

Westrom wants more jobs, better use of dollars

The Capitol building isn't as big as it once was, at least in the eyes of one lawmaker. And legislators don't seem so "super human" anymore.



Rep. Torrey Westrom

It's not that newly elected Rep. Torrey Westrom has grown cynical. He's grown up.

When he first visited the State Capitol as a young teen, Westrom sat in the gallery high above the House floor and watched the players below.

"I thought maybe I could be one of those pages on the floor but never a lawmaker," he said. "They seemed intangible."

The 23-year-old Republican from Elbow Lake, Minn., was mistaken. Today he represents District 13A in west central Minnesota, a seat formerly held for 12 years by DFL Rep. Chuck Brown of Appleton, Minn.

Much has been said and written about Westrom because he is believed to be the first blind House member in state history.

"I am a representative. Blindness is an incidental," he said.

Westrom, blinded at 14 by a car accident on his parents' dairy farm, understands that he is expected to be a role model for people with blindness. But he hopes people see him as a lawmaker first. "Everybody is a role

model . . . It goes with all legislators."

Unknown to Westrom until recently, a role model helped pave the newcomer's way into politics. Minnesota was home to Thomas Schall, a blind U.S. House and Senate member from 1915 to 1935.

Schall, a lawyer, came from western Minnesota. With the help of his wife, who read to him regularly, and with the use of a guide dog, Schall was able to keep up his law practice, which eventually led to a lengthy political life. He helped pass legislation allowing guide dogs on public transportation and in public places.

Westrom, a graduate in political science from Bemidji State University, won't be using a dog during the legislative session. Already, he has been studying the hallways, stairwells, and nooks and crannies of the State Office Building and the Capitol. During session, he will have his own legislative assistant to help read written materials to him.

But the issues on Westrom's mind don't necessarily focus on blindness. Instead, he wants to save taxpayer dollars and create jobs in rural Minnesota.

He is concerned about cuts to the base funding of local schools and wants to attract jobs to rural Minnesota that involve the private sector — not a state jobs program.

Westrom also is concerned about prison reform. In his district sits Appleton, home to

the state's only privately run prison. It costs that prison about half of what it costs the state to incarcerate an inmate.

Unlike some lawmakers, no particular issue drew Westrom into the race for a House seat. "So many areas seemed ridiculous," he said, such as "Why is the government even talking about building a stadium . . . and Why require truckers to keep log books when no one can verify them anyway?"

Westrom's love for political debate and dialogue prompted him to run. The trick to good lawmaking, he said, is "to put people at ease . . . [about whether] you know what you're talking about."

— K. Darcy Hanzlik

District 13A

1996 Population: 32,755

Largest city: Morris

Counties: Big Stone, Douglas, Grant, Pope, Stevens, Swift, Traverse

Location: west central Minnesota

Top concern: "Declining population. It spills over to fewer kids in the schools, fewer families spending money in main street businesses. It's a spiraling downturn effect and calls for the need for economic development in the area and good paying jobs."

— Rep. Torrey Westrom

Congress has granted President Clinton a new power, but it's one Minnesota governors have enjoyed for more than a century.

Republicans in the 104th Congress kept a 1994 campaign promise to pass the line-item veto, and the president signed the measure into law last year.

Minnesota is one of 43 states where governors have line-item veto authority. In most states, including this one, that authority is limited to spending bills.

An amendment to the state constitution granted Minnesota governors line-item veto authority in 1876. Voters at the polls for a presidential election that year

Do you know?

ratified the amendment by a margin of roughly 10-to-1. John S. Pillsbury, Minnesota's eighth governor, was the first to have use of the line-item veto.

At the same time Minnesotans were embracing the line-item veto, a proposal to give the president similar authority was sputtering.

President Ulysses S. Grant in 1876 offered the first proposal to give the president line-item veto power. Grant's proposal failed, and, since then, more than 200 bills and proposed constitu-

tional amendments with similar goals met with defeat in Congress.

But a new federal law effective Jan. 1, 1997, provides the president line-item veto authority with respect to appropriations and limited tax benefits.

Proponents of the line-item veto long have argued that it reduces wasteful spending, mainly the so-called "pork barrel" projects considered to be devices for lawmakers to bolster support in their home districts.

Opponents claim the line-item veto threatens the balance of power by shifting authority away from the legislative branch to the executive branch.