

# MICHIGAN'S LAWYER-LEGISLATORS of the 99th State Legislature

## Why the Michigan Legislature Needs You

*By Samantha Meinke*

Members of the Michigan legislature come from all corners of the state. They bring with them different experiences and diverse outlooks on life.

But they also have one thing in common. They all know they need you.

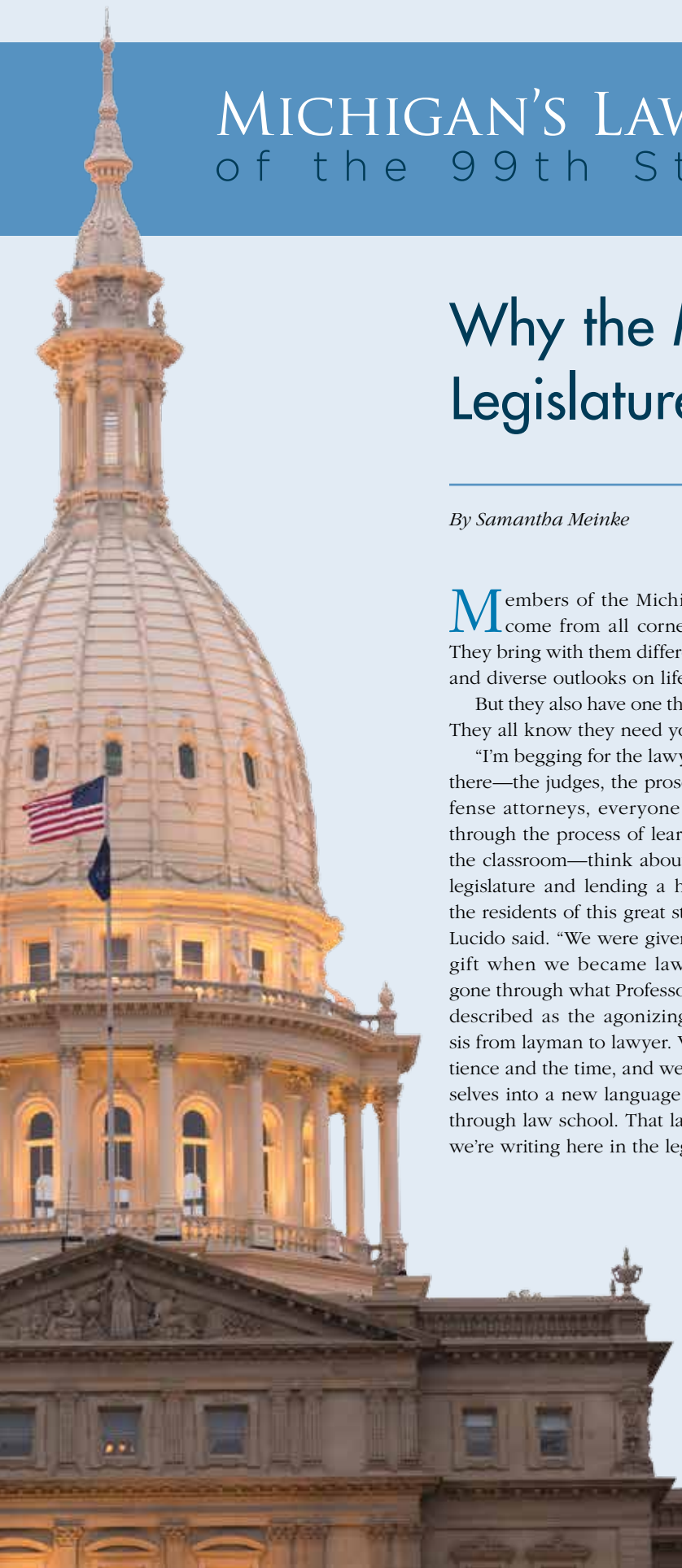
"I'm begging for the lawyers that are out there—the judges, the prosecutors, the defense attorneys, everyone who has gone through the process of learning the law in the classroom—think about coming to the legislature and lending a helping hand to the residents of this great state," Rep. Peter Lucido said. "We were given a very special gift when we became lawyers. We have gone through what Professor Harold Norris described as the agonizing metamorphosis from layman to lawyer. We took the patience and the time, and we immersed ourselves into a new language when we went through law school. That language is what we're writing here in the legislature."

When lawyers come together to make change in the world, they can have an incredible impact.

"One of my favorite moments in this job occurred in my first term," Speaker of the House Thomas Leonard wrote in an e-mail. "The preliminary exam is a very important step in district court of determining if [an alleged] criminal has cause to go to trial. While working as an assistant prosecutor, I learned just how much this system had been bogged down in red tape and become a burden to both crime victims and our local taxpayers. Everyone knew this problem existed, but no one was willing to fix it because all the different sides of the issue could not agree on even the smallest changes. But I had previously worked with both sides, and I knew what changes each wanted to see and what changes each side would be willing to accept. After months of putting everyone in a room and working out the details, we eventually passed a significant and bipartisan preliminary exam reform that will have a long-lasting positive impact on Michigan's justice system."

Every lawyer who has already served one or more terms in the state legislature can immediately think of ways other lawyers have contributed to his or her work.

But it's possible none of them has more appreciation for the guidance and assistance



attorneys can offer than Sen. Steven Bieda, who worked in the legislature for 12 years to help individuals who have been wrongfully convicted of crimes receive compensation from the state.

“I work with a large number of attorneys: some present ideas...and make the case for legislative change, others participate in helping to advocate for legislation that has already been introduced,” Sen. Bieda wrote in an e-mail. “I recently had legislation that I’ve worked on for many years signed into law....Michigan now joins 30 other states and the federal government in compensating the wrongfully convicted. While I was inspired to take up this quest by newspaper accounts of an individual who was wrongfully convicted, I relied on the assistance and experience of attorneys from the Innocence Projects at Cooley Law School and the University of Michigan in bringing this bill to the governor’s desk.”

### Why serve in the legislature?

Having legislators who come from a variety of backgrounds and bring with them a wealth of different personal and professional experiences is good for the people of Michigan.

“The legislature considers bills on a variety of topics,” Sen. Tonya Schuitmaker wrote in an e-mail. “Each bill goes through a committee that focuses on specific issues—natural resources, regulatory reform, insurance, etc. For the last six years, I’ve been vice chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which considers bills dealing with the practice of law. Some of those bills have dealt with complex legal issues, which are easier to understand given my background practicing law. Similarly, someone who spent a career in the insurance industry would have a better understanding of risk assessment.”



State Representative Klint Kesto working with colleagues in the Michigan House.

Many people think most legislators are attorneys. But in fact, of 148 voting members of the Michigan legislature, only 13 are licensed attorneys. Those 13 legislators play important roles.

“I believe lawyers contribute greatly to the functioning of the legislature,” Rep. Robert VerHeulen wrote in an e-mail. “A lawyer-legislator has a unique skill set: analysis and advocacy. A lawyer has a sense of justice and an appreciation for the rule of law. In addition, a lawyer is uniquely qualified to engage in the interaction of the legislative and judicial branches of government.”

Lawyer-legislators’ unique backgrounds make them valuable for other reasons as well.

“Lawyers bring the important skills of critical and analytical thinking that are so valuable to crafting legislation,” Rep. Klint Kesto wrote in an e-mail. “These skills, coupled with real world application and interpretation of the law, make lawyers excellent

legislators. As a profession that deals in an adversarial setting, lawyers are specially equipped to work with parties that have conflicting interests and find a solution where all parties are in agreement.”

Because of their training, attorneys can understand the impact of the language of the law. Lawyers can catch potential problems in drafted legislation that other legislators may not appreciate until the law goes into effect, causing unintended real-life consequences.

“We tend to be very methodical problem solvers,” Rep. Jeffrey Yaroch wrote in an e-mail. “We drill down to the heart of the issue and think about all possible outcomes of proposed legislation.”

“The smallest details can make a big difference when it comes to state law, and lawyers are some of the best at parsing out the details and making complex decisions with everyone’s needs in mind,” House Speaker

Leonard wrote. “The words we use in legislation impact access to our basic civil liberties, how children receive their education, and even whether people can follow their dreams and open a small business. Our team of lawyer-legislators is very good about considering the legislative impact beyond the obvious and finding the best way forward for everyone.”

### Benefits of a legal background

Lawyers serving in the Michigan legislature are universally grateful for their legal education.

“I thank God I had legal training and experience before I got here,” Rep. Lucido said. “I can’t even imagine how other legislative members without legal experience can read as much as needs to be read or have the depth of comprehension to perceive and validate what they’re doing.”

Lawyer-legislators say their legal education has vastly improved the quality of legislation.

“[There are] very few of us with formal training in the interpretation and construction of statutes and other legal documents,” Sen. Tory Rocca wrote in an e-mail. “I have found that training critical on a number of occasions in spotting language in legislation that...could result in consequences other than what the bills’ sponsors had intended.”

Legal training has helped legislators undertake heavy annual burdens required to keep state government running.

“To develop a budget that passes the House, the Senate, and ultimately is accepted by the governor requires advocacy skills as well as the ability to negotiate and compromise,” Rep. VerHeulen wrote. “It also requires the skills to understand and absorb the complexities of the state budget and the applicable federal rules and regulations that may relate to the subject area. For example, Medicaid is a very complex state program that is substantially funded and regulated by the federal government. The budget must reflect the priorities of the legislature, but also comply with complex federal regulations.”

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Legal training has also aided lawyer-legislators in drafting other unique laws of great significance.

“Being an attorney has been very helpful in terms of interpreting legislation and anticipating how courts are likely to interpret statutory language,” Rep. Timothy Greimel said. “In the context of the Detroit bankruptcy, there was language in the proposed Detroit assistance legislation that by reference might have affected not only city of Detroit retirees, but also retirees in other municipalities involved in similar pension and healthcare litigation. When this was brought to my attention, I talked through it with Judge Gerald Rosen and others involved in the city of Detroit bankruptcy and was able to get the language modified to not affect other municipalities and retirees.”

Other aspects of professional legal experience have been helpful to lawyer-legislators.

“Coming from a legal background has given me the ability to think critically about the issues we debate and see both sides of an argument,” Sen. Schuitmaker wrote.

Rep. Greimel agrees.

“Having had the experience of verbally sparring in the courtroom, and then setting that aside later that day has been good training for serving in the legislature. We’re going to disagree on a number of policy areas, but we’ve got to maintain a good working relationship in order to have the ability to find common ground on other issues,” he said.

### What you should know about running

Getting elected to public office is not an easy task.

“Running a serious campaign for the state legislature is an 18-month commitment akin to a second job or obtaining a graduate degree while working,” Rep. Brian Elder wrote in an e-mail.

You can’t just decide one day to run for office. First, you need to be an active member of your community.

“Being a legislator is about serving the constituents,” Sen. Schuitmaker wrote. “If you’re not already involved locally in service or professional organizations, get plugged in. Volunteer. If we hope to effectively represent our communities, we have to first know our communities. It’s cliché, but it’s true: people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Educate yourself on current events, get a good pair of shoes, and polish your people skills.

“In most legislative races, the candidate must be willing to knock on thousands of doors and be prepared to raise money to pay campaign expenses,” Rep. VerHeulen wrote. “Detailed policy positions should be thought through on a variety of issues including agriculture, business regulation, tax policy, and education. These are all complex and, at times, controversial issues. Your constituents will rarely be in agreement on these issues....A lawyer thinking of running

should consult with current and past legislators who would be more than willing to share their experiences and assist the lawyer in determining whether a run for office is something that should be pursued.”

Despite all the hard work required for a successful political run, standing for election can absolutely be worth the effort. It can help you satisfy driving forces in your life and personality.

“Running a campaign takes a lot of time and energy,” Rep. David LaGrand said. “It’s a real and serious commitment to the common good. I would advise you to check with your family first. I’m a common good guy.... It’s important to me to do what I can to try to make the world a better place.”

“The issues you will work on are very much those of your own choosing, allowing legislators to focus on matters they genuinely care about,” Sen. Rocca wrote. “It’s a wonderful opportunity to use your training and skills to help your community.”

If you are considering a political run, remember that while you can advocate for a client alone, you cannot accomplish a legislative goal without working with other people.

“Politics is the art of the possible,” Rep. Greimel said. “It’s important for a legislator who wants to be impactful to remain focused on good policy, but also to consider the political parameters within which they’re operating. I think a lawyer who is accustomed to making a purely legal argument to a judge or jury needs to remember that in the context of the legislature, politics enter into the equation and need to be considered when pushing for the best possible policy outcomes.”

“We all come from very different backgrounds, with different experiences and interests,” Speaker Leonard wrote. “But we all have the same goal. We all want to make our local community and our state a better place to live, work, and raise a family.... Anyone running for office must be able

and willing to work with any of their colleagues to find that common ground and work together.”

### Other ways to get involved

Even if you don’t want to run for a position in the legislature, you can still serve your community and state by working with elected officials.

“The legislature is constantly making changes in criminal and general civil law,” Sen. Rocca wrote. “Part of the very nature of a legislature is that many of the people making decisions about those changes have little or no training or experience in those areas. Advice from constituents who have such training and experience can help legislators vastly improve the policies they make. There are also opportunities for attorneys to serve by working as bill drafters and policy analysts, using their skills to ensure legislation is written correctly and legislators are properly informed about the content of the bills on which they vote.”

Very few people bother to take the time to reach out to legislators and offer guidance.

“If we hear from 15 to 20 people on a given piece of legislation, that’s a lot,” Rep. Greimel said. “A relatively small number of people can have a big impact on policy. Most legislators welcome input from Michigan residents, including those with special expertise, and lawyers should always feel welcome to contact their legislators.... I have routinely considered the input of sections of the State Bar and of individual lawyers when voting on certain bills.”

You can also get involved by joining groups that devote time and expertise to advising legislators.

“There are several organizations that advocate for the interests of lawyers and the interests of the clients lawyers represent,” Sen. Schuitmaker wrote. “The Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan, the Michigan Association for Justice, and the State

Bar of Michigan are just a few. Getting connected with one of these groups will help you stay up to date on how legislation may affect the legal profession. They can also provide guidance on the best way to share your knowledge of a topic with legislators. Laws aren’t made in a vacuum, and we always rely on the knowledge, experience, and expertise of members of the public when crafting policy.”

“Attorneys who represent different sections of the State Bar provide excellent insights as they are essentially experts in a particular area of the law,” Rep. Kesto wrote. “As chair of the House Judiciary Committee, I worked with attorneys on a weekly basis to help shape and improve legislation.”

Whatever else you do, every lawyer-legislator urges you to get involved—to share your expertise and passion. They welcome your input.

“I love the law,” Rep. Lucido said. “It’s the spirit and passion of my life. It’s what I have wanted to do since I was 10 years old.... Look—if you sit there arguing with the television, nothing is going to change. You’ve got to get up and work hard to make change happen.... We lawyers are foot soldiers of the freedoms we share in this country under the Constitution. I can’t look at my life and say it’s complete without doing my damndest to make a difference in this world. I have a chance here, in the legislature, to make a change, to leave a footprint, and to leave this world a better place than I found it.” ■

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*Samantha Meinke is the communications manager for the State Bar of Michigan. She manages all of the State Bar’s interactions with the news media and established and manages its social media accounts. She regularly consults with lawyers, bar associations, and law-related groups on using social media to their best advantage, and has been a featured speaker on social media at ABA TECH-SHOW for the last three years.*



## Meet the Legislators

### Representative Brian K. Elder (D-96, Bay City)



S-1285 Anderson House Office Building  
Ph: (517) 373-0158  
BrianElder@house.mi.gov

Bar Admit Date: November 18, 1998  
Law School: UCLA School of Law

Standing Committees: Agriculture (Minority Vice Chair); Energy Policy; Military and Veterans Affairs

Serving his first term, Rep. Elder comes from three generations of autoworkers. He has practiced law in mid-Michigan since 1998, representing dozens of municipalities, labor unions, union members, and individuals in the areas of estate planning and elder law. He also served as Bay County commissioner and chairman of the Bay County Board of Commissioners and has been acknowledged for his leadership in economic development projects.

### Representative Gary W. Howell (R-82, Lapeer)



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Ph: (517) 373-1800  
GaryHowell@house.mi.gov

Bar Admit Date: October 28, 1974  
Law School: University of Michigan Law School

Standing Committees: Agriculture; Local Government; Natural Resources (Chair); Transportation and Infrastructure

Rep. Howell is serving his first full term. In addition to being a lifelong farmer, he has been a township, city, and village attorney for 40 years. He was chairman of the Lapeer County Road Commission, president of the Lapeer County Bar Association, and president of the North Branch School Board and has worked with many other organizations. He is a U.S. Army veteran, having served overseas in Korea.

### Representative Timothy A. Greimel (D-29, Auburn Hills)



N-793 Anderson House Office Building  
Ph: (517) 373-0475  
TimGreimel@house.mi.gov

Bar Admit Date: November 15, 2000  
Law School: University of Michigan Law School

Standing Committees: Commerce and Trade; Insurance; Judiciary (Minority Vice Chair)

After serving as House minority leader in his first and second terms, Rep. Greimel is now serving his third full term in the House. Before joining the legislature, he practiced labor, employment, and civil rights law. In addition, he has served on the Oakland County Commission, his local school board, and boards for a number of nonprofit organizations.

### Representative Klint K. Kesto (R-39, Commerce Township)



S-888 Anderson House Office Building  
Ph: (517) 373-1779  
KlintKesto@house.mi.gov

Bar Admit Date: November 14, 2006  
Law School: Wayne State University Law School

Standing Committees: Commerce and Trade; Elections and Ethics; Law and Justice (Chair); Tax Policy

Rep. Kesto is serving his third term. Before entering public office, he was a prosecutor for Wayne County, worked for the U.S. Department of Energy and Department of Justice, and managed his family's small business.

### Representative David M. LaGrand (D-75, Grand Rapids)



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Ph: (517) 373-2668  
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Bar Admit Date: November 20, 1992  
Law School: University of Chicago

Standing Committee: Appropriations

Appropriations Subcommittees: Agriculture and Rural Development; General Government (Minority Vice Chair); Joint Capital Outlay

Rep. LaGrand is serving his first full term. Before joining the House, he practiced law at Warner, Norcross & Judd, served as a Kent County assistant prosecutor, and founded his own law firm focusing on family and criminal law. In addition, he has started a number of small businesses and served on the Grand Rapids City Commission and Grand Rapids Board of Education.

### Representative Thomas Leonard (R-93, Lansing)



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Ph: (517) 373-1778  
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Bar Admit Date: December 14, 2007  
Law School: Michigan State University School of Law

Statutory Standing Committees: House Fiscal Agency Governing Committee (Vice Chair); Legislative Council (Chair)

Rep. Leonard is serving his third term and his first as House speaker. He was assistant attorney general for the state of Michigan and a prosecutor for Genesee County, where he was assigned to the Special Crimes Division. In addition, he has served his community as chair of the DeWitt Township Public Safety Committee, associate member of the Clinton County Farm Bureau, and member of the DeWitt Lion's Club and St. John's Kiwanis Club.

### Representative Peter J. Lucido (R-36, Clinton Township)



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Ph: (517) 373-0843  
PeterLucido@house.mi.gov

Bar Admit Date: May 20, 1988  
Law School: Michigan State University School of Law

Standing Committees: Financial Liability Reform; Law and Justice (Vice Chair); Transportation and Infrastructure; Tax Policy

Rep. Lucido is serving his second term. Before entering public service, he founded his own law firm and was founder and publisher of *Macomb Now Magazine*. In addition to being a licensed attorney, he is also a licensed insurance agent, realtor, and security register representative.

### Representative Rose Mary C. Robinson (D-4, Detroit)



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Ph: (517) 373-1008  
RoseMaryRobinson@house.mi.gov

Bar Admit Date: June 7, 1973  
Law School: Wayne State University Law School

Standing Committees: Family, Children, and Seniors; Judiciary; Law and Justice

Rep. Robinson is serving her third term. Before joining the House, she was a criminal defense lawyer for more than 40 years. In addition, she worked as an attorney for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union Council 25. In 1970, she was the first woman elected to the Wayne County Commission. She also served as a member of the Detroit Charter Revision Commission.

### Representative Robert J. VerHeulen (R-74, Walker)



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Ph: (517) 373-8900  
RobVerHeulen@house.mi.gov  
Bar Admit Date: May 11, 1978  
Law School: Wayne State University Law School  
Standing Committee: Appropriations (Vice Chair)  
Appropriations Subcommittees: Environmental Quality; General Government (Chair); Higher Education; Judiciary (Chair)

Rep. VerHeulen is serving his third term. Before joining the House, he worked as an attorney for Meijer, most recently as general counsel to the Meijer Foundation. In addition, he served more than a decade as mayor of the city of Walker and was on the boards of several nonprofit organizations.

### Representative Jeffery P. Yaroch (R-33, Richmond)



N-797 Anderson House Office Building  
Ph: (517) 373-0820  
JeffYaroch@house.mi.gov  
Bar Admit Date: May 6, 2011  
Law School: Western Michigan University  
Cooley Law School  
Standing Committee: Appropriations  
Appropriations Subcommittees: Corrections (Vice Chair); Health and Human Services (Medicaid Subcommittee Vice Chair); Licensing and Regulatory Affairs and Insurance and Financial Services; Transportation (Vice Chair)

Rep. Yaroch is serving his first term. Before joining the House, he served as a Clinton Township firefighter for 25 years and ended his service with a rank of battalion chief. He also served on the Richmond City Council for several years.

### Senator Steven M. Bieda (D-9, Warren)



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Ph: (517) 373-8360  
SenSBieda@senate.michigan.gov  
Bar Admit Date: May 21, 1993  
Law Schools: University of Detroit Mercy School of Law; Wayne State University Law School  
Standing Committees: Economic Development and International Investment; Finance (Minority Vice Chair); Insurance (Minority Vice Chair); Judiciary (Minority Vice Chair)  
Statutory Standing Committee: Legislative Council (Alternate)

Sen. Bieda is serving his second term. He was first elected to state public office in the House in 2002. Before his service in the legislature, he worked as a director of labor relations for the city of Warren and senior policy analyst for the House of Representatives. He also holds the distinction of being the only living Michigianian to design a coin for the United States Mint.

### Senator Tory M. Rocca (R-10, Sterling Heights)



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Ph: (517) 373-7315  
SenTRocca@senate.michigan.gov  
Bar Admit Date: May 15, 2000  
Law School: University of Michigan Law School  
Standing Committees: Banking and Financial Institutions; Judiciary; Local Government; Regulatory Reform (Chair)  
Statutory Standing Committee: Administrative Rules (Vice Chair)

Sen. Rocca is serving his second term. He was first elected to state public office in the House in 2004, when he was the only freshman representative to be appointed chairman of a standing policy committee. His legal experience has focused on business law, premises liability defense, and product liability defense work.

### Senator Tonya Schuitmaker (R-26, Lawton)



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Ph: (517) 373-0793  
SenTSchuitmaker@senate.michigan.gov  
Bar Admit Date: November 10, 1993  
Law School: Detroit College of Law  
Standing Committees: Appropriations; Energy and Technology; Judiciary (Vice Chair); Oversight  
Statutory Standing Committee: Legislative Council (Alternate)

Sen. Schuitmaker is serving her second term. She was chosen as president pro tempore of the Senate in her first term and continues to hold this position. She also served three terms in the House. She was a partner of the law firm Schuitmaker, Cooper and Schuitmaker, focusing on family, estate, business, and municipal law. She has served in the State Bar of Michigan Representative Assembly and as president of the Van Buren County Bar Association. In addition, she has been involved in a number of nonprofit and civic organizations.