

# 'Frankfort has not changed me,' says KY Senate's new Republican floor leader

Campbellsville Republican Max Wise talks about upcoming session, past political experiences

BY: MCKENNA HORSLEY

**F**RANKFORT — Sen. Max Wise said putting his name in the hat to become Kentucky Senate majority floor leader was an opportunity he could not pass up.

Last month, Senate Republicans elected Wise to be their next floor leader over former Republican Caucus Chair Sen. Julie Raque Adams of Louisville. Outgoing Floor Leader Damon Thayer did not seek reelection to the legislature this year.

Wise, a Campbellsville Republican, will begin his 10th year in the Senate as the 2025 legislative session begins in January. He said in a recent interview with the Kentucky Lantern that throughout his time in the Senate, he's had the chance to carry big policy bills for his fellow Republicans and other senators encouraged him to consider a leadership position.

"I didn't want to challenge a sitting member of leadership," Wise said. "I kind of wanted to play a long game and see what may open up."

Wise said that he felt that some of his own attributes — being able to communicate and work with others, trying to stand for integrity and "being a champion fighter" — would match those needed to be the next floor leader. He began considering seeking the role after Thayer announced he would leave the Senate.

"I did not want to have a regret in life of looking back and not running and wishing, 'I wish I had tried that,' because you never know, and I've always carried on the belief of you can't be afraid to lose in life," Wise said. "You got to take chances. And I just felt like this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. And at the same time, I'm humbled, I'm excited and I'm really looking forward to the 2025 session."

In the Lantern interview, Wise discussed the past legislation he's carried, his expectations for the upcoming session and what he plans to bring to his new role within his caucus.

### 'A great opportunity'

Wise represents the 16th Senate District, which includes the counties of Adair, Allen, Metcalfe, Monroe and Taylor as well as part of Warren County. He's also previously served as chair of the Senate Education Committee.

Many Kentuckians may know him as the running

mate of former U.S. Ambassador Kelly Craft in last year's gubernatorial election. They were defeated in the Republican primary by former Attorney General Daniel Cameron, who later went on to lose to Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear in the general election.

Sen. Max Wise, left, was on stage with Kelly Craft as she conceded defeat in the Republican primary for Kentucky governor, May 16, 2023, in Lexington. Her husband, coal executive Joe Craft, is on the right. (Kentucky Lantern photo by Abbey Cutrer)

However, Wise said that was a "great opportunity." He called the experience "unique" in that he was not running at the top of the ticket, but he still had the chance to meet Kentuckians across the state.

"Yep, we lost the race, but I learned more from a loss than I probably would have ever gotten if I had not been the lieutenant governor nominee with her," Wise said. "And I really, really appreciated that opportunity. And once again, I was in places of Kentucky I'd never been to before. I may have passed through some of those counties, but never really had stopped and listened ... (and had) conversations."

As a lawmaker, Wise has carried a variety of bills in different policy areas. Some of his highest profile bills include the hotly debated Senate Bill 150 from the 2023 legislative session, which ultimately established a ban on gender-affirming medical care for Kentucky's transgender youth among other changes in school policies regarding gender and sex education. During the 2024 legislative session, Wise carried a successful bill that would allow schools to hire armed "guardians" to fill vacant law enforcement positions. That aimed to build on a bipartisan school safety law Wise also carried after a 2018 shooting at Marshall County High School.

Wise said that some of the bills he's carried in the past may be considered "controversial" by some and "common sense" by others. However, he could not choose one that was his favorite, comparing it to choosing a favorite child as "every bill has been rewarding or it's been in an area that has been for different causes or different issues."

Wise predicts that as majority floor leader he will file fewer bills than he



(Submitted photo)

has in the past, though he noted he has "not been one that's ever filed 10-plus bills in a session."

"It's a lot of work to work your bill, and I don't think in my new role as floor leader, it's going to be about myself with legislation," Wise said. "I'm going to want to help members achieve success in their roles as legislators."

Sen. Max Wise, R-Campbellsville, addresses a rally in the Capitol Rotunda supporting anti-transgender legislation, March 2023. (Kentucky Lantern photo by McKenna Horsley)

As for what's on the table when the legislature convenes Jan. 7, Wise said he expects Republicans to move quickly to lower the state income tax rate another half-percent from 4% to 3.5% — following half-percent reductions in 2022 and 2023. He said the Senate will likely receive the House bill within the first week of the session. Revenue bills must originate in the House.

Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear has signaled he plans to sign the legislation when it comes to his desk, but remains cautious about the feasibility of ever entirely eliminating the state's personal income tax, a goal embraced by many Republican lawmakers and the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce. However, Wise said Republican lawmakers have enacted the tax cuts "in a very smart way" and showed taxpayers they are "putting more money back into their pocketbooks."

Wise also expects some

cleanup bills to be filed on past laws, as well as legislation on issues discussed during the interim session, such as workforce attraction, housing, child care, artificial intelligence, school efficiency and more. He said "every session takes on its own identity."

### 'Frankfort has not changed me'

In an interview earlier this month, Thayer told the Lantern managing the expectations of the 111 Republicans in the General Assembly will be a challenge for the party in

the future. Wise also noted that managing expectations of members will be a challenge for him as majority floor leader while also keeping the Republican supermajority moving forward on tax reform, economic growth and "being conservative."

"I think those are the types of things that our voters right now put us into these positions that they want to continue to see us doing those type of policy decisions," Wise said.

Wise did commend Thayer's time in leadership, saying he took "a lot of arrows that have come

his way" and made the role "his own." As for his own leadership style, Wise said, "you're not going to see me be quiet as a mouse" on legislation the Republican caucus is unified in backing. Wise added that he wants to be "very transparent" with members of the caucus and explain the reasoning behind decisions.

"Frankfort has not changed me, and I don't intend to change who I am, of working with others and taking stances that (are) what I believe in just because I'm now going to be a floor leader," Wise said.

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