

Leaving before his self-imposed limit

Severson looks to continue work on election reform as secretary of state

By LAUREN RADOMSKI

From the day he took office, Rep. Dan Severson (R-Sauk Rapids) knew his tenure in the Legislature would last no more than 10 years, a time limit he'd set for himself.

"I don't believe in professional politicians," he said. "I think it's public service."

But what Severson didn't expect was that an interest in election reform would prompt him to step down earlier than expected in pursuit of another office: secretary of state.

Following the 2008 election, Severson was contacted by a constituent who had multiple complaints about the conduct of officials at her polling place. Dissatisfied with the response from city and county officials, Severson took the issue to the Minnesota Supreme Court, where he was told his complaint did not come through the appropriate channels to be heard.

The experience left the fourth-term lawmaker wondering how everyday Minnesotans are supposed to get their grievances heard.

"If we as public officials don't take a stand for what's right, (the) quality of the freedoms we enjoy is on a clock," he said.

These freedoms have always been important to him. A St. Cloud native, and a resident of Sauk Rapids, Severson joined the Navy after college, spending 21 years as a fighter pilot. His naval experience included positions in Washington, D.C., where he worked on officer retention, policy enforcement and other issues within the Navy Reserve.

Severson and his family had been back in Minnesota for about a year when someone in church asked whether he had ever considered running for office. Severson, whose political experience was limited to working on other people's campaigns, saw it as an opportunity to serve in a different way than he had previously.

"It was an eye-opener and a totally new experience, but a place to make a difference," he said.

Since his election in 2002, Severson has put much of his energy into veterans issues, sponsoring legislation to help returning soldiers reintegrate into life at home. Many of Severson's bills have been designed to help veterans access educational and business benefits, tax breaks and familial supports. A member of the House Veterans Affairs Division, Severson is also part of the Military Action Group, a bipartisan coalition organized by the Department of Human Rights that works on veteran-friendly legislation.

Severson's passion for veterans issues has ties to his work on election reform. He's concerned about military votes from overseas going

unaccounted and troubled by the number of votes in general that he says go unverified. This session, Severson sponsored a bill that would change recount procedures and implement new voter and ballot verification standards. Also an advocate for judicial reform, Severson sponsored legislation in 2009 to ask this year's voters whether a constitutional amendment should allow judicial vacancies to stay open until filled at election time.

Throughout the process, Severson says he has tried to keep an open mind, make decisions based on facts and take action on topics he cares about.

"If you see a need then you're probably the person to take it forward," he said.

Severson has also worked to stay close to constituents, particularly those who may not agree with him. He recalls door knocking around his district with the intent of visiting everyone — not just the "friendly doors."

Severson is proud of having secured funding for a Sauk Rapids bridge several years ago that was in dire need of repair. A proponent of conservative family values, he also notes having carried a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as between a man and a woman.

In the future, Severson hopes to see less "wholesaling" of legislation in the form of massive omnibus bills, which he says leads to corrections later on. Along similar lines, he believes the Legislature needs to "throttle back" the number of issues it tries to address each session — either that or re-evaluate how much legislators are paid so that more Minnesotans, particularly from Greater Minnesota, can afford to serve.

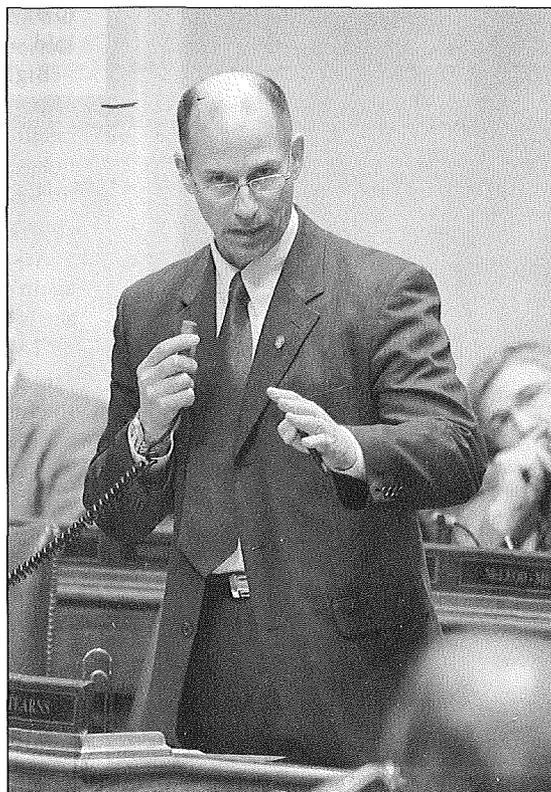


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Dan Severson has sponsored many bills to help veterans reintegrate into life at home.

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Dan Severson
Republican
District 14A – Sauk Rapids
Terms: 4 (elected 2002)
Advice: "Have an open mind and an open heart and stay close to the people."