



‘Baptism by Fire’

Sophomore Legislators Reflect, Plan

By Rebecca Patrick

There really was no easing into things for the record 25 legislators who were first-timers in the 2011 Indiana General Assembly. By their sheer numbers – 19 in the House and six in the Senate – they soon realized they could be a recognized force in their respective caucuses. What’s more, the tenor of the session certainly thrust them into the thick of things, as they dealt with the emotionally-charged education issues and right-to-work concept.

In separate interviews, BizVoice® spoke with three of these legislators – before the start of the 2012 session – to get their views on being a part of such a unique year, their upcoming priorities, the impact of social media and more.

The participants: Sen. Jim Banks of Columbia City (District 17), Rep. Sue Ellspermann of Ferdinand (District 74) and Rep. Jud McMillin of Brookville (District 68).

What were the benefits of coming in with such a large freshman class?

Banks: “It was an opportunity to bring a fresh perspective and to battle against the mentality of ‘this is how we’ve always done things,’ to challenge the mindset that things could be done differently.”



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– Rep. Sue Ellspermann

Ellspermann: “We were probably less intimidated than in a small group. Because there were so many of us, we did ask a lot of questions. We didn’t feel that it was inappropriate to jump in.”

McMillin: “Not only did it help us have a larger voice, a more persuasive voice as new legislators, but it also

had the effect of giving leadership a reason to really spend time with us and make sure we understood what was going on. When there’s that many of you, you kind of demand some attention.”

What were some overall takeaways from the 2011 session?

Banks: “Change doesn’t happen overnight. I tackled a number of issues like eliminating the inheritance tax, implementing a ‘loser pays’ legal system in Indiana and a constitutional amendment to protect secret ballots. These are big ideas and they don’t get passed overnight; I could spend my legislative career working to advance them and move them forward. That was a lesson I learned;

you don't just show up the first day of session and make something happen."

Ellspermann: "There is something called baptism by fire and it was a wonderful learning experience. We saw the whole realm from passing important legislation to the walkout to understanding how to work fast in the last weeks of session to get all the work done."

McMillin: "I was pleasantly surprised, even given the difficult things people were telling me were happening, with the work we were able to get done. As somebody who was on the outside looking in before, I was frustrated with government and was prepared to go up there and find out my frustrations were well-founded and that nothing could be accomplished. That's not what I found, and I was pleasantly encouraged by what I did find."

How did the 35-day walkout by the House Democrats impact you?

Banks: "Frankly, it didn't slow us down in the Senate that much. We were still busy and still meeting in committee. It was disappointing, though, and the public saw it as a childish endeavor of not doing what the elected legislators are supposed to do – stick around and debate issues, and get things done. What's disappointing about that is the public looks at it as not really a Republican or a Democrat issue; they just lose faith in the process. That's an indictment on all of us. I think the public expects something more and when we go back in session, I hope we live up to those expectations."



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Ellspermann: "It gave us and me, particularly as a freshman, the opportunity to study up and really dig into a better understanding of some of the bills. That was a very positive thing."

McMillin: "While I was personally disappointed in the walkout, I'm not as wrapped up in that at this point as I am at seeing how the voters respond to something like that. I'm interested in seeing how the notion that your representatives can walk out and leave the state in gridlock for that period of time plays with the people back home who have trusted people with their votes to go and get something done for them."

Is there anything you would like to have as a "do-over"?

Banks: "Sure. Where do I start? I thought it was disappointing that there were a number of issues that the other side and even some in my party didn't want to debate. I think debate is healthy, even on controversial issues. But you find out quickly there are two sides of every issue and you upset people on different issues just by raising an issue, when everyone should

be welcome to the debate."

Ellspermann: "I wish we had more time. I didn't get to know my Democrat colleagues as well as I would have liked to. In crafting and passing good legislation, relationships and all of our perspectives are important and that was difficult to do with the walkout."

McMillin: "There are times when I opened my mouth and I probably shouldn't have, and there are times that I can specifically remember when I sat there with my mouth shut and I probably should have stood up and said something. But they're all part of a learning process."

What surprised you the most?

Banks: "I underestimated how quickly the process moved and how complicated the process becomes. That was the difficult part for me."

Ellspermann: "How difficult it is to do what I consider good problem-solving in our current legislative process. I think there's

tremendous opportunity to improve it to be more bipartisan, to ensure more points of view are heard and ultimately craft even better legislation. I understand now having gone through it how it got there and why it is the way it is. I'm just not

content that it's the best process for Hoosiers."

McMillin: "Having the ability to be a part of such historic legislation that got passed – not just casting my vote, but being a part of it and having some real input. I was really surprised to be able to participate in the process as much as I did as early as I did."

What role does social media play in reaching your constituents?

Banks: "It's presented me with a great way to communicate with them, both on Facebook and Twitter. I use it as an education tool for them and to get policy feedback for myself."

Ellspermann: "I don't spend a lot of time on social media. I think there's a very important place for social media but just don't think it will replace the other pieces of doing the job well, which are being in the public and taking phone calls, and being visible and accessible in other ways."

McMillin: "I don't think I have enough time in the day to use it more. I have two Facebook pages, a Twitter account and a web site that I'm using on a daily basis. When we're in session, I am using it constantly from the floor. I tell people it's the best way I could put you in the actual seat to push the button. When we're getting to vote on a piece of legislation I know is



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important to people, I can put it on Facebook and say, ‘Tell me what you think.’ Before we vote, I might have 60 people who comment to me, so I’m getting a feel of what the people back home think.”

What will be your top issues for 2012?

Banks: “Eliminating the state’s inheritance tax, pushing for ‘loser pays’ legal reform and passing right-to-work. Overall, advocating for things that would make Indiana a state that continues to stand out.”

Ellspermann: “The right-to-work issue will certainly be important to continue ensuring Indiana’s economy for the future; that is a high priority of mine. My second priority is looking out for rural communities. I have a completely rural district. My largest community is 7,000 people. It’s important that we understand and are not only bringing jobs and opportunities to the urban and suburban areas, but to our more rural ones as well.

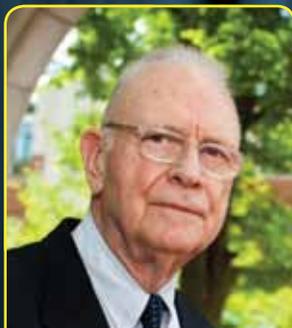
“One of my focuses will be introducing a piece of legislation called the Rural Entrepreneur TIF (tax increment financing), which creates a TIF district countywide for start-up companies like TIF districts are doing in other places.”

McMillin: “Addressing the Barnes ruling, where the Indiana Supreme Court came down and said individuals don’t have a right to resist any forced entry into their homes by police officers. That’s a difficult issue, trying to balance the interest of homeowners and their personal life with the ability to protect police officers, which is obviously very important. The other piece I’m really working hard on is legislation involving drug testing for welfare recipients.”

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