Housing, transit top of mind for Davis

Here's what the new state representative hopes to accomplish in her 1st term

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State House News Service

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

State Rep. Leigh Davis speaks at a news conference following a meeting with Gov. Maura Healey and other state and local officials about funds for bridges and culverts in rural communities at Lenox Town Hall.

BOSTON — After 22 years, the largest district in the House is represented by a new face on Beacon Hill: Rep. Leigh Davis.

Davis — who has a background as a filmmaker, director and lecturer — isn't native to the Berkshires, but after living in Ireland for 12 years, she landed in Great Barrington with her three kids. She started running an errands service business before she went on to work at Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, The Berkshire Eagle and housing nonprofit Eagle Mill Redevelopment and Construct, along with volunteering at places like HospiceCare in the Berkshires and the Great Barrington Land Conservancy.

Davis' foray into local government began in 2013 on the Great Barrington Finance Committee. Before she was elected to the House in November, she served on the town's Select Board, where she chaired a housing subcommittee.

In a recent conversation with the News Service, Davis spoke about her Berkshire-based transit goals, her strategy to be a voice for rural Massachusetts on Beacon Hill, and how she's handled the first few months in office.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and length.

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE: How have your first three months been in the House?

STATE REP. LEIGH DAVIS: Every day is an education. [The other day] was a perfect example. I started out, and I was a presenter for the Massachusetts Coalition of Suicide Prevention. I gave an award to someone in my district from Lee, and having to give a presentation made me think about my relationship with suicide, and it's something that I would never even think about, or I've put past me, and it wasn't until I was kind of put in a position of having to talk about it that it brought up things from my past with my kids. My daughters have struggled with mental health issues. I had to make a choice of feeling vulnerable and telling this group that I'd never seen before of my struggles. It's introducing me to parts of myself that I've kind of put to the side, and it's also introducing the people that I've never met.

Following that, I ran off to meet with the Black and Latino Caucus, which I'm part of. I'm with this group of wonderful colleagues, and I'm telling them about a feeling of always questioning my identity because I'm biracial — again, I'm talking to this group of people I don't really know that well about things that are very close to me. My dad's Black, my mom's white, that I've always kind of felt like the black sheep. And just having these groups of people that I've never met before embrace me and say, "We support you and we want to guide you to your goal" is a gift.

SHNS: You're the first woman and first person of color to be elected to this seat. What has that experience been like for you this far?

DAVIS: I feel such an overwhelming support, and a feeling of someone that [people] can identify with. I'm a parent to three, I've also struggled. When I moved here from Ireland, I was on WIC, I was on SNAP, I was on MassHealth. I started an errand service business so that I could be there for my children and figure out how to pay the bills. I worked in retail, I was where people are. When I talk to my constituents, I'm like, "I was you, I absolutely understand." When we arrived, I had no foundation, no tether, it was a leap of faith. People saw me as a parent, a volunteer, as someone struggling. Now being in the position of being a representative, they've seen me grow. It was so interesting — when my predecessor stepped down, my phone blew up. People were calling and texting and emailing me saying, "You know what you've got to do?" And I'm like, "What?" And they're like, "You've got to run for this." And I was like, "Whoa." I think people were ready for me, and I didn't even recognize it.

SHNS: Your predecessor, [William] "Smitty" Pignatelli, said in an interview before he left office that sometimes it can feel like Western Mass. is a bit forgotten on Beacon Hill. What have you noticed about that relationship so far?

DAVIS: I keep hearing that. I went into the office hearing that, because it's something that's echoed. And my feeling about that was, if it's true, I'm going to do all that I can to reverse that. So I'm very, very engaged in the Statehouse with the 24 bills that I've filed. I remember, you know, asking [Pignatelli at the time], "Did you do anything your first session?" And he gave me the impression that he hadn't. And then I kind of felt like maybe I don't have to do much. But then I was like — I'm in this position for a reason. I took it to really advocate for Western Mass. and to work with my colleagues on their issues and find the commonality. I dove in and I remembered the conversations I had when I was campaigning for 10 months, and I remembered issues that kept coming up: transportation, housing, emergency medical services crisis.

A lot of that is coming together and having our priorities align. For instance, when the transportation package came out from the governor, there's a lot of talk about helping the MBTA. And I was kind of raising a flag saying, "What about Western Mass.?" I'm a huge proponent of micro-transit and on-demand transportation, [which has] been very successful in the 3rd Berkshire District. That's something that I see we need a bit more equity for Western Mass. So for sure, there are instances that I think we need to be a bit louder and prouder.

SHNS: One of your bills addresses that concept of micro-transit. What does that entail?

DAVIS: In rural Mass., we have regional transit systems, but it's not enough. It's not regularly scheduled, it has issues. For rural Mass., it's actually very costly. So we developed a micro-transit pilot program in Great Barrington years ago, and it was very successful. It started out in Great Barrington using existing Council on Aging vans. It has now blossomed to around six towns. This bill dedicates a funding stream solely for micro-transit. It's similar to EMS, it's kind of a patchwork of grants. There's no stability, we're struggling recruiting drivers. I'm trying to work on a way to stabilize micro-transit and raise that this is a solution for rural Mass., in particular. It's more affordable to run a micro-transit program than the existing program that we have with RTAs — it's quite expensive to have a van going around, maybe on a loop, and maybe picking one or two people up. Micro-transit is an on-demand app program. I'm trying to flag it as something that could be a successful solution for the whole commonwealth, whether that's part of the budget, or whether that's codifying something that's in the budget and raising the profile of this as an issue. It's about equity as well. I look at the money being dedicated toward Boston and I feel that, for equity purposes, micro-transit works in rural Mass., let's dedicate a stream of funding for that.

SHNS: There have been some recent headlines out of the Berkshires revolving around a few incidents where people in positions of power in schools [allegedly] took advantage of students. You filed a bill that would address those situations — how did you decide to take on this issue?

DAVIS: This is a big one. [My bill is] a companion bill to Sen. Joan Lovely's same bill in the Senate. For nearly a decade, she's been trying to address the age of consent loophole that exists. Year after year, it hasn't advanced. During my nine months of campaigning, the Miss Hall's story broke — Miss Hall's is in Pittsfield, not my district, but as I'm knocking on doors, people are saying, "You need to do something about this, this is crazy, how can a teacher get away with this?" I think maybe two weeks after I was elected, I met Berkshire County DA Tim Shugrue — I remember reading an interview saying he was frustrated by the law that allowed this loophole to happen and he wasn't able to prosecute. So we had a discussion, and I [decided to] talk to Sen. Lovely to see if she'd be open to me having a companion bill so I could support her, and I could address all the calls from advocates and constituents. I see it from a former educator's perspective, I see it as a mother. It's very personal to me, it's not just policy.

SHNS: A lot of your EMS-related bills are centered around a larger goal, which would be for the state to declare EMS an essential service, right?

DAVIS: I took the big picture, and I realized it's a big picture, and I realized there's money involved. The central problem of EMS [is that] it's not seen as an essential service. What that [includes] is a dedicated [funding] stream, and the state stepping up and saying, "This is something that deserves the same status as police and fire." They could get the pensions, they could get the benefits, they could get the funding that EMS are now scrambling for every year to stay afloat. I covered myself by kind of chopping it up and saying, "OK, if I don't get the big goal, then what could we do that would help us immediately?" So another bill designates an EMS commission to look at this. [Another is] the Treatment-in-Place pilot program, which would allow EMS to have a different funding stream, so instead of having to only receive payment when they transfer you to a hospital — which is how they get reimbursed right now — they could actually have the ability to get paid for treating in place, or telehealth.

What I'm trying to do is flag it as a crisis. This is a health issue, and in rural Mass., our population is getting older and it's quite hard to get volunteers. The days of volunteer EMS are long gone. As I'm having these conversations, the fire departments are saying, "Hey, we need to have the same conversations about fire," so that's probably my next one. It's something that having an older population, having a population that's so scattered — the fact that I have 18 different towns, 18 siloed governments … I'm just trying to get some kind of system together so that we're unified, and that people feel like they're being supported.

SHNS: What would your proposed EMS licensure compact accomplish?

DAVIS: Western Mass. borders New York and Connecticut, and we're very close to Vermont. With New York moving toward declaring EMS as an essential service, we have EMS that we're at risk of losing because they can get better pay and get certified easier. We're losing key personnel to different states because we are kind of behind the curve. This would allow them to work seamlessly between states, to basically stop that drain that could happen, between the other states around us having better systems in place. Making it easier for EMS to be recruited into Massachusetts, and vice versa. I did look at the [2024] Nurse [Licensure] Compact, and it's something that when I had my meetings with stakeholders, they actually flagged.

SHNS: There are housing troubles statewide, but rural regions see them sometimes differently than denser areas. What are some steps that could help with housing production and affordability in your district?

DAVIS: I'm particularly looking at the seasonal communities designation. Great Barrington wasn't part of that first round, and I'm going to be very vocal that it should be. We didn't have [a large] enough percentage of seasonal homes that made the cut, but my argument is that we're the hub and we're surrounded by seasonal communities, and folks that have Airbnbs and seasonal homes in, let's say Alford or Becket, they come to Great Barrington as the hub for the library or the senior center.

I am quite passionate about repurposing existing properties. We have a lot of older homes, we have historic properties, we have mills, we have motels that could be turned into [single-room occupancy]. I worked as director of development for Eagle Mill, an old paper mill, and now we're repurposing it into hundreds of units of housing. The other thing I'm looking at is home share, which is in Vermont — a matching program of seniors [who] have rooms in their existing homes that need some help around the home or paying property taxes. And it's kind of a matching program [for] workers looking for housing and seniors that have existing room in their homes.

I think we need everything. It's not either/or, we need zoning changes, we need to look at density, make it easier for people [participate in] ADU bylaw. I wrote a bylaw about restricting short-term rentals in Great Barrington, so I kind of made my mark with that. I could see the tide of short term rentals, seeing what was happening on the Cape and Islands — Berkshires was next. I was very in favor of the real estate transfer fee, I testified twice in front of the Revenue Committee and in front of the Housing Committee. The rental voucher system, as properties get more expensive, we need to make sure the vouchers follow that.

SHNS: If you have questions about the job, who do you turn to?

DAVIS: I have a funny story. When I was running for my campaign, I'm on LinkedIn, and there was one gentleman that was sending me really encouraging messages. He was from Florida. I was like, "Why is there someone following me from Florida?" His name was Chris Hodgkins, and I researched him, and he was a state representative before my predecessor, for 20 years, for the 4th Berkshire District, and he had been following my work in Great Barrington on the Select Board. He has become my greatest role model in terms of telling me how things are and giving me that boost of confidence. Another former rep, Chris Speranzo — again, I'd never known him, but he was the 3nd Berkshire Rep before [Rep.] Tricia Farley-Bouvier, and he came out of the woodwork. He really offers a point of view from an attorney, so I have this balance of people that have been here and that unexpectedly have become really dear mentors and friends. And, the Berkshire delegation is obviously very helpful, and the freshmen are wonderful. We're all kind of just bouncing off each other. Every day is an education.

SHNS: How has your perspective changed over these first couple of months now that you're within the Legislature?

DAVIS: It's so supportive. I never expected that, and I didn't really know what to make of the leadership and the structure. I honestly feel like they have our back, and that they are a group of people that are very wise, that have made changes for the good. My background is as a filmmaker, so I approach things by looking at the big picture, and I think it's helped me with my mentality of puzzles. You look at the puzzle and you see what it's supposed to be, and then you start taking the pieces and you build it. And I think having such varied experiences, that's how I'm kind of approaching being a legislator. I find myself thinking — how did I start as a filmmaker and end up as a representative? I was always under the impression you had to be an attorney or have your PhD, and I've realized that the value of lived experience is just as important as having high education or so forth. So that's been something surprising as well — that my lived experience is valued.