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Quadrant squares off during legislative panel

MACKINAC ISLAND – If any session during the Detroit Regional Chamber Mackinac Policy Conference could be compared to a highly anticipated sporting event, it was the quadrant panel featuring Senate [Majority Leader Winnie Brinks](#), House [Speaker Matt Hall](#), Senate [Minority Leader Aric Nesbitt](#) and House [Minority Leader Ranjeev Puri](#).

Each member of the quadrant was welcomed to the stage to cheers from their respective parties and chambers, and the next 40 minutes were punctuated by laughter and gasps from the audience while the panelists exchanged thinly veiled insults and pointed to one another as the root of Lansing's problems.

Brinks (D-Grand Rapids) opened the panel by saying it was important for the Legislature to create stability in a moment of uncertainty.

"It's incredibly important for us to be really responsible here in the state of Michigan, and to add some of the predictability that we can by passing a responsible budget and doing it on time. By making sure that we are sitting down together, negotiating our differences and making sure that we do the budget," she said. "But also look at all those other priorities that people are bringing to us, things like health care, housing, education. ... We've been doing work on those topics in the Senate in addition to the budget, road funding is another example. All of those things need to happen, and it requires us coming together to find common ground."

Brinks made a point to say that the Senate was dedicated to that pursuit.

"And we'd like to have good partners," she said.

Immediately, Hall (R-Richland Township) said he was setting a good example of that, but not by working with Puri or the Senate. He said he was working with [Governor Gretchen Whitmer](#).

"I would encourage the Democrat leaders to empower your governor, Gretchen Whitmer, and empower her in negotiations, and her and I will get a deal done," he said. "And we'll get it done very quickly."

Puri (D-Canton Township) said that to create more certainty, the Legislature should be working together in a bipartisan fashion.

"I don't think it needs to be hard. ... Let's get a meeting on the books" Puri said, pulling out he phone to laughter and applause. "We're back in session next Tuesday. Looks like I have a 9 a.m. and an 11 a.m. open. If the speaker can agree to meet, we can start the dialogue and start working for the people."

"I don't need you," Hall responded to Puri, almost immediately. "We're getting things done. You look at all these votes we're taking. Every bill we're doing is 20 Democrats, yes, 25 Democrats, yes, 30 Democrats, yes. You only bring to the table negative ideas. ... You have no credibility, and we're working with Democrats that want to get stuff done that have positive solutions."

"Governor Whitmer said I'm the only legislative leader with the guts and the brains, that includes you guys, to put forward a roads plan and get it through a chamber," Hall continued, turning his ire toward the other leaders on stage. "Now you see I'm showing up with Warren Evans. I'm showing up with Mike Duggan. I'm showing up with Mark Hackel, all kinds of Democrats. ... We're doing everything we can in good faith to get things done, and we're working with the Democrats that are willing to work with us."

Brinks said that for any piece of legislation to become law during divided government, bicameral negotiations were necessary.

"If it's not also bicameral, it will never get to the governor's desk," she said. "For that to be true, there needs to be some communication between the chambers. There needs to be negotiations. ... That's how the Legislature works."

Brinks went on to say that the Michigan Constitution has very few requirements for the Legislature, but one of them is to pass a budget.

"The Senate is on track. We passed our budget," she said. "We are ready to sit down and have those conversations with you. We just need you to catch up. Pass the budget. Get into the room."

Hall objected, saying that there is not a constitutional obligation to pass a budget by the end of September.

"We do have a fiscal year that ends September 30, so we have a responsibility to fund the budget," he said. "When we get the budget to you, it's going to be balanced. It's going to be smaller than the one last year."

Hall once again declined to specify when the House would pass its budget.

"It's going to be very soon," he said.

"It should have been done two weeks ago, three weeks ago," Brinks interjected.

Hall continued, saying that the House's process of using the numbers from the May Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference was superior.

"We will use the May numbers when we reconcile the differences between the House and the Senate budgets, as has been done for many years under responsible Republican leadership in the past," Brinks said thinly. "I'm not sure why you think that now is a good time, in the face of all the chaos and uncertainty that we are seeing from D.C., to change that up and just take your time. ... Dragging this out is not responsible in terms of governing, and it's not helpful for our constituents."

Brinks said that despite productive conversations between other members of the House and the Senate, Hall was making it impossible for the Legislature to do its job and pass a budget on time.

"Well, we're not just tacking on 4 percent on top of last year and running a deficit budget," Hall fired back. "And by the way, you guys rushed the budget to us in July, and it was bigger than any budget ever before, and there are all kinds of drafting errors and typos and all kinds of things, and now you got to come back with a cleanup supplemental and a book closing to fix all that. So, when you get our budget, it's going to be a perfect budget."

The leaders were then asked to provide one small thing they thought the Legislature could work together on to pass.

Puri said he would like to see the Legislature maintain funding for universal free breakfast and lunch for K-12 students.

Nesbitt (R-Porter Township) said that he thought the Legislature could do big things, like a roads deal, and he thought that it should be put up for a yes or no vote in the Senate.

"Big things require negotiations. Requires sitting down and meeting. Ironing out your differences. Establishing a civil environment where people are not constantly insulting each other to set a stage so that we can have a productive conversation," Brinks said, looking toward Hall. "I know you can do it. Senator Nesbitt and I, for the record, sit down regularly. It's not that hard. Sometimes we talk about how cute his kids are."

"They are cute," Nesbitt said, jumping in.

Hall then pivoted to passing legislation on transparency and asked Brinks why the Senate wouldn't move the House's plan or enact the earmark transparency measures the House adopted in its rules.

Brinks fired back asking why Hall wouldn't move legislation to expand the Freedom of Information Act.

"This is literally a bill that you have supported in the past," she said. "It's passed the House. It's passed the Senate in different terms. It really is the gold standard of ethics and transparency ... if you really want to see more ethics and transparency, let's start there."

The panel ended with a lightening round, where the panelists were asked their thoughts about the possibility of a constitutional convention in 2027. Proposal 2026-1 is the automatic ballot proposal voters face every 16 years on whether to call a constitutional convention. The last convention was in 1961-62 with voters narrowing passing the proposed constitution in 1963. Voters have rejected the three previous proposals to call a new convention.

Hall took the opportunity to compliment Brinks for allowing Senate members to negotiate with him at the beginning of the term so he could work out a deal on bill for the Earned Sick Time Act and preserving the minimum tipped wage.

"What you saw on the Republican side was unity," Hall said as the audience began to giggle. "We don't see that on the Democrat side. The Democrat side is very fractured, and we're seeing that play out."

"Matt, this is not a compliment," Brinks interjected.

"You put that up for a vote," Hall said, continuing.

"The lesson here," Brinks said, speaking over him. "Is that we can do hard things. We can get in a room, we can negotiate things, and we can come out with policy that can pass both chambers and get to the governor's desk. Let's try that again."

– By Elena Durnbaugh

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