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January 4, 2021

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**Editorial: No time for shouting, let's move Pennsylvania forward, together**

Years before [Kerry Benninghoff](#) ran for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, he remembers touring the Capitol with his young children and walking down the hallways, reading the lawmakers' names on the doors. He recalls telling his kids someday his name might be on one of those doors. Their response: "Yeah, right Dad. Get a life."

Today, his name isn't on just any door. It's on the one that belongs to the House majority leader's office in the stately Capitol building. Benninghoff, 58, of Centre County, said he is honored that his Republican colleagues chose to re-elect him in November as the caucus leader for the 2021-22 legislative session. He said he felt like he was on a five-month job interview following [his mid-term election to the post in June](#). He intends to serve as a mentor to newer members and share lessons he learned throughout his 24-year legislative career.

Thinking back to his freshman swearing-in day in 1997, he recalls sitting in the House chamber listening to Matt Ryan, who was House speaker at the time, offer this advice to the new class of lawmakers: "Make your work here notable enough to earn a place in history." The father of five children has championed various bills over the years but he is especially proud of the enactment of [a law that allows adopted children to have access to their original birth certificate](#). Benninghoff, who was adopted, keeps maps of Pennsylvania and the United States on a wall in his office, with pins signifying the location of people who have benefitted from that law.

Over the years, he used his prior role as Centre County coroner to help shape bills to address the concerns coroners have raised. He is passionate about cancer research and other healthcare initiatives, drawing on the loss of his youngest daughter Ryleigh at age 7 to the disease. More recently, he has reflected on his late father's experience of being laid off from his electrical engineering job and having to pick apples to make money to feed his family to relate to the struggles many unemployed Pennsylvanians are facing due to COVID-19 and the fallout of the pandemic.

As the leader of an at-times divided Republican majority, Benninghoff knows that he won't make everyone happy but he promises to give all of his members a chance to be heard. That's a lesson he learned from a former manager named Margaret who he worked with when he was an orderly at Mount Nittany Medical Center in State College. "She said, 'Kerry, everybody has some value. Everybody has some opinions. And if you think you have to please everybody all the time, you're not going to be a very good leader – or manager [as the case was] in those days. Sometimes you have to make tough decisions.'"

He said he encourages members to listen to others' opinions. It might not change their minds, he said, but they might learn something by doing it. "Whether it's Republicans and Democrats or even within our own caucus, there's always been fringe groups of greater degrees of some ultra-conservatism or liberalism on the other side," Benninghoff said. "But I've always kind of looked at it as while it's challenging, a diversity of opinions ultimately, hopefully brings a better product."

Rep. Sheryl Delozier, R-Cumberland County, believes Benninghoff's steadiness and approachable manner makes him right for the job as the state faces complicated challenges with members possessing competing ideas on how to address them. "I believe this session is one that I have not seen in a long time where so much baggage is coming over from last legislative session that needs to be addressed," she said. "Emotions are high and opinions are louder than emotion. We need someone even-keeled like Kerry and willing to listen to both sides."

Benninghoff said a diversity of opinions is part of the beauty of working in a chamber of 203 members. It's an opportunity to hear the views of lawmakers representing people from different parts of the state. Sadly, though, he said there are few opportunities outside of the House for members to learn more about each other to appreciate those differences.

Prior to the pandemic, Benninghoff made a concerted effort to build relationships with House colleagues by having dinners outside of the Capitol with Republican and Democratic members. He said he'd ask everyone a few questions about how they came to run for the House and details about their life. He found that he came away from those dinners knowing more about members he had known for years than he ever did before. He caught sight of members who came together for those meals talking to each other in the days that followed.

Among those he dined with on occasion is House Democratic Whip Jordan Harris of Philadelphia. Harris said he finds Benninghoff to be thoughtful of others' opinions and someone who seeks to find compromise. "In this time of COVID and Zoom and post-COVID recovery and rebuilding and repositioning and the financial stress that we have on our budget, it's important for our leaders not to be ideologues and not to play to the minorities in either of our caucuses but to do what is best for the greater good of all Pennsylvanians," Harris said. "There are serious problems in our commonwealth that were there before COVID that COVID has exacerbated. We need strong leaders on both sides of the aisle to be leaders to address those things."

While their political affiliations and regions they represent may be different, he said his and Benninghoff's legislative districts have commonalities. Both have parts of their district facing financial distress in need of innovation, industry, education and support and share a desire to do something about that. "We can disagree on how to get there but we need to agree that we need to get relief to our folks," Harris said. "I'm hopeful this next session could bring leadership, not leadership as a position, but for the leaders to possess the leadership necessary to get it done."

The start of a new legislative session usually represents a fresh start. But as Delozier pointed out, the 2021-22 session includes a lot of unfinished business from the last session. Lawmakers will work at crafting remedies to help the state recover from the economic toll of the pandemic. "It's time to get Pennsylvania rockin' and rollin'," he said. "Get people back to work. Get kids in the school. Get income coming into people's pockets and their businesses and rebuild this state and country."

He said the Republican caucus has a small internal group focusing on ways that could help restart the economy and create an atmosphere where businesses find it attractive to reopen or move into Pennsylvania. Lowering the corporate net income tax is critical to that in Benninghoff's mind. He said he believes the governor, too, agrees that is smart policy but they differ on the path to achieve that. There are a number of other suggestions the Tax Foundation made in a [Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry-commissioned report](#) to bring the state's tax code into the 21st century that Benninghoff admits wouldn't be easy to accomplish but remain worthy of consideration.

Such steps include expanding the number of services and goods subject to the state sales tax; lowering the personal income tax rate but making retirement income subject to it; and repealing the inheritance tax. "We get dependent on revenue sources and then they become hard to give them up. That's not reason to keep them," Benninghoff said. "We really want to see Pennsylvania grow and want people to be encouraged to live here and stay here and not only come back because it's a great place to retire."

The perennial issue of property tax reform will be raised but Benninghoff said there are no easy answers to that \$15 billion problem. "It does not mean we are not cognizant of the ever-increasing cost of public education and the burden it places on property taxes," Benninghoff said. "It's a matter of trying to keep the cost down and try and find additional resources. But unfortunately, everyone is trying to find additional resources at all levels of government, much less the poor taxpayers who pay all that stuff."

Cutting regulations also must be part the state's economic recovery strategy. "Many of our businesses will tell you they spend more time jumping through hoops and pushing paper than actually doing the business that they're in. That's not the message I want for Pennsylvania," he said. "I want us to be the envy of the East."

He cited other priorities: looking at the education system and the caliber of instruction children have received throughout the pandemic; finding ways to streamline government; expanding broadband access; providing personal protective equipment to frontline workers; finding new revenue sources to improve transportation infrastructure; and promoting the state's natural resources more to attract tourists. There are several proposed constitutional amendments that, if approved by the House and Senate in the 2021-22 legislative session, could go to voters for approval.

Benninghoff said lawmakers will focus on a proposed amendment that would limit the length of a governor's emergency declaration to 21 days, from the current 90 days, and it would require legislative approval for any extension of the emergency. It would clarify that the General Assembly could terminate or extend a governor's emergency declaration at any time without the threat of a veto. Benninghoff has been critical of Wolf's handling of the pandemic and what he called his failure to work with lawmakers. "There is only one reason why restaurants and small businesses are shut down, suffering and facing permanent closure, and that reason is the governor," he said in a statement. He criticized other moves by Wolf, such as [his veto of a bill that would allow local school officials to decide whether to allow sports](#) and set crowd limits.

Lyndsay Kensinger, the governor's spokeswoman, said Wolf welcomes the chance to work with Benninghoff and legislative leaders. "The governor is always willing to have conversations with, or meet with, members of the General Assembly and has done so many times over the years, including multiple meetings and conversations with Leader Benninghoff," she said. "The governor looks forward to working with the leadership as we move Pennsylvania forward in the new year."

Benninghoff faulted the governor and his administration for the oversight of the election. He stopped short of joining other Republicans in calling for disregarding the popular vote results and having the Legislature appoint the state's electors. But Benninghoff did [sign a letter](#) urging Congress to reject Pennsylvania's 20 electors who would be voting for President-elect Joe Biden; he also supported other legal challenges. He joined his GOP colleagues in asking Attorney General Josh Shapiro to appoint an independent prosecutor to look into possible violations of the state's election laws and for the state inspector general to review the Department of State's policies and procedures for irregularities during the 2020 general election.

[Democrats criticized Benninghoff and other Republican lawmakers](#), saying they are trying to overturn Pennsylvania's popular vote. State and local election officials defended the integrity of the election. "Claims about fraud in the election don't stand up to even the most basic fact checks" Wolf said in a tweet. "Public officials who intentionally spread these falsehoods do a disservice to the public and the democracy they took an oath to protect. Pennsylvanians deserve better."

Democratic legislative leaders – Sen. Jay Costa of Allegheny County and Rep. Joanna McClinton of Philadelphia – called on Republicans "to move on and focus on a peaceful transition – rather than partisan efforts to undermine the results they don't like." Shapiro called the election "fair, secure, and carried out by local election officials of both parties." State Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta, D-Philadelphia, called the GOP lawmakers' request to Congress to be "dumb and also dangerous as hell."

Benninghoff defended his decision to sign on to those documents, saying he was inundated with inquiries from people about irregularities or concerns about their experience at the polls and not being able to vote. "If someone comes in



and says I saw this, this and this irregularity or I was sent five ballots or whatever else, I believe we have a responsibility to put their minds at ease,” Benninghoff said. Benninghoff said his goal was not to flip electors to vote for President Donald Trump but to ask Congress not to let Dec. 8 – the date by which all states had to certify their election results – “keep you from at least looking at these irregularities and seeing what impact they may or may not have had.”

In the end, he said he accepts that Biden won Pennsylvania. “He’s been certified by our state and those have been presented to Congress. That is the outcome of the election,” Benninghoff said. His differences with Wolf are policy-based, not personal. Since being elected leader six months ago, you can count on one hand the number of one-on-one conversations he has had with the Democratic governor, all of them initiated by the GOP leader, said Benninghoff’s press secretary Jason Gottesman. “I don’t know Tom Wolf very well and it’s a shame that we don’t have more collegial opportunities because he was duly elected just as I was,” Benninghoff said.

He said a few years back when Wolf was diagnosed with prostate cancer, he had a conversation with him to wish him well and make a pitch for the state to invest more in cancer research. But that didn’t lead to any lasting acquaintance. “Sometimes the separation of powers is important but sadly we only get to know each other in snippets, which is not necessarily good,” Benninghoff said.

Benninghoff is a history buff. He appreciates the craftsmanship that went into a 114-year-old house he is remodeling in Showshoe, Centre County, right down to the 19-inch wide wood planks he tore off its walls. He admires the grandeur of the Capitol building, such as the oddity he discovered in a House mural (a person appears to have three feet) and the unevenness of the tiles on the first floor hallway from heavy foot traffic.

He thinks about the leaders who have sat in his Capitol office. He hopes his tenure will be regarded as a time when decisions were made to move the state forward, heeding the admonition from Speaker Ryan 24 years ago. Benninghoff admits he may just be “a blip on that radar screen when somebody reads through the history of Pennsylvania but it’s pretty cool to be part of that.” – **Pennlive**

