local Republican Party meetings. It spurred in him a passion for government, and Vos went on to study political science at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. As an undergraduate, Vos was named by then-Gov. Tommy Thompson to the university system's Board of Regents, where he represented his 165,000 fellow students.

After working as a legislative staffer at both the state and federal levels, Vos launched a career as an entrepreneur. He bought his first business, a small popcorn manufacturing company, at age 28. He's grown it from a few employees to 20, and now owns several other small businesses.

Last month, CSG Midwest interviewed the

incoming speaker about his leadership style and goals for the upcoming legislative session. Here are some excerpts from the interview.

Q: You are the owner of several small businesses. How does your experience in the private sector enrich your public service?

A: If you've never run a business or worked in the private sector, it is very hard to understand what it takes to grow more jobs. In the public sector, it's fairly easy: You just go to public

officials and convince them to raise taxes to provide funding for your program. The private sector isn't quite like that.

I was a legislative staffer, and having worked as a part-time employee in the public sector, you think you know how it works. But now that I have run a business, I have been out there getting my hands dirty. I have not paid myself so I make sure I can make payroll for my employees. Those are the things that somebody that

hasn't run a business might not quite understand.

Of course, there are plenty of smart people who serve well who don't have business backgrounds, but it really gives us a whole wealth of experience when we look for solutions about how to create jobs.

Q: You are a proponent of charter schools and an advocate for school choice. Why?

A: School choice just got expanded to Racine two years ago. The first year it was 250 kids, the second year was 500, and they met that cap very quickly. Now there will be no cap beginning in the next school year. I went door-to-door in my district ... and talked to a family whose son was unable to go to a private school, but he really was not succeeding in [the public school district]. They said school choice was the reason that they will be able to send their kid to a school that they think will do a better job of educating him.

I don't really care who pays the light bill at the school. I want to make sure that the product that they are turning out, whether it be in private, public, parochial, charter or home school, is a child who is ready to succeed and ready to work — and not looking for help from the government but looking to help others who need it more than he or she does.

We have seen that school choice can literally turn around families' lives.

Q: What else is on your agenda for education reform?

A: I think we definitely need to find a way to reward good teachers. I don't want to ever see ... school districts let the \$60,000-a-year math

teacher go because they are earning too much and then hire two teachers right out of college earning \$30,000. We need to have a system to determine who is doing the best job and make sure it's not just about money but about the quality of the educational effort they give toward those kids. I think there are a lot of things we need to work on to make sure parents know they are getting a good product — and if they don't, that they have choices. We need to have teachers and administrators inside schools that are doing the best job and make sure they know we are standing behind them.

Q: What are your policy goals for the next legislative session?

A: We are going to have an income tax cut that will be across-the-board, but really targeted toward the middle class: those that are earning between \$20,000 and \$200,000.

We are going to have regulatory reform. We have 1,768 chapters in administrative code. Some are half a page long and some are 200 pages, and many of those have not been reviewed in decades. We are going to have a systematic review of those by all of our legislative committees to see if they are still protecting the public, if they are outdated, or if they are hurting our ability to create private-sector jobs.

We are going to pass a mining regulation bill, hopefully sometime before the spring, that protects the public but at the same time actually gives an opportunity to create real, good-paying, family-supporting mining jobs here. I don't want to just pass a bill to say we passed a bill. I want to be able to get something done and be able to look back and say we were successful in every way we could be to try to bring those jobs here.

Lastly, I want to focus on education reform and continue our efforts in that area. ... One of the ideas would be additional areas [of the state] that might get school choice because they have failing schools or schools in need of improvement. We also need to make sure our public schools have the resources that they need, and that parents have the ability to do more to try to keep the public schools accountable in the same ways we do with private schools.

Q: You have also mentioned tax reform as a top priority of yours. Why?

A: [We have] discovered that Wisconsin's tax code is one of the most complex in the entire country. There was a study done four or five years ago showing that nationwide, 60 percent of poor people needed a tax preparer to fill out their income tax form. And if our tax code is the most complex, I would assume that our percentage is higher than that.

It is silly if people have to hire an accountant so that they can fill out their taxes, which should be fairly simple as a low-income person. So I hope that we can do meaningful tax reform that makes it fairer and simpler, and hopefully lowers taxes for those who are paying them. ★

Bio-sketch of Speaker Robin Vos

- ✓ first elected to the Wisconsin Assembly in 2004
- ✓ lifetime resident of the southeastern city of Racine, the area he now represents
- ✓ bought his first company at 28 and owns several small businesses today
- ✓ worked as a legislative staffer for a state lawmaker and a member of U.S. Congress before running for the Assembly
- ✓ served as a Racine County Board supervisor for 10 years