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Handling himself well during controversies

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He's sponsored hundreds of bills during his tenure in the Illinois General Assembly, but like most politicians thrust into the media spotlight, Sen. [Kirk W. Dillard](#) is probably most known for his losses and controversies. Earlier this year, the Republican lawmaker from Hinsdale lost his party's primary race for governor by less than 200 votes. And just three years ago, Dillard was criticized by members of his own party for appearing in a campaign commercial for Barack Obama.

While some might consider these to be the low points of his career, Dillard's colleagues say the opposite. The two examples, they say, show exactly what type of person he is — a loyal Republican who didn't want to damage his party's efforts by demanding a recount and a committed lawmaker who understands the importance of working with everyone, despite party affiliation.

"Kirk understands when you need to draw the line between being partisan and getting stuff done and some find that line hard to draw," said [Peter G. Baroni](#), an attorney with Leinenweber, Baroni & Daffada LLC. The former Republican staffer-turned lawyer lobbyist has spent the past few years working with Dillard on an overhaul of the state's Criminal Code. Baroni is the director of the Criminal Law, Edit, Align and Reform (CLEAR) Commission, and Dillard has successfully sponsored several of the group's proposals.

"This is a wholly bipartisan effort and Kirk has a unique capability to bring people together to solve problems," Baroni said. "He has the credibility with his party and the other side of the aisle so when he has a proposal or goes into a negotiation, he can command the respect of both sides."

[Roger R. Fross](#), an attorney at Locke, Lord, Bissell & Liddell LLP in Chicago where Dillard has practiced for nearly two decades, said while some people were critical of Dillard's appearance in Obama's campaign ad, he thought it showed a great deal of courage. "It's that type of courage that will get us out of this over-partisan funk we are in," Fross said, adding that he was disappointed Dillard didn't end up the Republican's gubernatorial candidate. He believes Dillard would have made an excellent governor as his fellow law partner is a hard worker who focuses on the big picture. "He's always out there thinking about the impact of different things," Fross said. "When he is in the middle of session, he'll call and ask me, 'Did you see this?' or 'You should think about that' or 'Here's something on that one matter.'"

Dillard, 55, said he doesn't regret running for governor or deciding against a recount. He's proud of the way he carried himself and has nothing but fondness for all of the people he met and worked with on the campaign trail. "While I may have prevailed in a recount, I didn't want to put our party through that," he said. "Whether it was Sen. [Bill] Brady or me, we needed to get running against Pat Quinn and the Democrats." Dillard, who has served in the Illinois Senate since 1993, said after spending months knocking on doors and making campaign speeches, he is going to wait until after the November election to reevaluate his situation.

In the meantime, Dillard, a father of two young daughters, said he is going to concentrate on rebuilding his law practice at Locke, Lord, where he handles product liability matters, among other areas. Fross said Dillard's career experiences are assets to the law firm. In addition to understanding the legislature, Fross said Dillard has experience in the executive branch as former governor Jim Edgar's chief of staff and former governor [James R. Thompson](#)'s director of legislative affairs. He also spent three years working as a judge for the Court of Claims.

"A lot of people don't have the wealth of experience Kirk does," Fross said. "When you want a good, solid opinion from somebody, he's the guy to go to." Paula Wolff, senior executive at Chicago Metropolis 2020, has known Dillard since the late '80s, when she worked on Thompson's policy staff and he worked on his legislative staff. Even back then, she said she could tell that one day, Dillard would make an excellent lawmaker. "He was very calm and patient," she said. "He was incredibly talented, got along with everyone and was able to carry the message out in a very positive way." After Dillard joined the General Assembly, Wolff said she worked with him on higher education legislation as president of Governors State University.

Most recently, Wolff has collaborated with Dillard in her role with Metropolis 2020, which helped developed the CLEAR Commission. She said he has been instrumental in the group's mission. "He has been very supportive and thorough, but also a helpful critic," she said. "He will be upfront and say, 'This isn't going to fly.'" Dillard, a 1982 graduate of DePaul University College of Law, said he prides himself on being a good listener and trying to learn from his fellow lawmakers. He's usually pretty quiet in committee meetings and during floor debates, but said he's not afraid to speak up when needed.

"I can be tough, but I do it in a civilized and dignified fashion," Dillard said. "That's sorely missing from government today." Besides the CLEAR Commission, Dillard said he is proud of his involvement with the Senate Judiciary Committee. He is currently the Republican spokesperson and previously served as the co-chair with now-Senate President [John J. Cullerton](#).

Cullerton said he had a very positive experience co-chairing the committee with Dillard, who "is a moderate Republican that we need more of." He said they worked together on various bipartisanship efforts like death penalty and tort reforms. Over the years, Dillard has pushed a variety of criminal justice legislation, as well as a law that returned the Pledge of Allegiance to high schools and was involved in the state's first ethics changes included in the Gift Ban Act. "He's smart and he knows state government," Cullerton said. "He's great."

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