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Jim Holcomb, policy guy by nature, takes reins at chamber

CHAD LIVENGOOD

Michigan Chamber of Commerce CEO Jim Holcomb

MICHIGAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: **Jim Holcomb, the new president and CEO of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce**, is no stranger to Lansing. He's been in town since 1992, working his way up from entry-level legislative aide jobs to the head of one the most powerful business lobby groups in the capital city. In January, he officially became the Michigan Chamber's CEO following 14 years as the chamber's [chief lobbyist, succeeding longtime CEO Rich Studley](#). Holcomb recently chatted with Crain's Senior Editor Chad Livengood about his career path and the issues he's focused on now that he's in charge of the 4,000-member business advocacy organization.

Tell me about your career trajectory, how you got to the chamber and ultimately why did you want to be CEO of the Michigan Chamber?

I've been in town since 1992, I was an intern in the state House and I was in law school (at the University of Dayton) at the time ... and I decided to transfer law schools and come to Cooley to finish up just because I enjoyed the legislative process so much. My career started off like a lot of people around town, just working in the Legislature. I worked for a great state rep from Southwest Michigan. His name was Bob Brackenridge. My first time in the Legislature was under shared power, so [Curtis] Hertel and [Paul] Hillegonds were sharing the speakership — it was a great learning experience. I worked in the House for several years. Then I went over and worked for Sen. Joanne Emmons in the Senate, who was a great mentor me. Another really good legislator, someone who really listened to their district, got things done. I practiced law for a few years and then came back to be policy director in the House, I was a legal counsel in the House ... chief of staff for [Speaker] Craig DeRoche. After that (2006) election, where Republicans were in the minority, I stayed around for a year. And then I've been at the chamber for now my 15th year.

What drew you to work for the chamber?

I like how it's the focus on the members. It's not about personalities. I get politics. I like politics. But my heart is really into policy and it's working to find solutions. And I always viewed the chamber as that. They were a strong voice for their members. And I also like the consistency in position. Because we are member-driven with a policy focus, well before I got here and it will be that way well after I leave, it's a great place to work because you feel like you're doing work that really helps people back in their communities. We hear from our members daily about the challenges and problems that they face. And anytime we can enter into a conversation with them and help figure out what they need, then deliver to them, it's a great feeling. You're helping people to make sure that their business is running well, their employees are served and their community is bettered.

Under your two predecessors, Rich Studley and Jim Barrett, there has been consistency in positions. How do they maintain that? And what's management of members look like at the Michigan Chamber?

We maintain it because we just stay true to our core principle that we're going to be member-driven and policy-focused. It's never about who sits in the CEO seat. I'm only the fourth one, and we're going to continue down that road. It's really because we have active policy committees and a really strong, active board. We're a diverse membership, with members in all 83 counties. Our board reflects that, reflects the vast industries here in Michigan. And it's one company, one vote. Whether you're a single-person shop or the biggest multinational corporation.

In some of the election year talking points, I'm hearing a lot of discussion that Michigan's business environment isn't as competitive as other states'. Are there specific areas where we are lagging that you think should be the main focus of policymakers?

It's hard to say because it goes by industry. ... I think where Michigan is making great strides and where we can continue to improve is we need a solid regulatory structure that really helps people comply. It's not just putting up a hurdle and making businesses jump through hoops.

From a tax standpoint, are we competitive with the states we want to compete with in our principal industry?

I think we are making progress, but we can always be better. Like I said, it depends on the industry — what works for one may not work for the other. Our premise will always be is the best tax system is the simplest, the broadest and the least intrusive for the taxpayer. But I do think we have made progress. Under Gov. (Rick) Snyder, we made a lot of progress. With Gov. (Gretchen) Whitmer, there's a lot of people talking about tax cuts now. ... The best thing is, let's make sure we're talking about it and we have a sensible tax structure that can be stable so business can operate efficiently and competitively in a global marketplace.

At the outset of the pandemic, there were several billions of dollars that went out the door from the Unemployment Trust Fund two years ago during the big mass layoffs. What does the chamber think should be done going forward to build back that fund to a healthy balance so we're ready for the next recession that will come along eventually?

First and foremost, we think any shortfall to the fund that was not due to employers laying off people but was the result of fraud and should absolutely be covered by the state (general fund). ... We don't believe businesses should bear that brunt of paying that back through increased assessments. It was through no fault of their own. COVID was, hopefully, a one-time issue — and I think we've learned a lot from that. But one thing we know we learned is you can't turn off the fraud detection measures and you have to still make sure the process works. ... What do we need to do to streamline this? There are a lot of good people within state government, and I don't think anybody was purposely trying to create a problem. But there were a lot of people out there who were purposely committing fraud to try to rip off the system. ... But going forward, how do we make sure that we don't have this same problem in the future? If we don't do that, we're missing a tremendous opportunity to make government work better.

Inline Play

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