

Close enough to count

Slawik returns to Legislature, still favoring issues of education and health care after two-year absence

By MARY KAY WATSON

In an election year dominated by a contentious presidential recount, Rep. Nora Slawik (DFL-Maplewood) understands firsthand the stresses that a recount imposes upon the candidates.



Rep. Nora Slawik

A veteran of close elections, Slawik saw two of her three runs for the Legislature capped by recounts — both against Republican attorney Jim Seifert of Woodbury.

After winning her first bid for election in District 57A in 1996, Slawik lost to Seifert by 298 votes in 1998. Last November, when more than 22,000 ballots were cast, she won by 79 votes after a recount.

It was like living through election night all over again during the three days of the recount and the weeks that preceded it, she said.

"It confirmed that we have a really good process in Minnesota," Slawik said. "I am thrilled and humbled at the same time."

As a freshman legislator and member of the majority party during the 1997-98 session, Slawik served as vice-chair of the Health & Human Services Committee. At that time, her interest in education and early childhood issues led her to sponsor a bill that would have created an endowment fund for early childhood education.

That bill died in conference committee, though it brought the importance of early childhood issues to the forefront, she said.

After a two-year hiatus from the Legislature, and with the hard work of campaigning behind her, Slawik says of losing and coming back that she has a "new appreciation for all of it."

The issues important to her remain the same as before: education, health care, and tax reform. She is serving on the House Health & Human Services Policy and Family & Early Childhood Education Finance committees.

The key issue for Slawik is education, specifically early childhood issues. Solving the problems of overcrowded classrooms, too few teachers, and outmoded buildings are a top priority for her tenure, she says.

In addition, Slawik said she believes that increasing funding to reduce class sizes will lead to children learning better. "Education is the beginning of everything," she said. "If you educate children well, you will have the educated work force Minnesota needs."

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—Rep. Nora Slawik

Slawik, 38, said she feels qualified to voice the needs of young families in the Legislature. She and her husband, Brien, have a fourth-grade son, Sean, and a daughter, Victoria, in preschool. Victoria was born during Slawik's first legislative tenure in 1997.

Born and raised in Tucson, Ariz., Slawik was selected for a training program for the United Way of America after graduating from Arizona State University. She worked in Texas and Colorado, then moved to Minnesota to work as a campaign manager for the United Way of the Saint Paul Area.

Eventually she formed her own consulting business, which provides services to non-profit organizations in fund raising and resource development.

Slawik has also been active in her community in roles as varied as president of the Woodbury-Cottage Grove League of Women Voters, founding board member of the Southeast Area YMCA, and volunteer coordinator for the Ramsey County book drive.

She also has family roots in Minnesota. Her grandfather published a newspaper in Benson, Minn., and served on the Democratic National Committee. Her husband Brien's family, also from Minnesota, developed the Har Mar Mall in Roseville.

In addition to education, top concerns of Slawik's constituents are prescription drug costs and long-term care issues — issues she also hopes to address.

"I see myself as a true public servant," she said. "I'd like to serve my constituents well." However, she pointed out that legislators "have hundreds of things on our plate and only a few we can bring back."

Like many other areas throughout the state, a property tax cut is another high priority for constituents of District 57A, the fastest growing district in the state. Along with this rapid growth have come climbing property values and subsequent tax increases that present a problem for both seniors and young families.

Slawik said she hopes the Legislature will strike a balance in dealing with the surplus

with a combination of tax cuts and rebates.

Redistricting will undoubtedly have a profound effect on the political makeup of Slawik's district. Already the most populated district in the state, District 57A has grown especially rapidly in swing areas, such as Woodbury, which tends to vote Republican.

"We have to lose 11,000 people in redistricting," she said.

Slawik said she refuses to dwell on the potential vulnerability of her seat when redistricting is complete. "Right now I'm here to serve my constituents," she said.

DISTRICT 57A

1998 population (estimate): 49,822

Largest city: Woodbury

Counties: Ramsey, Washington

Location: east and south of St. Paul

Top concern: "When it comes to education, you can pay now and invest in kids, or you can pay later in higher crime rates and associated costs."

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