

Mautino wields big stick for Downstate

By Jim Nowlan

As a state legislator, Frank Mautino is a natural—comfortable with people, confident, an acknowledged expert on budget matters, middle of the road, and willing to compromise when necessary.

For almost 20 years, Mautino, a Democrat from Spring Valley in central Illinois, labored in the trenches, all the time honing his skills as a student of budgets and taxation. In the past two years, his quiet work paid off, as he has moved quickly from party caucus chair to assistant majority leader and this year to deputy majority leader.

All of a sudden, Mautino is the “go to guy” for downstaters who need to move their legislation or stop proposals that might hurt the region.

For example, every Wednesday during session Rep. Tom Holbrook (D-Bellefonte), chair of the Democrat’s informal Downstate Caucus, gives Frank a list of bills and concerns of the shrinking number of Democrat downstaters in the House.

Recently Holbrook identified an amendment that would sunset (eliminate) tax benefits on the purchase of farm machinery. Frank killed the amendment in committee, even going against his own majority leader, a Chicagoan.

Frank, 48, had been groomed for the legislature. His father Dick had been a prominent House member and beer distributor from Spring Valley, and when Dick died in 1991, Frank was appointed to fill his seat.

As a college student, Frank worked on the family beer trucks, developing his gift for gab at the family-owned Italian restaurants and taverns that dot the eastern Bureau and LaSalle County landscape.

Frank could easily have been just a glad-handing back-bench lawmaker, but he had an interest in state revenues and budgets.

“Speaker Madigan told me I was the only House member he had known who actually volunteered for the Revenue Committee,” Frank told this writer recently.

In addition to that committee, Frank served on Illinois budget committees and the Legislative Audit Commission, “where you learn more about budgets than you ever wanted to know,” Frank smiles. Further, Mautino became active in the National Conference of State Legislators, where he has chaired the financial services committee.

“As part of leadership, I have to read every bill,” says Mautino, waving a daunting stack of paper in front of me, “and this is my homework for this week.”

Frank meets every day during session with Speaker Madigan and various members of the 11-member leadership team. At present, Mautino is a key negotiator on the sticky problem of how to reduce the state’s multi-billion dollar debt to the national government racked up by big unemployment payments to the jobless.

In addition, as part of leadership, Frank has to take sponsorship of tough bills, like the \$8 billion borrowing bill to pay off the state’s overdue bills, on which he has lost, thus far.

“I’ve only lost a couple of bills in 20 years, and the borrowing bill was one of them. But we’ll have to have some borrowing this spring, in order to capture about a billion dollars in Medicaid match (from the federal government).”

“I thought it was the right thing to do,” Mautino says of the borrowing. “We’re holding 88,000 vendors hostage by not paying them what we owe them.” And part of the income tax increase was to go for borrowing to pay off the unpaid bills.”

Frank credits the long-time Speaker of the House Michael Madigan with being a good listener, who “will hold a bill as necessary if I have a problem with it. And you can have real input with him, although you might not always get a ‘yes.’”

Frank is highly accessible in his district office, and he has some tips for those who would influence the policy process:

“Do not send Xerox letters. Much better is a handwritten letter with a couple of good arguments for your position.”

Mautino prefers face-to-face meetings with people, “so I can find out what’s really, deep down, on their minds.”

With the legislative leadership in Illinois having a strong grip on policy outcomes, Frank Mautino is just the fellow with whom you might want to have that face-to-face meeting, as the state faces tough decisions on budget and policy issues this year and beyond.