

Andy Tobin, Fighting for the Entrepreneurial Spirit

By Lisa Schnebly-Heidinger

Arizona's food retail industry has a friend in House Speaker Andy Tobin.

Elected before the Legislature adjourned this spring, Tobin is so new to the position that he smiles when he tries the right key to get the speaker's office unlocked. The room, right behind the huge dais in the Arizona House of Representatives chamber, reflects an interest in sports, love of family, and some western memorabilia. It is here the Republican sits to talk with AFMA President Tim McCabe about his role in state government.

Elected to the Arizona Legislature in 2006, Tobin is fairly new to politics, although not new to public service. But he downplays what some could call a rapid rise to power when McCabe congratulates him on ascending to the top position in the lawmaking body. Tobin, in a crisp white shirt with a dignified tie, seems casual and comfortable, as if he'd be equally at home in denim. He isn't looking for limelight to bask in.

"Clearly there are ten members here who could come down and do this job," he says. "I just feel very lucky and fortunate that members felt I was the best candidate for the caucus to move forward." He adds that being friends with former Speakers Kirk Adams and Jim Weiers is reassuring: "If I'm smart enough to reach out for some friendly advice and counsel, these people are close by."

Back to his regard for the retail food industry; Tobin tells McCabe that he not only enjoys the annual event AFMA hosts for legislators and members ("It creates a nice casual atmosphere, and there's not a lot of relaxing during the session"), but has great respect for people involved in the field, from farm to fork.

"What you in the Food Industry do is incredible; the jobs you provide and the families you feed. Oftentimes you're taken for granted. You people are able to deliver; people don't think twice about it. I don't think a lot of people really know how complicated the business is."

McCabe agrees, adding that staying under the radar is usually a good place to be. He reminds Tobin that Arizona is the most competitive grocery market in the nation, adding that including convenience stores, the amount of food and fuel moved by AFMA members is on a grand scale.

"We get blasted for prices going up," adds McCabe. "Even though it's amazing that turkeys at Thanksgiving are the same price as 20 years ago. And we donate what comes out to 27 pounds of food for every resident in the state to food banks."

Tobin nods. "Your efforts to be involved down here, showing folks who you are, able to provide the quality you do and the safest food system in the world is taken for

granted. My hat's off to you. You take your jobs seriously, and we should at least be appreciative in recognizing it."

He and McCabe discuss the difficulty in getting grocery stores to open in small towns, touching on a feasibility study in Humboldt that hasn't borne fruit.

Perhaps Tobin's early training as a meat cutter gives him an appreciation of the Food Industry. ("My Irish immigrant grandfather said to learn a trade," he says with a laugh. "So I learned to be a meat cutter. There are days I wish I were still a meat cutter. I can still cut a steer down; it's like riding a bicycle. I still have my knives at home.")

Raised in New York, Tobin entered the meat business back East after attending Dowling College in marine biology didn't pan out as he'd planned. ("I wanted to pet Flipper, and never got my chance. I got bored with English and Sociology.") His father, formerly a New York City police officer, had applied to be chief of police in Kingman. While not given the position, he nonetheless fell in love with Arizona. Tobin followed him out here after graduation. Raised in New York City, he came to appreciate the advantages of rural living. After spending years in banking in Scottsdale and later opening a business in Dewey, Tobin moved to Prescott, then north to Paulden, between Prescott and Ash Fork. Now he lives on five acres against national forest land there, and says the commute is worth it.

"The water is great. The air is pure. We're at 4,000 feet. We don't get an awful lot of the snow, although we do get wind." But he's also keenly aware of the challenges facing rural residents, especially when it comes to government.

"Traffic lights – and jobs – are hard to find. I believe in the entrepreneurial spirit. Especially in rural areas, it kind of drives you into the political world. You've got to fight for everything you get up there."

Tobin says with a smile that after helping other candidates (including now-Secretary of State Ken Bennett) in Yavapai County with their campaigns, "They ran out of candidates and they picked me." He is a man who knows the value of every vote: having entered his first race after three candidates were already in, he won by a narrow 41-note margin.

But long before he was seeking his own nomination, Tobin found himself getting more involved in community service. He'd been hired at a Mira Bank branch in Scottsdale when he first came to Arizona, and joined the Phoenix Jaycees in 1981.

"Back then if you were in these companies they wanted upcoming executives to be involved in the community. In other groups it took years to work yourself into a position of office- or chair-holder, but the Jaycees were for younger people and had a good rep for doing things."

After Mira Bank President Gene Rice told Tobin to join Jaycees, Tobin found himself (as he does today) swiftly rising in the ranks of the organization. He became local, then state, then national president, which got him involved in politics at the national level.

“When I was national president of Junior Chamber, with a quarter-million members across the country, we were so concerned in 1987-88 with the budget that we endorsed our balanced-budget amendment, and carried it to Washington with both the Reagan and Bush administrations. That’s where it all started for me. I was fortunate to get to meet them both, and I find it fascinating, looking back on it, 23 years ago now, that we’re still having the conversation about balancing the budget. If they’d done it when I told them to, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Tobin came back to Arizona after having moved to Tulsa to serve as Jaycee’s national president, and opened his current business in insurance and employee benefit consulting. He also became involved in the YMCA, Sharlot Hall Museum, Big Brothers and various chambers of commerce.

“I have always been a dues-paying member. Now I’m in three for my business, and about ten for my campaign.” Tobin’s legislative district – number one – encompasses a lot of territory, especially contrasted with those around the Valley that can be very dense and low in square miles.

“It’s a big expanse of land. You’ve got to love it for all the right reasons. I could move and I don’t. But I think I work with 12 mayors in my district. You don’t have that as an urban lawmaker. It’s quite a diverse group, with different communities, just far away enough from one another, needing each other badly, and each with an interest in marketing the region as a whole. We’re not without our fights, but it’s a refreshing way to do business.” Tobin adds with pride that a number of distinguished lawmakers have come from the Prescott area over the years. “And folks have to work very hard to come from a rural community and be in a leadership role.”

McCabe asks about Tobin’s role as speaker for the upcoming session; how will it be different than serving as a general member?

“Well, my email fills up quicker, and my calendar got busier,” Tobin says. Just then his assistant Becca comes in with a question about an event scheduled for the next day. Tobin asks if he’s supposed to attend, and is told he’s the guest speaker. He nods, unruffled, “I probably ought to draw something up.” Tobin’s confidence keeps him calm; a trait that will surely help him in tense situations.

McCabe then asks what Tobin’s priorities will be when the Legislature convenes again.

“We’re in a race for jobs right now. When folks get back to work, a burden on the system is reduced. There’s a compounding effect: when people work, they buy

things. They stop having the state pay for medical needs. There's a reduction in state expenditures and an increase in state revenue. The person can buy that house, that car, that TV."

Tobin adds that achieving a balanced budget last session was the first step in bringing Arizona back to economic recovery.

"We had to get to the bottom. Now we're forecasting a surplus in 2012. It's the first time I can say that since I've been in office. You have to be honest about how much the government can take from the private sector before it hurts the private sector."

He adds that his goals for next year include using the model Governor Brewer created for the Department of Commerce to solve tourism issues. "We have a tourism industry desperately in need of help. I hope we work with executives in the tourism industry, come up with a plan for all the stakeholders, and create a new direction. We have issues that relate to things hurting Arizona's tourism. We have to make sure we can be competitive for tax structure, and create jobs."

Tobin also wants to focus on changes in tort reform and incentivizing education. "What does education reform look like going forward, and how do we pay for it? You've also heard me talk about being an energy exporter. Arizona has to know what our own needs are first. Then we have conflicting pieces: water use intrastate, and the energy grid. Trying to math these up, find out if there's a more efficient way to manage water and reduce expenditures without reducing services, is key. If we can be an exporter of power, it will help us."

Public safety is a major priority for Tobin. "We do have major issues with drug smuggling, and human smuggling, here. Our public safety is always at great risk. We have an obligation to support them; they are a funding priority of mine. So we'll try to be careful, but on the other hand I think the Governor has developed quite a cabinet looking for efficiencies."

Tobin says cuts aren't at the top of his agenda; efficiencies are. "Looking for stability in government is important. We made major mistakes not having the will to cut the budget. We wanted a soft landing and it never came. Our debt service now exceeds \$300 million a year. So you'll see us try to reduce our debt, and do a multi-year forecast."

Then McCabe mentions the recent special session Governor Jan Brewer called to extend unemployment benefits. "You had a position, the Governor had a position. Talk a little bit about that."

Tobin says that his concern went more to the underemployed than the unemployed. "Many Arizonans are self-employed, sole proprietors. The economy hurts them as much as an employee. The difference is that these people don't have unemployment checks. They've been in the marketplace, trying to make a living on their

own. They don't have health insurance. We felt it's important to create a package that fits everybody who is un- and under-employed, not just those receiving federal benefits.”

From there Tobin and McCabe move on to partisan conflicts. McCabe asks if Tobin has plans to bring the parties closer together.

“Well, I think you already see some of this happening. We just yesterday had a meeting on forestry that involved the minority right from the beginning. The Democrats are at the table on these issues involving what to do with our forests from the beginning. They talk about not being at the table on the budget; we've created two subcommittees so they can meet here during the summer before we get into session. They have a voice in what we do about debt.

“I have an open door policy,” Tobin continues. “I was here late last night because a member of the minority walked in, and we sat and talked. Often, the rift and partisanship is media-driven. A very small percentage of bills are partisan; probably 85 or 90 percent are non-partisan.”

McCabe asks if there's anything AFMA members can do to help the Legislature on issues that affect members. Tobin says getting to know the legislative staff and employees is almost as important as getting to know the officeholders.

“These are incredible public servants, and they work very hard. Whether it's someone getting information out, or the staff going through thousands of bills to make sure we aren't stepping on any land mines, even with cuts and reductions, the staff has really stepped up. They could be doing a lot of things, but they work here. And there are a lot more of them than of us.”

McCabe offered his willingness to assist in anything Tobin might want help on, and Tobin thanked him. He added a story about why he holds the Food Industry in such high regard.

“Let me tell you about something you might not know. Two years ago at Christmas things were really tight here in Arizona. I went online, found a phone number, and called the president of Jennie-O. This was the day before Christmas even, he was on holiday. But he called me right back. I got Bridgeway Health Solutions to make a contribution to cover the cost of 1000 turkeys. Jennie-O ate the cost of shipping. Less than 72 hours later, hundreds of turkeys were sent to Yuma, Tucson, Yavapai, other places around the state. Just with a phone call, I went to your industry to ask for help. They put it all together. It was really neat.”