

Rep. Roger Cooper . . .

Teacher produces laws to benefit rural Minnesota



Some 28 years ago, Roger Cooper ventured to Bird Island, Minn., on a journey from Illinois. He started teaching high school there the next year, settled down, and eventually weighed in on local political matters as a city council member. Later, he served as DFL party chair for Renville County.

He's proud to be from rural Minnesota. In fact, improving life in Greater Minnesota dominated Cooper's legislative experience. It's the reason he ran for the House 10 years ago.

"I did not feel I was being represented at the Legislature," Cooper said. So with some encouragement from his friends and colleagues — and a lot of votes from a lot of folks — Cooper became Representative Cooper in 1986.

Whether the issue was improving transportation infrastructure, looking out for farmers, or reforming the health care system, Cooper was (and still is) a solid and steadfast advocate for rural Minnesota.

His work, particularly the development of MinnesotaCare, gained him respect on both sides of the aisle, as well as from staff and the public. Cooper was always looked to for input on "the rural perspective," according to many of his colleagues.

It all started when he became the chair of a subcommittee on rural health care in 1988.

"That was a time when health insurance premiums were rising 15 to 25 percent a year, we were losing a great number of primary care physicians, hospital stays were cut short, and volunteer ambulance services were having a difficult time recruiting and retaining people," Cooper noted. "There was a tremendous concern within the medical sector, and with individuals worried about their health care," he added.

"I feel very fortunate that I had this opportunity. I'll never claim to have the answers. As a chairman, I've always tried to hold hearings to identify problems. Then, with the help of



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Noted achievements: As chair of the MinnesotaCare Division, Cooper was instrumental in the ongoing development of MinnesotaCare, the state's subsidized health insurance program for low-income Minnesotans and their families. As legislator and chair, he focused on the rural health needs of state residents. Cooper also sponsored several laws improving volunteer ambulance services statewide, again a key issue to rural Minnesotans. Workers' compensation reform is another policy area where Cooper was able to make a difference.

many, many people, we try to find solutions," explained Cooper.

He is quick to credit a host of doctors, medical professionals, and other folks from his area and beyond who have been instrumental in health care reform.

"I love to work on constructive solutions to problems," Cooper said. "Part of the reason I decided to leave was not that I don't still enjoy that — it's because it has become increasingly more difficult for people to concentrate on policy, rather than politics.

"Whether it's a family, a school, or a legislature, compromise is absolutely crucial if you're going to solve a problem," he said. "Legislation by intimidation and confrontation has become increasingly frustrating," Cooper said.

"Frustration leads to anger, and anger leads to bitterness. I don't want to be bitter and angry," he said. "When you act in anger, it becomes more difficult to come to a solution. . . . It's time for me to go home," he concluded.

Reducing local school districts' dependency on property taxes is an example of an issue that never made much headway because it was so mired in politics, Cooper said. The Minnesota Constitution, he observed, clearly requires a "uniform system of public schools" throughout the state. Cooper said this means schools should be as equal as possible. The Legislature's long-standing inability to meet this requirement stems from "the lack of leadership and will — on both sides of the

aisle — to solve the problem," said Cooper.

"If the development of public policy is put first, people's talents can be unleashed. Then, politics will take care of itself. I hope we get back to giving folks the opportunity that I was given to work on solving problems. I know that will happen at some point in the future," Cooper predicted.

His message for future legislators and those involved in politics and policy: "Criticism needs to be more constructive. Instead of just tearing things and people down, find solutions to make society better.

"For me, this has been one of the greatest opportunities a person can be given," Cooper said, adding that "you have to serve with your heart and soul, with all your energies."

And to whom did Cooper look upon for inspiration?

"President Abraham Lincoln for his courage; Marge, [Cooper's wife] for her compassion; Pastor Paul Sorlien for his genuine commitment; and Sue and Julie [his campaign manager and treasurer] for their kindness," he said.

Cooper looks forward to teaching and spending more time with Marge. His departure also will give him more time to tinker in his flower garden, but he admitted there is some work to be done, too. "This year, I'm going to make sure that the lake lot gets mowed," he said.

— Joel Larson