



House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

JERRY CORNFIELD

Q&A: State House speaker on taxes, death penalty, harassment

Democrat Frank Chopp has had the speaker title since 1999, and he says he's not retiring this year.

By Jerry Cornfield

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OLYMPIA — Since the turn of the century, no one's dominated the legislating landscape quite like state House Speaker Frank Chopp.

In his reign, the Seattle Democrat has thwarted Republicans, frustrated governors and, at some point, angered most if not every member of his caucus during the past 18 sessions for quashing one or more of their initiatives.

Under the Capitol dome, his wizardry of the political craft is unequalled. He became co-speaker in 1999, when the two parties shared power. He's been the only speaker since 2002 and is the longest to serve in the post in state history.

There are whispers he'll quit when his term ends this year — which makes him laugh.

“I clearly am going to run for re-election,” he said in a recent conversation. “Absolutely.”

There were few other absolutes in a dialogue that touched on gun control, the death penalty, the House's handling of sexual harassment allegations and whether he's ever been accused of inappropriate behavior.

Here are excerpts, edited for clarity and space.

Question: Let's talk guns. Is [a ban on bump stocks](#) going to get through the House?

Answer: That's a possibility.

Q: Do you support it?

A: Yes, I represent my district and they definitely would support that.

Q: Do you want to see other gun bills like safe storage get to the governor's desk?

A: I think there is enough support to do some things but we'll have to see the details. We are working on the core issues of education, health care and jobs and then we'll see how those other ones play out.”

Q: Does [eliminating the death penalty](#) fall under the list of “other ones”?

A: It could. People have really strong feelings about that. It was voted on by the people. Look, the core issues are education, health care, jobs and then related issues like housing, for example.

Q: Will the House pass a carbon tax? Prior to the session, you seemed to be saying that with an initiative in the works, the focus needed to be on those other priorities.

A: People have a different opinion of the prospects about every hour. We're open-minded about it. The [governor cares about it](#) quite a bit. We'll see how it progresses.

Q: Are you open-minded about it?

A: Yes. I represent a district that strongly supports doing things to fight climate change.

Q: Why hasn't it been able to pass in your caucus?

A: People are concerned about the actual net impacts on local communities, jobs for example. Not everything in this state is doing as well economically. In my district, we've got more than enough jobs. Other places don't have that.

Q: Could you agree to support the tax break for manufacturing businesses vetoed by Gov. Jay Inslee last year if it would gain Republican votes to pass a carbon tax?

A: We're open to that idea. I've been working with a number of our members to figure out what would best help small businesses in rural areas. There are several ideas, one of which is coming up with a B&O (business-and-occupation) tax break. It would be more targeted for the places that need the help. We are interested in doing something because we want to make sure the entire state benefits. That's why we've had this One Washington theme for 20 years. Now the Republicans are mouthing what we've been saying for 20 years.

Q: A lawsuit brought by the media could force lawmakers to make their records public. What do you want to see happen this year? (Since the interview, a Thurston County Superior Court judge ruled lawmakers are subject to the law.)

A: You really have to ask all members of the Legislature for their personal opinion. Some want more public disclosure, which generally I'm in favor of. But then you've got members who feel very legitimately that in some areas this is just not appropriate. It's going to play itself out and we'll comply with whatever is decided.

Q: What was your reaction when House Minority Leader Dan Kristiansen revealed earlier this month that he was sexually harassed?

A: That was news to me. I think other people were surprised as well.

Q: In the ensuing days, did any other male lawmakers tell you they had been harassed?

A: No.

Q: Have you ever been the victim of sexual harassment?

A: No.

Q: Has any House member been accused of sexual harassment or inappropriate behavior since the session began?

A: No. Listen, we take this issue very seriously and will take appropriate action if we need to. We have to work very strongly to prevent sexual harassment or any other kind of harassment. That means not only that we have the right policies — and it appears that we have pretty strong policies — but we need regular and ongoing training to make clear what is appropriate and what is not appropriate.

Q: What more do you see the House doing?

A: We're interested in the idea of having a place outside the Legislature that staff, members and lobbyists could go if they have a concern or complaint. You have to work out details of how it would be structured, how it would run, how would we pay for it and would they have any legal authority. You want to make sure the person has a place to go and there is a person who can work with them in good faith to address it.

Q: Several women have accused former Democratic lawmaker Brendan Williams (2005-'10) of sexual harassment and assault. I've been told some House leaders were concerned enough about his behavior that they spoke with him. Did you ever talk to him?

A: We did not hear about those complaints until it came out. I mean, look, there's been lots of people interacting with Brendan over the years, I didn't interact with him much. I don't know if you remember but he was not necessarily my greatest fan. I didn't talk to him much.

Q: Have you ever been accused of inappropriate behavior?

A: Not that I am aware.

Q: OK, let's finish with the big question on many minds: Is this your last session?

A: I clearly am going to run for re-election. Absolutely. I am so excited about the issues that I have been involved in.

Q: Why do [the rumors](#) persist?

A: They've been going on for at least 12 years. That's when a state senator made a pronouncement that "Frank will be retiring for sure this year." I laughed. I said, "We'll see." It's just gossip. I am very excited about the work we're doing. I've got so much energy it's ridiculous.

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