

Leadership: A More Practical Approach?

Many hope new leadership in the House and Senate will get the Legislature out of its ideological rut.

By Mary Ellen Klas

A young Allan Bense spent much of 1989 in Tallahassee lobbying the Legislature for what few have asked for since: A tax increase.

Bense, a partner in the Panama City-based road building company GAC Contractors at the time, was **urging lawmakers to pass a 10-cent increase in the state gas tax to close a mounting deficit in the roads budget (*emphasis added*)**. Road builders and contractors wanted the gas tax hike, against the wishes of Republican Gov. Bob Martinez, because state transportation officials had fast-tracked road projects, allowing hundreds of contractors to begin work on jobs the state didn't have the money to complete.

After three special sessions, Martinez compromised. Legislators raised the gas tax — 6 cents per gallon. The tax has stayed the same since, but the backlog in highway construction continues as the demands of newcomers to Florida have outpaced the taxes collected at the pump.

Fifteen years after that tax hike, Bense, 51, is now a conservative three-term Republican state representative from Panama City. As lawmakers meet this month in the final four weeks of their regular session, Bense will quietly take control as the next speaker of the House, designated by the Republican majority. In the Senate, Tom Lee (R-Brandon) will take over as president.

It's a rite of passage observed every two years in Tallahassee. While the name on the speaker's or president's door doesn't change, the outgoing presiding officer of the House and Senate traditionally defers authority to the incoming officers, who assume behind-the-scenes control.

They'll make the calls on which controversial bills get heard and which deals get made. Then they'll collect the promises from lobbyists for campaign cash for their fellow Republicans — whom they need to get re-elected in the fall.

Bense and Lee will officially take control of their chambers in the fall. Their platforms call for smaller government, fewer taxes and "running government more like a business."

In spite of this mantra, **many in Tallahassee hope Bense and Lee will take a more practical and less doctrinaire approach to the question of funding government and the state's backlog of infrastructure needs (*emphasis added*)**.

Setting the stage

Both Lee and Bense are businessmen who are considered pragmatic politicians, free of the ideological agendas that have fractured legislative relations for the past four years. More importantly, they have earned a reputation as men whose word is true and whose motives are clear.

"I think the tone will change," says Jim Smith, former Republican secretary of state who is close to both Lee and Bense. "At the end of the day, they're both gentlemen, and they won't let things get personal."

Lee, a home builder by trade and former Brandon Chamber of Commerce president, wants to lay the foundation for a new budget system that forces state leaders to acknowledge and address the backlog of services needs. His goal this year is to get a constitutional amendment on the ballot that will require legislators to write a five-year financial plan for the state, forcing them to prepare for the growth in programs and consider ways to pay for it.

“We are approaching a time when we’re going to have to make some very difficult decisions for how we set the stage for the next generation of Floridians,” Lee explains. “It’s going to take the ability to step outside an ideology and look at the facts. **We have billions and billions of dollars of deficiencies in the development of our transportation infrastructure (emphasis added).** We have a declining quality of life in this state, all as a result of the fact that the more we grow, the further we tend to get behind.”

The real agenda

Lee, 42, is vice president of Sabal Homes, a Brandon-based construction company started by his father. Since his election to the Senate in 1996, he has earned a reputation as an independent thinker and fiscal moderate who considers it a moral obligation to speak his mind, even if it challenges leaders of his own party. **He gets particularly perturbed by what he believes is manipulation of the state budget for political goals (emphasis added).**

For example, Lee blasts the governor’s proposed budget as being “financially irresponsible.” He is particularly critical of the governor’s use of one-time budget windfalls from the federal government or other sources to pay for ongoing programs. “You can’t continue to draw from your savings to pay your mortgage,” he says.

Lee criticizes the governor for proposing to “steal” \$300 million out of the transportation trust fund so that the money can be used to pay for unrelated services and tax cuts (emphasis added).

Finally, Lee has called on the governor and “the conservative Legislature to be honest.” The real agenda this year, he says, is to try “to get us through an election year so that everybody can feel good about themselves, and we’ll worry how to fix it when I take the podium next year.”

Lee also thinks it’s time the state start talking about tax reform: “There are some people who say tax reform is just a way to raise more revenue for the state. That has always been a way for conservatives to define tax reform for the purposes of killing it. What tax reform has always been about is tax fairness — getting some of these people out of the wagon and have them start helping us pull.”

Lee says that, unlike the governor, he’s not conditioned to consider politics first and policy second. He also admits he’s going to have to quiet his tongue as Senate president. “The governor was raised in an environment of political royalty and a diplomacy that is foreign to me,” Lee says. “I have to stretch to be diplomatic. To Jeb Bush, it comes naturally.”

SEN. TOM LEE

(R-Brandon)

Age: 42

Political career: Florida Senate president-designate, November 2004-06; Senate Rules and Calendar chairman; elected to Senate in 1996.

Hometown: Brandon (lived in Florida since age 7)

Represents: Hillsborough, Pasco and Polk counties in Senate District 10

Education: B.S., business, University of Tampa

Occupation: Vice president, Sabal Homes of Florida Inc.

Children: Regan, 6, and Brandon, 2

Source: Florida Clerk’s Manual

Major achievement

Bense, by contrast, has stayed out of the spotlight. He arrived in Tallahassee with the largest freshman class in state history in 1998 and immediately began pursuing his goal of becoming House speaker. He quickly earned a reputation as a dogged campaigner, a skilled money raiser who won over his House colleagues in a close race against Rep. Gaston Cantens, R-Miami.

“He just plain outlasted him,” says Charlie Hilton, Bense’s business partner and longtime mentor. “He’s a tireless person who never, never gives up.”

Bense says that he wants “to reduce the size of government,” but **he also knows the state has “some serious, big picture infrastructure problems that need to be addressed (*emphasis added*)**. I hope the governor has an appetite for it. I think Sen. Lee has an appetite for it. The question is, how do you solve it? I hope good strong minds will come together to figure out a way.”

Bense has branched out into other lines of work since his road construction days. He’s been part-owner of a cable television station and a beach renourishment company, and he’s developed hotels and golf courses. His net worth last year was \$8.5 million.

The success is a major achievement for a man whose father died at age 45, when Bense was just 14. His mother died three years later. Hilton, who had started an Optimists Club in Panama City, befriended Bense and became a surrogate father to him. Bense went to undergraduate and graduate school at Florida State University and returned to Panama City. He and Hilton eventually became business partners.

In 2002, then-Senate President John McKay attempted to use the influence of his office to get a constitutional amendment on the ballot that would ask voters to force a legislative review of the state’s tax exemptions. Then-House Speaker Tom Feeney chose Hilton, a board member of the fiscally conservative think tank the James Madison Institute, to head the study group that would set the stage for the House to oppose it. The Senate was forced to accept watered-down language that was thrown off the ballot by the court.

Hilton now says the only time Bense has “shot him off the saddle” on an issue was when Bense endorsed Sen. Charles Clary, R-Destin. Clary had backed McKay on tax reform, and Hilton wanted him ousted from office and replaced with someone Hilton had endorsed. But the Panhandle district was so loyal to Bense that his endorsement “was as good as gold,” Hilton says, and Clary was re-elected.

“I’m not saying he would be against all taxes, but I would think it’ll be a real job to persuade him,” Hilton says of Bense, adding: “**User fees are certainly more friendly than taxes.**” (*emphasis added*)

REP. ALLAN BENSE

(R-Panama City)

Age: 51

Political career: Elected to Florida House, 1998; current chairman, House Procedures Committee; designated next House speaker for the 2005 and 2006 legislative sessions.

Hometown: Panama City

Represents: Gulf County and part of Bay County

Education: Florida State University, B.S., 1972; M.B.A., 1974

Occupation: Contractor, road builder

Family: Wife, Tonie; children, Courtney, 25, Jason, 21, Taylor, 16

Source: Florida Clerk’s Manual

Maintaining peace

Lee and Bense first got to know each other on the golf course — Bense owns a golf course in Panama City, and Lee played golf at the University of Tampa. They grew closer last year, when the two were designated as key negotiators between the House and Senate in the final days of the regular session.

Finally, during the special session in October, to earmark money for the Scripps Research Institute, Lee cemented Bense's respect by winning Senate approval for the House's redistricting map. Without the bill, a federal judge would have been left to designate the boundary lines for the House districts, leaving in doubt Republican control of the chamber and jeopardizing Bense's speakership.

Lee and Bense know their biggest challenge will be maintaining peace between their chambers at a time when so many philosophical issues divide their own Republicans.

"The next speaker has the right personality and the right orientation toward problem-solving to align very well with me," Lee says. "The policy side of things is different, and I think there's a big question mark there. There is no doubt in my mind that the House has had a difficult time operating outside the shadow of the governor since 1998. I think the speaker has that ability, but whether the loyalties to the governor preclude him from doing that remains to be seen."

Bense says he doesn't have a huge social agenda, has no pet projects and believes if the business community can be successful, the rest of the state will prosper.

"I don't think the tax system we have in place now is perfect, but I think the tax system we have in place now is probably better than 98% of the states'."

He expects there will be differences between the House and Senate, as always, and the House will continue to be more philosophically aligned with the governor. "We're not going to agree on everything in '05 and '06," Bense says. "I'm just hoping we build a strong enough foundation so that when we do disagree, we can do it in a respectful manner."