

# What makes Al run?

Pscholka keeps up busy pace in Lansing

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LANSING — There aren't many jobs where you are expected to be an authority on health care, school truancy, higher education funding, and even disposing of swamp land — all in one day.

"It's an education," state Rep. Al Pscholka said of myriad topics that fall on a state legislator's desk.

These issues and more were among those that filled Pscholka's calendar

on Wednesday, as he was shadowed by Herald Palladium Staff Writer John Matuszak.

And that doesn't even count his responsibilities to shepherd the state's budget as the recently appointed chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. Those talks will heat up in the spring.

Pscholka, a Lincoln Township Republican in his third term, puts in about 60 to 70 hours a week, working five and sometimes six days in a row, staying in a hotel during the week and coming home on weekends.

On this particular

Wednesday, Pscholka's day started about 7:30 a.m. with a breakfast meeting. At 8:30 he and his staff — Adam Carlson, his senior budget advisor; Kirstie Sieloff, legislative director; and Christine Simon, legislative assistant and scheduler — descended on the office to go over the day's agenda.

The suite of offices, adjacent to the Appropriations Committee hearing room, is dotted with photos of the 79th District, including the St. Joseph lighthouses.

A photograph on the wall points up the brief learning curve Pscholka and others face in the era

of term limits. It shows Democrat D.J. Jacobetti, Michigan's longest-serving House member, in office from 1954 through 1994, including 19 years as appropriations chair.

It will soon be joined by a portrait of state Sen. Harry Gast, a Lincoln Township Republican who chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee for 19 years.

Pscholka has a scant two years to get comfortable in his role before his final term runs out.

Pscholka's third-floor office window overlooks the state capitol mall and the domed Supreme Court



John Matuszak / HP Staff

**State Rep. Al Pscholka, right, talks with Rep. Dave Pangel of Oronoko Township following a meeting of the appropriations committee Wednesday in Lansing. As committee chairman, Pscholka, in his third term, will soon be immersed in crafting the state's 2015-16 budget.**

building in the distance.

Mementos that decorate his desk include a Broncos football helmet from his alma mater, Western Michigan University. A Magic 8

Ball sits on a conference table, no doubt to assist with the tougher legislative decisions.

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## PSCHOLKA

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### Targeting truants

At a few minutes before 9, Pscholka and Sieloff briskly walked across the street to the House office building, where he testified in favor of his bill that would withhold government food assistance from parents whose children are chronically truant from school.

During his speech, Pscholka tells the story of a 7-year-old Benton Harbor boy whom he tutors, who doesn't always make it to school.

He also tells about another boy, raised by a single mother in Saginaw who always made sure that he was at school early.

He is that boy, he tells members of the Families, Children and Seniors committee.

"That education is what gave me the opportunity to be successful, so this is personal for me," Pscholka testified. "I believe in my heart that the way to break the cycle of poverty is through a good education."

Pscholka's bill passed the House in 2013 but didn't make it to the floor of the Senate. He said that Berrien County officials, including family court Judge Mabel Mayfield, have urged him to re-introduce the legislation.

Sieloff stayed behind to listen to other testimony as Pscholka dashed out to make a 9:30 Appropriations Committee meeting that begins precisely on time with the rap of his gavel.

### Swapping swampland

Pscholka presided over the committee confronting a potential quagmire that had languished since the 19th century.

It seems that about 800 acres of swamp land was never conveyed from the federal government to the state when other property was transferred in the 1830s. People have owned and paid taxes on the land without knowing it belonged to the feds.

The last time the issue came up, debate centered around such environmental concerns as possible fracking. This time it passed without any questions from lawmakers.

"We should meet at 9:30 more often," quipped Pscholka as he gavel the meeting closed at 9:37. "You're more relaxed at 9:30."

The abbreviated meeting leaves Pscholka a few minutes to consult with other committee members, including Rep. Dave Pagel of Oronoko Township.

He also joined a knot of lawmakers and aides, including his assistant Adam Carlson, to hash over budget shortfalls caused by businesses cashing in tax credits.

Carlson, a Dowagiac native and Notre Dame grad, has been with Pscholka since his first campaign in 2010. He was an intern in U.S. Rep. Fred Upton's office, where Pscholka was a legislative aide.

"I like him," Carlson, who lives in Meridian Township near Lansing, gives as one of his reasons for sticking with Pscholka. "Our ideals line up well."

Together, they have been able to get things done, he said.

Carlson and Kirstie Sieloff keep pace with Pscholka as he makes his rapid forays back and forth across the capitol grounds.

Wherever he goes, Pscholka seems to know just about everybody by first name, from his fellow lawmakers to former legislators, even secretaries and security guards.

He has made most of his contacts since being elected to the leg-

islature in 2010, Pscholka said. He is known for traveling the state on behalf of fellow Republicans.

Before coming to Lansing, he spent six years working in Upton's office, and two terms as a Lincoln Township trustee. He also was a vice president with Cornerstone Alliance for nine years, building a statewide and national reputation in economic development.

Despite his years in and around the seats of power, Pscholka said he retains some of the awe of a newcomer.

"It still makes the hairs on my arm stand up," he said during a stroll through the ornate Senate chamber.

When asked if he would like to be on that side of the capitol some day, Pscholka simply responds "Don't know."

### Legislative ups – and downs

Lunch for Pscholka is a piece of a sub sandwich swallowed while talking to medical students gathered at the offices of Governmental Consultant Services. They are lobbying to save \$57 million in state support that Gov. Rick Snyder cut from his budget proposal.

Pscholka leaves that conclave to make it to a 1:30 legislative session where he has a bill on the floor to deregulate the chair lift industry.

Here Pscholka learned that an entire day of legwork and listening can be eclipsed by half a dozen words.

Pscholka explained to his fellow legislators that current law makes it expensive for Michigan seniors to have the chair lifts installed in their homes, leading them to buy them in nearby Indiana or to install the devices themselves.

Even California – "the land of fruits and nuts," he said – has deregulated this industry.

"I shouldn't have said that," he added. "Sorry, Mr. Speaker."

The bill, co-sponsored by Rep. Aric Nesbitt of Lawton, passes 62-47. But it is his aside that attracts attention, as Democrats and gay rights groups later castigate Pscholka for what they claim was a derogatory term for homosexuals.

Pscholka later apologized, saying the comment was meant to be "jocular, not derogatory."

### Chairman's work never done

At 3 o'clock Pscholka still has meetings scheduled to discuss the Detroit Medical Center and liquor fees. He attended a meeting of the Workforce and Talent Development Committee where he had been pushing for funding for Lake Michigan College.

The committee approved a bill that would provide \$8.7 million for upgrades to the Napier Avenue campus, with the same amount in matching funds from the college.

Sieloff has a sit-down with the Department of Environmental Quality staff about the Orchard Hill landfill near Coloma, which has drawn complaints from residents about odors.

Sieloff, who has been with Pscholka since 2013, described him as a legislator who is sometimes blunt, but who will give you a straight answer.

He treats his staff well, which Sieloff said comes from his previous experience as an aide.

As to Pscholka's future political plans, the staff members are mum.

Perhaps the answer lies in a comment he shared with the medical students earlier in the day.

His wife, Suzanne, once told him of his political ambitions, "This is your dream, this is not my dream," Pscholka said.

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