



Michigan COMMENTARY

Pat Gagliardi: A Profile

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The career of Pat Gagliardi, newly elected Majority Floor Leader in the Michigan House of Representatives, abounds in contradictions and ironies.

A politician to his fingertips, he looks forward to the challenge of becoming the second most powerful officer of the House, after Speaker-elect Lew Dodak, yet he insists that the position of Majority Floor Leader mainly is important "to the people inside this building [the capitol]" and that the extent of his new influence is limited "maybe to the city limits of Lansing."

Gagliardi's 107th District—largest of all House districts—stretches from Drummond Island on the eastern tip of the Upper Peninsula west to within 12 miles or so of Marquette and down across the Straits of Mackinac to include the western tip of the northern Lower Peninsula, encompassing such contrasting venues as the wealthy summer homes of Harbor Springs and the comparatively poor villages of Chippewa County. Moreover, while the district has had a long history of representation by Republicans in the legislature and in Congress, Gagliardi is a Democrat.

In addition, Gagliardi realizes his own voting record can seem contradictory, depending on the outlook of the observer: "Up north, they think I'm a liberal; down in Lansing, I'm a conservative." In truth, he asserted, "I'm a moderate." Finally, although he is a comparative newcomer to the House (he begins his fourth term in January), Gagliardi numbers among his closest friends such veteran Democrats as Dominic Jacobetti (starting his 18th term), Richard Young (13th term), James E. O'Neill, Jr. (12th term), Morris W. Hood, Jr. (11th term), Dodak (7th term), and Speaker Gary Owen, retiring after his 8th term.

Gagliardi, who will be 38 on December 14, has enjoyed a relatively quick rise through the political ranks, but not without considerable struggle. He first became interested in politics under the influence of his father, a keen student of current events who worked for Dow Chemical Co. in Midland. "I can remember watching the conventions in 1960, 1964, and 1968," Gagliardi said, "and I give my father credit for getting me interested [in politics] at a very young age [ten]." He also grew up reading in the newspapers about the seemingly interminable Vietnam war: "By the time I was 18 and registering for the draft, I was still reading about it."

After graduating from Midland High School in 1969, Gagliardi enrolled at Lake Superior State College in Sault Ste. Marie, where he immediately fell under the twin spells of politics and the beautiful eastern Upper Peninsula.

He plunged into student government. There he met Mitch Irwin, a native of Sault Ste. Marie who also attended the college, and together they branched out into local Democratic politics. Gagliardi had clear-

ly found a home, and after graduating in 1974 with a B.A. in sociology ("I was one course short of a minor in political science"), he moved to Drummond Island and entered the real estate business.

As Democrats in the eastern U.P., Gagliardi and Irwin had to contend with an historically strong Republican Party and the Bob Davis factor. Davis, a popular Republican state senator, vacated his seat to run successfully for Congress in 1978. This move allowed Irwin, who had lost a close race to Republican Charles Varnum for the 107th District Michigan House seat in 1976, to capture Davis's state Senate post in 1978, breaking a Republican stranglehold on the position. That same year Gagliardi was elected to the Chippewa County Commission. "I ran for county commission in an area that had never had a Democratic county commissioner," Gagliardi said. "I figured that I had the ability to talk to people and perhaps to convince them that a Democrat could be a good person."

That success and Irwin's victory convinced Gagliardi that Democrats had made enough headway in the 107th District to make possible a successful challenge to Varnum, who sought his eighth term in the House in 1980. "I thought I was ready," Gagliardi said, "but it turned out to be a humbling experience." He lost to Varnum by 9,000 votes out of just over 38,000 cast. "Charlie had been there 14 years, and I learned how tough it was to take on an incumbent: real tough," Gagliardi said.

Varnum announced his retirement in 1982, and Gagliardi filed for the Democratic nomination. Although not an incumbent, his Republican opponent was someone with formidable assets: a name known throughout the state and a well-financed campaign. "In 1982 it was just as tough [as in 1980] because I had to go up against a congressman who was raising money for his son to run against me," Gagliardi said. Bob Davis, Jr., son of the U.S. representative and former state senator, gave Gagliardi the fight of his career, succumbing by a mere 1,163 votes out of 32,461 ballots cast. Now enjoying the advantage of his own incumbency, Gagliardi has won re-election three times.

In Lansing, his political acumen and loyalty to the Blanchard administration as well as friendships with such powerful Democrats as Jacobetti and Dodak have made Gagliardi a formidable figure in a remarkably short time. In his third term Gagliardi achieved a seat on the House Appropriations Committee, chaired by Jacobetti; now, heading into his fourth, he has been elected Majority Floor Leader, in an extremely close vote, over the veteran Lynn Jondahl, who will begin his ninth term in January. Gagliardi said he did not realize how close his race against Jondahl would be (reportedly one or two votes) until it was over. "I feel real lucky . . . It sort of reminds me of my first election to the legislature," Gagliardi said. "I know I can continue to work with Jondahl . . . I consider him a friend."

Gagliardi has won a job often made difficult by the demands of one's colleagues. The Majority Floor Leader must schedule debate and voting on all legislation to come before the House and, in consultation with the Speaker, assign newly introduced legislation to committees for study. Bill sponsors and committee chairs often put considerable pressure on the floor leader to give special consideration to their pet legislation. Gagliardi's immediate predecessor is Lew Dodak, who already has announced that as Speaker he will govern more by consensus of the Democratic leadership than did his predecessor, Owen. Dodak's management style could make Gagliardi's position even more influential.

"Lew [Dodak] has done a heck of a job [as floor leader]," Gagliardi said, adding that he is "excited about" their partnership. "Most people in the House know me as a person . . . Pat Gagliardi's style is to be fair and honest with people," he said, acknowledging that he also will have to make partisan decisions

at times. For the most part, however, Gagliardi expects that he will get along well with House Minority Leader Paul Hillegonds (R-Holland) because both understand and respect the bipartisan nature of the institution they serve. Gagliardi said that his "colleagues wouldn't have elected me over such a highly respected member as Jondahl if they hadn't believed I have the kind of personality to handle the job." He also agrees that the floor leader needs a sense of humor to survive, an asset that both Dodak and Dodak's predecessor, Joe Forbes, possessed in abundance. "You have to be able to joke about [the job], to make fun of yourselves; otherwise this business would get way too serious and overwhelming," Gagliardi said.

From his current perspective on the Appropriations Committee, Gagliardi sees the budget for the 1989-90 fiscal year as "a real tough fight." He believes that the economy will not grow at a rate that will keep pace with the cost of providing government service at all levels. "I came [into office] with Governor Blanchard in 1983," Gagliardi said, adding that he does "not want to create a [budget crisis] of the type we found when we came in. We are going to have to live within our means."

Gagliardi also believes that the governor's proposal to divide the politically interconnected issues of property tax relief, school finance reform, and educational quality into three separate legislative pieces "is a good idea.... There is a disgust out there about those of us who sit in the legislature, let's face it, so it would be difficult to sell a two-cent increase in the sales tax" as advocated by those who wanted to provide property tax relief and considerable new money for K-12 education at the same time. Property tax relief, Gagliardi believes, will help everyone who has to deal with school finance, especially the legislature and local school boards. "Let's do the financing thing first and attack the [spending per pupil] equity and quality problems next," he said.

Because he comes from such a diverse district, Gagliardi has a wide-ranging grasp of school financing problems. He represents many out-of-formula districts that are poor, which means that property tax revenue behind each pupil is comparatively high, but only because these districts cover huge expanses and have very few students. "I have a K-12 district in Paradise that has 67 students, with the most per capita spending behind it, but it costs them a fortune to provide education" because of transportation costs, Gagliardi said. These districts are so widespread that they cannot consolidate. "In almost every one of my districts children ride buses two hours one way every day....I think that this is cruel and unusual punishment," he said. Gagliardi advocates revising the school aid formula to assist poor rural districts that incur extraordinary costs in providing transportation over large areas. He said that some school buses in the north must travel more than 100,000 miles a year. A "rural funding factor" would take into account the distances children must travel in those districts that already have been consolidated as much as possible. "I think we ought to have a rural factor just as we ought to give special assistance to such troubled urban districts as Detroit," Gagliardi said, noting that his own two children attend a tiny Class D school on Drummond Island.

The consummate political technocrat in Lansing, Gagliardi also pays careful attention to his district, which covers six counties and takes three hours to traverse by car. He is married to Debra Tomburrini, legal counsel to Senate Minority Leader Art Miller (D-Warren). Gagliardi drives the 305 miles to Drummond Island each week and spends considerable time on the road while he is in the north, wearing out a car every two years. Gagliardi considers himself a pragmatist rather than an ideologue, saying that "you can lead only as far as the people back home want you to . . . I go back home and listen to my people, who are a very diverse group."

Gagliardi also works closely with the Blanchard administration on economic development in the Upper Peninsula and sees great progress in the forest products and tourism industries. He points out that 6,000 to 7,000 new jobs have been created in forest products during the 1980s, and that the governor has lured travelers to the U.P. not only from other states, but from Michigan as well. "We argued four or five years ago about whether the "Yes! Michigan!" campaign should advertise in Michigan. I said 'yes,' let's advertise; let's tell people to look at our state. I think it's proven wise," Gagliardi said.

He also points out advances in agriculture and mining, which have lagged behind forest products and tourism but are slowly improving. Gagliardi said he has worked "aggressively" with Paul Kindinger, director of the Department of Agriculture, and Governor Blanchard on initiatives to assist farmers in the north. He also looks upon Michigan State University's new agricultural research station at Chatham as an encouraging sign of statewide cooperation.

Because his district includes vast stretches of recreation and park land, Gagliardi has had an up-and-down relationship with the Department of Natural Resources, which has a wide variety of regulatory powers. "Traditionally, the north and the U.P. have had problems with the department," Gagliardi said, "but [former DNR director Gordon] Guyer and [new DNR chief David] Hales have made attempts to change attitudes." He praised Guyer for returning decision-making power to regional directors, who, because they live in the districts where they work, are better able to understand local problems than are Lansing bureaucrats.

The DNR continues to have structural problems, Gagliardi believes, largely because the legislature has given it too much regulatory authority without adequate funding and staff. "We've had problems where we've asked the DNR to do too much regulation—everything from clean air to waterways to forest products." Rather than disperse some of this regulatory power to other departments, Gagliardi believes that some regulation should be eliminated. Moreover, he thinks that the legislature should monitor department spending for waste and identify the few middle- and upper-level managers who are not working enough hours to do their jobs properly.

Gagliardi, who served on appropriations subcommittees dealing with corrections, general government, natural resources and environment, regulatory matters, and retirement, believes that problems similar to those in the DNR exist in other state departments. "We [the legislature] have to go back and revisit all regulatory powers and look at the number of decision powers we have given state departments. We should make this review continuous, especially because needs for such regulation change over time," he said.

The politician in Gagliardi would like to see the legislature pursue campaign finance reform to reduce costs before the election of 1990, but Gagliardi the pragmatist does not expect drastic changes to occur because all major statewide offices will be contested and incumbents will want to preserve the *status quo*. Moreover, legislators who win in 1990 will be charged with redrawing legislative and congressional districts. He is not among those who worry about the influence of multiclient lobbyists who collect and disburse large campaign contributions for their clients. "There are a number of equally important factors: unions, corporations, and private citizens."

Michigan, he believes, "is a great state in which to be involved in politics" because of the number of young, bright, aggressive candidates. "People outside of Michigan watch us because of the quality of

people involved. A number of Michigan Republicans are prominent nationally, and in the Democratic Party, it's the same way from the governor on down," he said. Gagliardi also said it is too early to worry about whether the unannounced competition between Blanchard and Senate Majority Leader John Engler (R-Mt. Pleasant) for the governorship in 1990 will cause legislative gridlock early in the coming session.

As to his own future, Gagliardi said he will concentrate on doing a good job as floor leader instead of laying plans for further advancement. "When I come to 1990, I want people to look back and say that Pat Gagliardi did a good job. I want people in the capitol and back home to say that I was equal to the challenge Whatever happens, I'm not going to worry," he said.

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