

All in the family

Latest Peterson makes it a hat trick for representing a large portion of southwest Minnesota

By TOM LONERGAN

Like grandfather, like father, like son.

Rep. Aaron Peterson (DFL-Madison) made Minnesota legislative history by becoming the third generation from the same family to serve in the House when he was sworn in Jan. 7.



Rep. Aaron Peterson

The 32-year-old succeeded his father, Doug, who served six terms before not seeking reelection after becoming president of the Minnesota Farmers Union, in representing the five-county district that borders South Dakota. Aaron's grandfather, the late Harry Peterson, served in the House from 1965-1973.

Peterson grew up on the farm his family has owned since the 1930s. The 300 farming acres the family still owns are rented to neighbors to grow corn and soybeans.

"He's (Aaron) always been around politics since Grandpa Harry," said Doug Peterson. "That makes an impression on you as a young person." He described a photo from the early 1970s of 18-month-old Aaron "sitting in my father's chair on the House floor."

"My dad represented District 20A. I represented 20A when I started (1991) and now (following 2002 redistricting) it's again 20A," Doug Peterson said. The district was 13B following redistricting in 1992.

Aaron Peterson said his "de facto involvement" in politics began "before I could walk. I remember going to Gov. (Wendell) Anderson's office when I was a little kid," he said, "and seeing all those serious men in suits." Peterson says such early exposure to politics through the family is not unusual among state legislators.

His more recent involvement included working in Washington D.C. for U.S. Rep. James Oberstar, former U.S. Rep. David Minge, and for the Minnesota Senate in 1997-98.

A field representative for Prairie Land Management, Inc., Peterson can recite a list of facts and characteristics about his home district

without much prompting. The nearly 2 million acres in District 20A represents 4 percent of the state's land, and its density rate is 12 people per square mile.

"Agriculture is our base," Peterson said. "It's as important to us as taconite is up north. Without agriculture, we'd be without a paddle."

Half of the state's energy-generating wind turbines are in his district, Peterson said, as well as the state's first power-generating plant to burn turkey litter. Located in Benson, the \$110 million plant — partially financed by municipal loans and bonds — will produce 55 megawatts of power to service 60,000 homes in the area.

"Renewable energy and fuel produced in

I remember going to Gov. (Wendell) Anderson's office when I was a little kid," he said, "and seeing all those serious men in suits."

— Rep. Aaron Peterson

rural Minnesota are centered in my district," Peterson said. Economic development and value-added agricultural initiatives, such as state investment in biodiesel expansion and ethanol production credits, are among Peterson's legislative priorities. Promoting rural infrastructure development — especially telecommunications — is key to long-term economic opportunity, he added.

"You can get a pizza delivered 20 miles one way (in his district), but you can't get high-speed Internet," Peterson said, noting holes in coverage throughout Greater Minnesota. "So what's the priority?"

Without long-term improvements in telecommunications, roads, and rural-based energy development, Peterson said, "no one will stay in or relocate to rural Minnesota." Maintaining local government assistance is also a legislative priority for him. "Our small cities with low property tax bases are hard-pressed to maintain services," he said.

His committee assignments include the House Agriculture Policy, Agricultural and Rural Development Finance, Environment and Natural Resources Policy, and

Transportation Finance committees.

Peterson, a road biker, fly fisherman, and canoeist, is an enthusiastic promoter of rural Minnesota's recreation attractions, especially its lakes and trails for summer and winter outdoor recreation vehicles. "It generates a lot of income for our service sector," he said. "We're big on personal fulfillment and enjoying the land. But there needs to be jobs, too."

Since many rural issues are affected by federal legislation, Peterson said he believes his experience in Washington, D.C., and career background in conservation-based land use has prepared him well for the Legislature.

During 2000, as a legislative assistant to Minge, he helped organize a local, state, and federal coalition to protect the Minnesota River and improve its water quality through the federal Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The state received \$250 million through the program to retire 100,000 acres of flood-prone farmland (less than 1 percent of farmland) along the river basin. Farmers were paid for the land they took out

of production.

Of working with Oberstar, now in his 15th term representing the state's Eighth Congressional District including the Iron Range, Peterson said, "I learned a lot about trade and really learned what seniority means in the legislative process."

While Peterson hopes there's "not a lot of stalling" during the legislative session, because of the looming budget deficit he predicts, "there will be some because no one wants to get cut."

DISTRICT 20A

2002 population: 36,641

Largest city: Benson

Counties: Big Stone, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Swift, and Yellow Medicine

Location: southwest Minnesota

Top concerns: "My goal is to keep (District) 20A connected, functioning and viable in the state's economy. Minnesota cannot afford separate urban versus rural economies. I've seen it go that way."

— Rep. Aaron Peterson