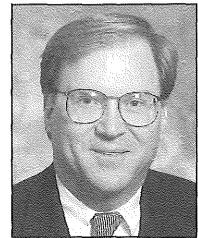


Class sizes, school funding key for Woodbury lawmaker

By Grant Martin

In one of the closest races last year, new Rep. Jim Seifert (R-Woodbury) campaigned right up through election day.



Rep. Jim Seifert

"I door-knocked almost every day — from the middle of May until 4 o'clock on November 3," he said.

Seifert, who won by only 296 votes out of almost 19,000 total, said that while he enjoyed discussing issues with the people in his district, the campaign was grueling.

"It was an awful lot of hard work," he said. "It was easily one of the hardest things I've ever done."

When asked why he put himself through the election, Seifert said he was motivated mainly by the issue of education.

"I saw my own children sitting in crowded classrooms," he said. "I saw my children's teachers at Bailey Elementary in Woodbury overworked and inaccessible at times to children due to the many burdens in dealing with oversized classrooms. And yet, the representative from our district at that time was taking credit for lowering class sizes."

Seifert said that his frustration forced him to take action.

"I was so tired of the disconnect between the truth of what was going on on a day-to-day level in people's lives and the words that were spoken at the Capitol," he said. "So I decided I was going to do something about it."

Seifert made a speech at his local Republican caucus stating his intentions. After five ballots at the district caucus, he was nominated to run against incumbent Rep. Nora Slawik in a district that has traditionally been held by the DFL.

Seifert said that his parents are his model for public service. His father was mayor of New Ulm, Minn., while running a busy dental practice. His mother has also been active with volunteer causes in the area.

"My mom and dad are real contributors to the quality of life in New Ulm and the surrounding area with no expectation of being repaid," said Seifert. "I thought it was a great attribute they modeled. By their example, they communicated how important it is to do public service. That was a huge motivating factor."

Seifert lives in Woodbury with his wife and two children. He currently works as an attorney for the Toro Company.

As he said during his campaign, Seifert is here to focus on education and taxes.

"One of the mistakes that legislators make is that they try to do too much," he said. "They've got all these problems in front of them and they try to work on every one, which means they work on none of them. I'm going to have a very focused agenda. I'm going to work on education and tax issues."

Emphasizing the overcrowding issue in his district, Seifert said that during the campaign he was approached by a high school chemistry teacher with 38 students and only 26 lab spots.

"We've got to have a desk and a lab spot for each student," Seifert said. "We have to have a clean and intact textbook for each student. We have to have an environment where teachers don't feel threatened by any sort of violence from the students. And it has to be an education that prepares kids to compete globally."

The overcrowding issue must come first, he said.

"The first step is to lower the class sizes," said Seifert. "And then we can do these other things."

Seifert said that the tax issue also ties into education. He favors adjusting both the income and property tax rates.

"The public schools need more space and lower class sizes, and that means that there will be several operating and bonding referendums that will have to be passed to keep pace with the needs of the public schools," he said. "This will add another burden on the taxpayer."

Seifert has written and lectured on alternative dispute resolution, a method of solving legal disputes without dragging them through civil litigation. He feels that his expertise will help him in the Legislature.

"Alternative dispute resolution is a method for resolving a very broad spectrum of disputes," said Seifert. "The essence of it is fact-based negotiations, and I think the guts of the legislative process is a negotiation process. I think the more it's weighted toward fact-based — as opposed to ideology-based — the more it works for the citizens of the state."

Seifert said that the message from the election last year is that partisan bickering will not be tolerated.

"Partisanship is okay when it's fact-based," he said. "When it's purely ideology-based and you have the two parties hollering at each other, it's a cancer on the electoral process. It dramatically affects the ability of state government to do the right thing."

District 57A

1995 population: 43,221 (District increased by 10,782 since 1990, largest increase in one district.)

Largest city: Woodbury

Counties: Ramsey, Washington

Location: eastern metro suburbs

Top Concern: "Public education in Minnesota will continue to be something that has to be adjusted from year to year, in terms of emphasis and in terms of funding. But, clearly, it's the highest priority for the voters in my district, and it will be my highest priority."

— Rep. Jim Seifert

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available for purchase by members of the public on the same terms."

The board also provided a ruling for the Ventura campaign regarding whether a purchaser of the Ventura action figure or other officially licensed products would actually constitute a political donation.

The answer: Yes, if the amount of value is over \$20.

Olson said that in its earlier years, the board was more reactive than it is today.

"The Legislature has given us more staff and money, which enables us to be more proactive," Olson said. "We do more teaching and training. We've developed software to help people meet the requirements of the law."

Olson said it's much more enjoyable if everyone does the right thing than if you have to "go out there and try to get them out of a problem," although she admitted the board does both.

In 1997, the Ethical Practices Board was renamed to reflect more closely the actual work performed.

"We never really dealt with anybody's ethics," Olson explained. "We got all sorts of calls about doctors' ethics and lawyers' ethics. The name now is more descriptive. It's not as sexy, I suppose, but it clears up some confusion."

If you will be visiting the Capitol in the near future, call the Capitol Historic Site Program at (651) 296-2881 to schedule a tour.