

Up to the challenge

Paulsen ready to fill some big shoes as majority leader by making strides of his own

By MIRANDA BRYANT

The second youngest daughter of Rep. Erik Paulsen (R-Eden Prairie) may only be 4, but she knows her father is equipped to be the House majority leader.

When Paulsen and his wife, Kelly, sat their four daughters down to explain Paulsen's new leadership role, Paulsen mentioned Tim Pawlenty. Now Minnesota's governor, Pawlenty was House majority leader from 1999 to 2002.

"Daddy has some big shoes to fill," Paulsen said, recalling his family announcement. It was then he felt little Taylor pulling on his left shirtsleeve.

"But dad," she said, "*you* have really big feet."

And those size-13 feet are moving a lot these days as Paulsen tends to his constituents in District 42B and to the other 79 Republican members in the House of Representatives. Elected by colleagues to be House majority leader, the 37-year-old is charged with internally managing the caucus and overseeing debate on the House floor.

"It's certainly more time consuming and more overwhelming," said Paulsen, who said he's now so busy that he can't plan his schedule more than one day in advance and must have his assistant answer his phone.

Part of his mission as majority leader is to ascertain and utilize the talents and strengths of House Republican members. Paulsen described the 30 newcomers to his caucus, many of whom were recruited by House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon), as "top notch."

"They're outstanding individuals," said Paulsen. "They're really excited and they're really hard workers. They really believe in the difference they're going to make."

Paulsen, now serving his fifth term as a representative, admitted he benefits from good relationships with other leaders. Sviggum, a fellow St. Olaf College math graduate, and Paulsen are doing weekly Monday community meetings across the state this session. And Pawlenty, also a Republican, has offered advice to his replacement.

"Knowing we have a friend and former

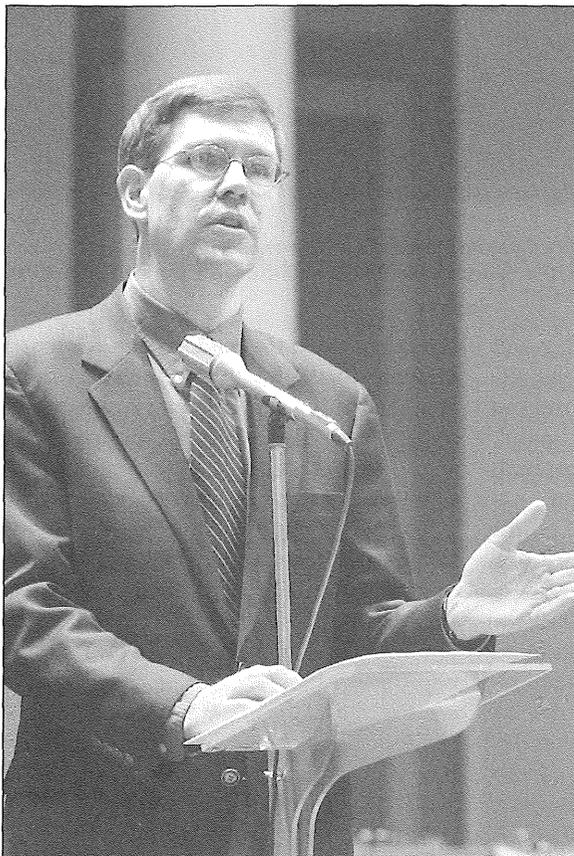


PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

Rep. Erik Paulsen will serve as House Majority Leader for the 2003-04 Legislative Session.

colleague to turn to (in the governor's office) makes a difference," Paulsen said.

And what can be expected of Paulsen's leadership style?

"I don't talk for the sake of talking," he said of his responsibility to control debate on the House floor. Paulsen added that he is analytical, thoughtful, and not prone to impulsive action.

Rep. Gene Pelowski, Jr. (DFL-Winona), DFL lead on the 2002 redistricting committee, said it was a joy to work with Paulsen, who chaired the committee.

"They couldn't have picked a better person to be majority leader in their caucus," Pelowski said. "If he does the same type of job as majority leader as he did in redistricting, he's

going to serve Minnesota very well."

Rep. Jeff Johnson (R-Plymouth), one of seven assistant House majority leaders, said that only two weeks into the session Paulsen is doing a great job.

"He has an ability to kind of weather the storm and keep people on task and bring people together even when the issues tend to be divided a little bit," Johnson said.

A former investment advisor, Paulsen said he is respected by a lot of different factions within his caucus, as well as by many DFL members.

"I think that sort of speaks to the character of how I'll carry out the position," Paulsen said.

Paulsen was one of 31 representatives to receive the Taxpayers League of Minnesota's "Friend of the Taxpayer" Award for his 2001 voting record. He was also one of nine legislators to be named a 2001 honoree of the Legislative Evaluation Assembly of Minnesota. The group bases its evaluation on constitutionalism, limited government, free enterprise, legal and moral order with justice, and individual liberty and dignity.

And while Paulsen was asked by constituents to consider running for a U.S. Senate seat that opened up following redistricting, he is content to remain with the Minnesota Legislature. Paulsen said he reached his decision not to seek office in Washington, D.C. after considering

which elected position would allow him to do the most good, particularly for the people of Eden Prairie.

"I have never had a planned calculated path to anything I've ever done," Paulsen explained. "A new door opens and you just step into the opportunity."

Paulsen said he anticipates introducing a bill to establish the power of initiative and referendum in Minnesota. Such legislation allows individuals to place qualified items on the ballot for voter consideration. The bill was twice previously passed by the House, but did not gain Senate approval.

Said Paulsen, "I have always been a big advocate of allowing voters to correct the Legislature when it's wrong." 