

Despite two-state practice, attorney still finds time for legislative career

It's fair to say that Christopher R. Blazejewski has a full plate these days.

A partner at Sherin and Lodgen, he practices in the firm's litigation department, splitting his time between the Providence and Boston offices. But in addition to the time he spends on his clients' business interests, Blazejewski also focuses on the state's business as the Democratic representative for Rhode Island House District 2, which encompasses several neighborhoods in Providence.

Since he was first elected in November 2010, the Harvard Law graduate has dedicated three evenings a week from January through June to advocating for his constituents on Smith Hill.

A number of his initiatives have been enacted, such as the first-in-the-nation Homeless Bill of Rights; a new fund to help prevent domestic violence; and small business and economic development programs.

Currently a member of the House leadership, Blazejewski was elected by his Democratic colleagues as deputy majority whip in 2015. Among the bills he is sponsoring in the current session are a measure to establish a mental health consumer advocate and wellness recovery center, and a resolution seeking \$1.9 million in funding for the Gano Street Gateway Project at India Point Park.

Blazejewski recently spoke with reporter Barry Bridges about juggling a law practice in two states with the demands of holding a seat in the General Assembly.



Q. What interested you in public office?

A. I ran because of my reaction to George Bush's administration, a response which is very similar to what we're seeing now with the Trump administration. And my constituents are united by a real concern and fear as to what they're seeing on the national level.

I have also studied and taught courses in political philosophy, and have become more interested and engaged in Rhode Island politics.

Q. If the concern is about what's happening nationally, what do residents of your district expect the General Assembly to do?

A. One thing we have to do is support our congressional delegation. I'm proud of their work in resisting President Trump's policies. We also have to continue to organize and send a strong message.

A major effort I'm involved in with other representatives is the "Fair Shot Agenda," where we're focusing on policies at the state level to help working families get a job and make a living for themselves. It's an economic package that includes

earned sick time, funding for school construction, reducing the car tax, and raising the minimum wage in a consistent way over time so that more money is put into the pockets of Rhode Islanders.

Although we have to be cognizant of avoiding a shock to businesses with the minimum wage, we can bring it up in steps so that families can have more money in their paychecks. This helps everyone.

Q. What are the big issues for the current legislative session? Where will your priorities lie in 2017?

A. My goals for this session will include protecting the environment, strengthening the public education system, protecting the rights of women and immigrants, and making the economy strong for everyone.

I'll also continue to work on good government reforms. Last year we passed a measure to restore Ethics Commission oversight over the General Assembly, and voters overwhelmingly approved that ballot question in November.

Every year, one of the biggest issues is the budget. We will see a large focus this year on reducing the regressive car tax, and there are proposals to make college more affordable for all Rhode Island families.

I'm also hopeful that the Fair Shot Agenda will be a way to push back against the radical proposals coming out of Washington.

Q. Like our congressional representatives, Rhode Island legislators serve two-year terms. Does it seem you're always running for re-election?

A. The two-year term certainly means you're always working, but it keeps legislators responsive to their constitu-

ents. It incentivizes us to work hard to serve the public.

Q. Is legal training necessary to be an effective legislator?

A. Out of 75 House members, 17 are lawyers. While I think having a background in the law helps, we are a part-time citizen legislature where all members have professional skills that they bring to bear on the substance of what we do.

Q. While practicing law in two jurisdictions, what differences have you seen between the Massachusetts and Rhode Island bars?

A. The biggest difference, of course, is that the Rhode Island bar is much smaller. That makes it easier to get to know other lawyers here and increases the likelihood you'll encounter the same lawyers in legal matters. The Rhode Island bar enjoys more camaraderie, and you're more likely to know each other on a first-name basis at bar activities and in the courtroom.

My practice is about 50-50 between the two states. In one of my niche practice areas, I represent lawyers in law firms on matters such as fee disputes and professional ethics, and I'm always impressed by the quality of lawyers in both Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Q. How do you manage all of your responsibilities, especially during the legislative session?

A. I'm lucky to have a family that is very supportive of my work, and I'm also lucky to work for a tremendous law firm that encourages us to engage in the community. **RILW**