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Legislative Issues



LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

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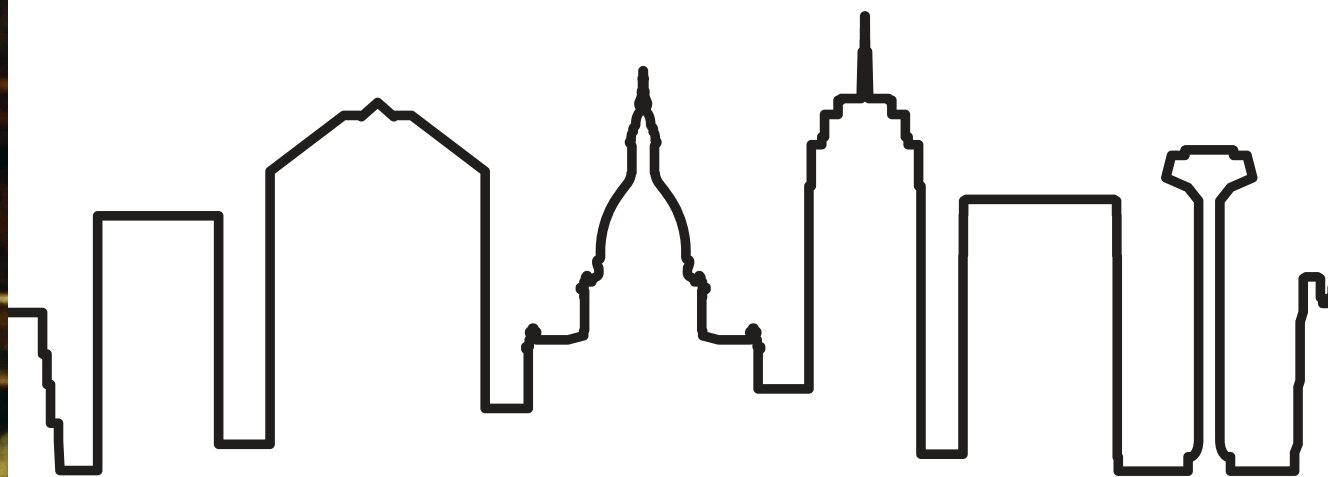
Municipal Leaders Take Their Seat in Lansing

By Lisa Donovan



Representatives Alex Garza (D-Taylor), Padma Kuppa (D-Troy), and Mark Huizenga (R-Walker) get ready for their first day in the 100th Legislature.

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LANSING

Michigan rang in the new year with a new governor, a largely new Legislature, and a number of firsts. On Jan. 1, Governor Gretchen Whitmer took the oath of office along with Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist II, the first African-American in that role in Michigan history. A week later, history was made as the 100th Legislature was sworn in. About a third of the 148 legislators are first-timers, with most of them in the House. In the Senate, just nine senators are back due to term limits, but many new senators are former House members.

Fortunately, some of the new and returning legislators bring a wealth of local government experience to their positions. Their paths to Lansing were somewhat different, but they all had something in common: a desire to serve their community and an innate sense of leadership.

Laying a Local Government Foundation

For second-term Representative Ben Frederick (R-Owosso), a financially challenged childhood led to a Habitat for Humanity house for his family and inspired him to go into public service. His political career began with a nine-year stint on Owosso's city council. He was then elected as Owosso's youngest mayor, serving in that role for seven years while also working as a House staffer. That gave him a unique combination of local and state experience when he first ran for state representative in 2016.

"I felt prepared from the House staff side, and the local side gave me a healthy dose of pragmatism. My big motivation was the skilled trades challenge," said Frederick, who served on the Workforce and Talent Development Committee in his first term. "Many people were leaving the state for jobs, and lots of people I went to school with were struggling to find jobs. I want to make sure educational institutions and employers are seeking and finding workforce development opportunities."

Reasonable decision-making was the ticket into politics for Representative Jeff Yaroch (R-Richmond). His neighbors recognized his talent and voted him onto the condo board. That same ability to listen to and understand issues won him a seat on the Richmond City Council, followed by election to the House in 2016.

"What really frustrated me was going to Lansing and talking about things like roads and revenue sharing. I thought if they'd just fix this, I could do my job better," said Yaroch. "I'd get a deer in the headlights look. I had people with no local experience telling me I don't know how to run government. It was clear to me that the only way I was going to change something in Lansing was to go there and vote and help them understand the role of local government."

Community service was the first step toward politics for first-term Representative Padma Kuppa (D-Troy), a former Chrysler engineer. Kuppa is the first Indian-American woman and first Hindu to serve in the Michigan Legislature. Diversity and the need to engage diverse people in city matters was the issue that first thrust Kuppa into the public realm. She got heavily involved in the Troy Community Coalition and founded the Troy Area Alliance Against Hate Crimes. From there, she was elected to the Troy Planning Commission, where she learned how to make the community better through development practices. She also served on the city's financial ideas team, which enhanced her interest in municipal finance, revenue sharing, and running for state office.

"In state office, I can have an impact on things that affect people every day," said Kuppa. "Building bridges is what I can do at the state level. It's needed for immigrants to be heard—their voices and women's voices."

Another first-time state representative got a very early start in politics. When Representative Alex Garza (D-Taylor) first decided to run for Taylor City Council in 2013, he was only a sophomore in college! Divisiveness and concern over public safety budget cuts prompted him to run—in a field of 27 candidates vying for seven seats. He eventually became city council chairman, and worked for Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Stephanie Chang, before taking the plunge into state politics.

"I decided to run for state representative due to many issues including road funding challenges and lack of support for public education," said Garza. "Also, part of my platform was Lansing's preemption of local government. I'm a big advocate of local government control, and I want to make sure Lansing empowers our local governments."

Experience as a healthcare consultant, helping clients with real estate decisions, prompted first-term State Representative Mark Huizenga (R-Walker) to say yes when a friend asked him to serve on the Walker Planning Commission in 2005. From there, he became city commissioner (2011-2013), and then was elected as mayor in 2013. He hit the campaign trail for state representative last year.

"My background is finance and accounting. Through all these things there's a common thread of fiscal responsibility," said Huizenga. "At the city, I learned how budgets work and how to reduce liabilities to make it easier for things to happen and make city council more successful. I hope to take that same fiscal conservatism to Lansing."

Sharing Their Local Government Experience

The strong understanding these representatives have of local government issues makes them an important voice in Lansing. They feel the weight of that responsibility.

"Not many legislators have local government experience," said Garza. "People think it's a natural progression, but a lot of legislators don't understand what local government officials deal with on a daily basis. I offer an important perspective on local issues."

"My first goal was to make sure I was the legislator that I wanted my legislators to be," added Yaroach. "I want to make sure I think of the people first, work on issues people in my district bring to me, and stay in touch with local government to help them do a better job."


Rewving Up Revenue Sharing

One of the most important issues for local government is cuts to revenue sharing. The League's SaveMICity initiative has been driving home the message that Michigan's system for funding municipalities is broken. Since 2002, the state has diverted \$8.6 billion from Michigan communities to balance the state budget. Representatives Frederick, Yaroach, Kuppa, Garza and Huizenga have experienced the effects of those budget cuts firsthand in their communities and want to see change.

"Revenue sharing is a basic promise of state government to provide resources so communities can engage in front line services," said Frederick. "We haven't been able to provide that in previous years. I'd like to have an honest conversation on setting a baseline of revenue sharing they can count on."

"There's a loss of institutional knowledge due to term limits," added Yaroach. "Representatives don't appreciate the history of revenue sharing. It's not charity to local government but the result of agreements with the state over the years to support local government and help them provide daily services to residents."

Bringing about that change will require serious effort from the state level to invest in Michigan's communities, and provide them with the resources they need to thrive. As she embarks on her journey in the Legislature, Representative Kuppa says it well: "I want to build alliances, find people with common purposes willing to make changes to move forward. The economic imperative for Michigan is immense. We need new streams of revenue, and we need to do better at planning for our future."

But no matter what the issue, there's great value for municipal officials in expressing their thoughts and opinions to lawmakers. "I definitely see how important it is—especially for local government leaders—to engage with state representatives early and develop a relationship," said Yaroach. "That's much better than calling on the day of legislation." 

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Rep. Jeff Yaroch (R-Richmond) was joined by a first responder for Sept. 11 ceremony.



Rep. Ben Frederick (R-Owosso) honors local veterans.



Rep. Padma Kuppa (D-Troy) exchanges ideas with constituents.



Rep. Alex Garza (D-Taylor) attended State of the State address with Romulus Treasurer Stacy Paige.



Rep. Mark Huizenga (R-Walker) takes the oath of office.

