

LAWMAKERS

Union man at heart: Clark works for the working class

Speaker pro tem hasn't missed a House vote

By Dan Dickson
For The Kentucky Gazette

Call Larry Clark the Cal Ripken of the Kentucky House of Representatives, having never missed a vote since arriving in the General Assembly in 1984. He and Ripken, the famed Baltimore Orioles player who played in 2,632 consecutive Major League Baseball games, have something in common — a dogged determination to show up to do the job the public assumes you will do.

"The voters expect me to be on the job every day," said state Rep. Clark, D-Okolona. "You can defend a yes or no vote a lot easier than you can not voting at all. I try to communicate. I send newsletters out with questionnaires in them to see what's on voters' minds and to make sure I'm responsive to their needs. It's part of my work ethic."

That work ethic was nurtured in Louisville's West End, where Clark was born in 1945. He's a life-long Louisville-area resident, attending the former Flaget High School, a Catholic college-prep school. He and his wife Violet have been married for nearly 40 years.

Clark's 46th House district is geographically long and quite varied.

"I have African-Americans, white and blue collar people and the working poor. It is made up of a diverse constituency, but I'd say you'd consider it a conservative district. I am also a Catholic. I have four Catholic churches in my district."

Growing up in a blue collar neighborhood, Clark developed an interest in the electrical trades, becoming a journeyman wireman. He's a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 369 in Louisville. He thinks if more legislators had union ties they'd be better in tune with constituents' needs.

"It would help them better understand the needs of working families."

One fellow lawmaker who does share a union tie is state Rep. Charlie Hoffman, D-Georgetown, a member of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union and a meat cutter at Kroger in Georgetown for the past 35 years.

"He's been my seat mate in the House chamber for the past 14 years. I know him to be a hard worker and an effective legislator," said Hoffman. "(Union membership) gives you a greater understanding of the issues that affect people who make up the backbone of the workforce of Kentucky."

Though one is from the city and the other from a small town, Clark agrees that he and Hoffman share a bond.

"We talk a lot about labor and family issues and how hard it is on families to make ends meet during these economic times with high unemployment," said Clark.

When Gov. Steve Beshear signed an executive order last year creating the Unemployment Insurance Task Force, Clark was among 18 members assigned to it. The task force worked to shore up the

state's unemployment insurance trust fund, which had fallen into deep financial trouble. During the recent special session, the General Assembly passed a bill, sponsored by Clark, which strengthened the fund. It received the support of business and labor groups.

"Being a member of organized labor gave me credibility with the business community to make sure we passed the bill," Clark remarked. "That's why I got involved in the unemployment task force, to take that plan back to solvency," he concluded.

Before that, during the regular session of the legislature this year, the House and Senate couldn't agree on a budget bill before the legislature had to adjourn April 15, forcing the governor to call the special session, at a cost of \$63,000 per day, to complete the task. The budget that emerged amid compromises was lean, to say the least.

"This budget is a reflection of our local and national economy. People want a smaller government and for us to live within our means. In the House, we thought education was a No. 1 priority and we protected that as best we could by minimizing cuts," Clark emphasized. "I wish we could have done more with construction and bonding, because government has the ability to create jobs and get people back to work, but it didn't happen."

Clark carries the additional title of speaker pro tem.

"I've been elected to that post nine times since 1993," says Clark. "Being in leadership means being strong, but also being willing to listen to your membership and working with other members of leadership."

As a long-time elected official in Frankfort, Clark is a mentor to newcomers. Perhaps he recalls his own quick ascension to the job when he won a special election for his district's seat in January 1984 and assumed office a month later.

"I try to make sure that when young members come in I am available to them. I started a program in which a new member is connected to another member outside their caucus. They are the only two who know who they are so they have someone they can go to and talk about issues and how to better serve. I just want to make the institution better."

For his efforts, Clark was selected Mentor of the Year by the Louisville-Jefferson County Young Democrats.

Clark, who was unopposed in the primary but who has a Republican opponent in the fall, advocates more women running for office and wants those already in the House or Senate to rise to leadership positions.

Ask Clark what he wants to see before he ends his career and he's quick with an answer: "The political climate today is pretty much 'in your face' politics. We need more civility in the process," he declared.

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Legislative Research Commission

House Speaker Pro Tem Larry Clark, D-Louisville, center foreground, is in the middle of the action on the House floor during the legislative session earlier this year.



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