

'Stepping up' to Senate race

Westrom hopes to continue renewable energy advocacy in different chamber

By **BOB GEIGER**

After eight terms in the House, Rep. Torrey Westrom (R-Elbow Lake) is stepping down to run for a Senate seat in a much larger, newly redrawn Senate district. In fact, "stepping down" might not be the right way to put it.

"I've been saying I'm stepping up to the Senate," Westrom said.

Westrom's current House district covers 1,585 square miles in less than three counties. The Senate district he's running for contains more than three times that area — 4,834 square miles in west-central Minnesota.

Redistricting created a new Senate district that includes all or parts of eight counties currently represented by Rep. Paul Anderson (R-Starbuck), Sen. Joe Gimse (R-Willmar), Sen. Bill Ingebrigtsen (R-Alexandria) and Sen. Keith Langseth (DFL-Glyndon).

The sprawling Senate district poses a challenge for Westrom's wife, friends and volunteers who drive him to campaign meetings or to the Capitol. That's because Westrom is the state's first blind legislator.

Westrom said he owes a debt of gratitude to former House Speaker Steve Sviggum, who

was minority leader in the DFL-dominated House when he started his first term in 1997. He also thanked House Speaker Kurt Zellers (R-Maple Grove) for naming Westrom speaker pro tempore, making him the first blind person in state history to serve in that capacity.

Much has changed for Westrom since he was elected as a single 23-year-old. Since then, he married his wife, Anna, and the couple now has three children — twin 6-year-old daughters Madelyn and Whitney, and 2-year-old son Carter.

A graduate of William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, Westrom said the House has "become more citizen-friendly and family-friendly" during his time in office.

Westrom was first elected in 1996, when Republicans were in the minority and lawmakers were more collegial than today. However, there is now "less getting together as colleagues," he said, because of the increasingly partisan nature of politics. He believes not discussing each others' concepts is unfortunate because it limits trading ideas with other lawmakers.

"Once you get to know somebody during a (House) floor fight, you know where they're coming from," Westrom said. Ultimately, that understanding is beneficial because areas of common interest emerge.

"There's always a similar issue that you can help with," he said, adding that burning political bridges can harm future efforts.

A wind turbine in Westrom's office hints at what he deems his most

significant House accomplishment. That was a 2003 law that increased the number of fuel casks containing spent nuclear fuel adjacent to Xcel Energy's Prairie Island plant, and provided a road map for renewable energy investment.

Westrom encouraged executives of Xcel Energy to meet with members of the neighboring Prairie Island Indian community to consider increasing the number of fuel casks and boosting Xcel's commitment to renewable energy at the same time. The resulting law was enacted four years before former Gov. Tim Pawlenty signed a 2007 law requiring Minnesota utilities to generate 25 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2025. Westrom's bill also required Xcel to contribute \$16 million annually to a Renewable Development Account.

The largest city in Westrom's House district, located along Minnesota's wind-rich border with North Dakota and South Dakota, is Morris, a city of 5,286 people that is home of the University of Minnesota-Morris. There, renewable energy provides at least 70 percent of the campus's electric needs. On-campus projects include two wind turbines capable of generating up to 3.3 megawatts, a biomass gasification research facility and a solar array.

Westrom characterized the wind turbines as "freedom towers." While support of renewable energy among Republicans has decreased since the 2010 GOP landslide, Westrom remains a centrist on energy policy; believing that a diversified portfolio of conventional and renewable energy creates jobs. He characterized himself as a "huge supporter" of renewable energy, including 2001 legislation he sponsored to mandate a 5 percent biodiesel fuel blend for vehicles used by the state.

Westrom's advice to his successor? "Ninety percent of what we do isn't as controversial as what you read about in the newspapers," he said.



PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Many things have changed in Rep. Torrey Westrom's life since he was first elected in 1996. He is hoping for more change as he seeks a Senate seat.