

Iron Range advocate

Bakk hopes to continue his efforts for residents of northeast Minnesota in the Senate

By SARAH MCKENZIE

Rep. Tom Bakk (DFL-Cook), who is stepping down to run for the Minnesota Senate, points to newly renovated schools in the state's northeastern corner as the hallmark of his work in the House.

Along with Sen. Doug Johnson (DFL-Tower), Bakk worked to secure public dollars for schools in Lake and Cook counties. Cook County, in particular, has a small tax base to draw from to fund school improvements.

In the state's far northeastern corner, the county is sparsely populated with 5,000 residents. About 90 percent of the land is publicly owned.

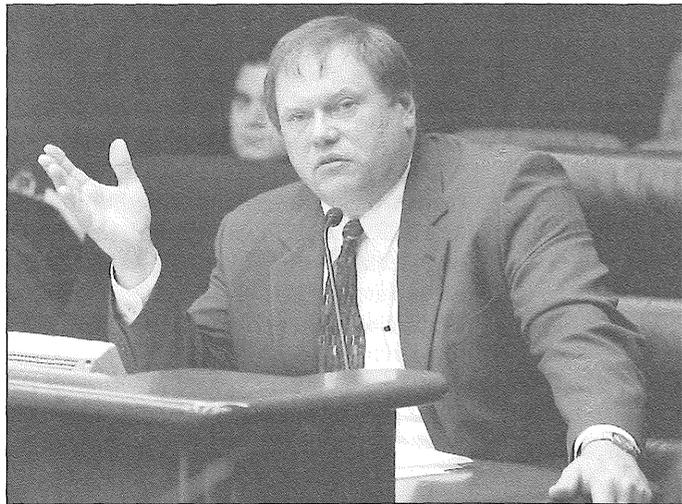


PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHEID

Rep. Tom Bakk will leave the House to run for a seat in the Minnesota Senate vacated by Sen. Doug Johnson, who will retire after this term.

With a \$6 million public contribution toward a \$10 million project, Cook County High School in Grand Marais was completely overhauled. It has upgraded classrooms, a new gym, and a community theater.

"I feel very strongly that no matter where you live in the state you should be able to have the same kinds of opportunities for a quality education," said Bakk, who works as a building trades labor representative.

Doug Conboy, Cook County High School principal, said he doubts the renovation would have happened without the work of the region's lawmakers. He said Bakk has been a

champion of his constituents.

"His objectives and his interests are not as much as the party line as with the people he represents," Conboy said.

Bakk, 47, has decided to run for the Senate at a time when the political landscape of northeastern Minnesota faces great change.

The region has lost long-time lawmakers with the deaths of Sen. Sam Solon (DFL-Duluth), who was first elected to the Legislature as a representative in 1970, and Rep. Willard Munger (DFL-Duluth), who joined the House in 1954.

Johnson, whom Bakk considers a mentor, will retire from the Senate after more than 30 years at the Capitol. Johnson was Bakk's high school guidance counselor, as well.

Bakk called Johnson a "brilliant strategist" who knows how to get things done.

The two lawmakers worked together to secure extended unemployment benefits for workers laid off on the Iron Range last year.

The 2001 Legislature passed a law granting 26 weeks of extra unemployment benefits to miners after the LTV Steel Mining Company filed bankruptcy and closed its Hoyt Lakes plant.

Rep. Greg Davids (R-Preston), chair of the House Commerce, Jobs, and Economic Development Policy Committee, credits Bakk with teaching him a lot about northeastern Minnesota, and the Iron Range in particular.

He toured the region with Bakk and other lawmakers last session.

"Tom is a very solid legislator who always knows where he's headed," Davids said. "He's been a tireless advocate for the Range. The House will be so different next year. We're going to lose some really good people — I'd put Tom in that category. He's a classy person."

Besides serving on the House Commerce, Jobs, and Economic Development Policy Committee this session, Bakk served on the House Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy committees.

Bakk has worked to expand sewer projects in his district to replace individual sewage treatment systems that have threatened ground water quality.

Rep. Dennis Ozment (R-Rosemount), chair of the House Environment and Natural Resources Policy Committee, said Bakk has "incredible firsthand knowledge on hunting, fishing, and trapping issues, as well as ATV and snowmobile use."

"He has been a strong advocate for the northeastern part of the state, supporting trail and park development and forestry management," Ozment said.

Bakk has also been a proponent of increased local control of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) and Voyageurs National Park — areas managed by the federal government.

During his first year in office in 1995, Bakk carried legislation that asserts Minnesota's rights to the surface waters and lakebeds inside the BWCA and Voyageurs National Park.

The law instructs the governor and other constitutional officers to "vigorously assert and defend" the state's ownership of the waters.

Rep. Irv Anderson (DFL-Int'l Falls), who was speaker of the House at the time, encouraged Bakk to sponsor the bill.

Anderson said Bakk did a good job shepherding the legislation, and he echoed other House members in calling him a supporter of the environment and outdoor recreation.

In turn, Bakk said Anderson has been an influential teacher, showing him that legislators can accomplish a lot by empowering other people to take action.

"That's how you lead — to plant ideas in the minds of other people," Bakk said.

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Tom Bakk

DFL

District 6A — Cook

Terms: 4

Career notes: Bakk, who serves on several House committees and the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board, has sponsored legislation that extended unemployment benefits to laid off LTV miners and appropriated money for schools in northeast Minnesota.