

# Rep. Tom Leonard elected new Michigan House speaker

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(Photo: Handout)

*Lansing* — House Republicans chose Rep. Tom Leonard on Thursday as their new House speaker to oversee the state's lower legislative chamber next year.

The DeWitt Republican will take over in January after the current House Speaker Kevin Cotter, R-West Olive, leaves the Legislature because of term limits.

Republicans also chose other caucus leadership positions Thursday after successfully defending their majority on Election Day and holding onto a 63-seat majority in a 110-seat state House.

Leonard said mental health reform is one of his top three priorities for the upcoming House session beginning in January.

"Right now, when we incarcerate somebody in prisons, it costs three times more than somebody that doesn't suffer from some type of mental illness," Leonard said. "So we've got to continue to work on mental health

reform."

Some mental health experts and others have said many state residents with severe mental illnesses ended up in prisons after most of Michigan's state-run psychiatric institutions closed under Republican Gov. John Engler's administration. Now, psychotropic drugs present an enormous costs to prisons.

Leonard also stressed training for skilled trades and fixing the state's "broken teacher retirement system" as two other top priorities.

He said he is pushing to switch public teachers onto a defined contribution or 401(k)-style plan rather than a defined-benefit traditional pension plan, the former being less costly for employers.

Leonard said addressing the state's enormous auto insurance costs is another high priority because, "We have the highest auto insurance rates in the nation."

House Democrats elected state Rep. Sam Singh of East Lansing to be minority leader for the next two years. Rep. Christine Greig of Farmington Hills was elected minority floor leader by the Democratic caucus.

Current Minority Leader Tim Greimel of Auburn Hills unexpectedly announced he would step down following Democrats' failure to take back control of the House.

"This was a decision that I came to last night," Greimel said Wednesday. "I poured my heart and soul into the position of minority leader for four years and I'm looking to move on and do other things."

Republicans also selected a new speaker pro-tempore in Rep. Lee Chatfield – a vacant spot after Leonard moved up. Rep. Dan Lauwers, R-Brockway Township, will become majority floor leader, and Rob VerHeulen, R-Walker, will become majority whip.

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