

New member reflections

Freshmen legislators proud of successes, bipartisanship

BY BRETT MARTIN

With their first session now under their belts, the 26 new House members can look back upon a highly charged year of major legislation. They weighed in on a widely praised bonding law and the various funding laws for the 2006-07 biennium.

Like college freshmen who arrive on campus and have to figure out room numbers and processes while concentrating on their studies, freshmen House members came to the Capitol to work on legislation while learning firsthand how the political process works.

Freshmen members introduced 331 new bills this session, representing their districts' interests as well as reflecting their diverse backgrounds, experiences and interests.

Carrying out marching orders

With the House divided by a mere two votes, each member played a crucial role in passing or rejecting legislation this session.

"I feel I have had a chance to contribute," said Rep. Mike Charron (R-Woodbury). "Everybody's a player when it's a 68-66 split."

Because freshmen members carried such influence, they made a conscious effort to be bipartisan.

"The whole freshman class is focused on the issues, not politics," said Rep. Melissa Hortman (DFL-Brooklyn Park). "Those marching orders came from the voters."

"It was an effective message, and I think this class has delivered on

that," added Rep. Frank Moe (DFL-Bemidji).

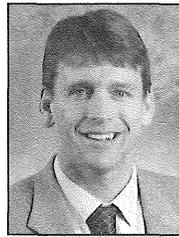
Hortman said new members are willing to cross party lines since the major political parties are declining and more interest is given to smaller, bipartisan coalitions and caucuses, such as the urban and rural caucuses.

members from Greater Minnesota allow for better representation because both parties end up working toward common goals. "We represent a lot of the same interests."

The marching orders from voters also included getting legislation passed, which is why Rep. Matt Dean (R-Dellwood) thinks Minnesotans weren't upset by the special session.

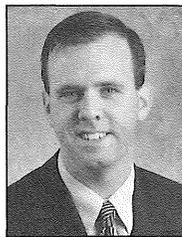
"The average person doesn't care if we get done in June or July. They just want it done. They would rather see it get done correctly than have shoddy work done at the last minute."

Still, 14 new DFL members banded together to try and save the state money by signing onto a bill (HF1102), sponsored by freshman Rep. Larry Hosch (DFL-St. Joseph), which would prohibit per diem expenses for legislators for a special session that is called within 60 days of regular session's adjournment. The bill did not receive a committee hearing.



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Rep. Frank Moe
DFL-Bemidji



"The day I took the oath of office, my wife, our children and my parents were there to see it happen. The look of pride my parents had in their eyes that day is something I will remember the rest of my life."

Rep. Pat Garofalo
R-Farmington

The learning curve

One of the most difficult challenges new members face is learning the inner workings of state government.

"I think it went well for learning how the system works. I have a good foundation," said Rep. Tom Emmer (R-Delano), although he notes that the learning process is not yet over. "I can't believe you can be a full-fledged, fully-educated member within two years."

Members fortunate enough to return to the House after their first term have a better understanding of the process, which can help them advance their ideas, he said.

Moe said he too had a lot to learn.

"Frankly, I didn't know what to expect," he said. "Back in February, I felt like it was the second quarter and I'd just gotten the rules."

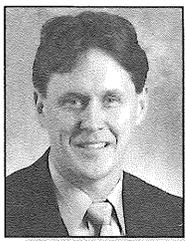
Moe said reaching across the aisle helped him get his bills heard.

"I had a willingness to work with Republicans, and they responded in kind," he said, pointing out that the bipartisan alliances he's formed with



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He also learned the ugly side of political debates and found it's sometimes better to not say anything than to be drawn into an argument.

"Early in the session, I took the bait and got into partisan bickering. I wish I wouldn't have done that," Moe said.

A coach and an educator, he found himself getting a firsthand lesson in government.

"These past five months have been the greatest learning experience of my life," Moe said. "You learn about people, public policy and yourself."

One concept that new members seemed to have grasped quickly is making their voices heard.

Hortman was one of five members who introduced bills to fund the Northstar commuter rail corridor project, which ended up in the bonding law.

"I'm thrilled that the Minnesota Northstar project got passed. I feel directly responsible for that," Hortman said. "We've made a lot more progress than they did last year, and I'm proud of that."

Indeed, Hortman and fellow freshman Rep. Denise Dittrich (DFL-Champlin) worked hard for the project, which helped them win their seats since their predecessors opposed the rail system.

Reaping rewards

Hortman worked in Washington, D.C., for former Sen. Al Gore and Sen. John Kerry, so she had a good understanding of the government process, but working for senators didn't prepare her for the excitement of serving in the Minnesota House.

"It was 10 times as wonderful as I thought it would be," she said.

"It's probably not the right thing to call it fun, but I'm having the time of my life. The challenges are invigorating," agreed Charron. "I'm really soaking it up with a sense of

delight."

He especially enjoys the camaraderie of House members. "The kind of characters here — you can't make this stuff up," he said. "You can have a good, spirited debate and then walk off, pat each other on the back and say, 'You got me on this one, but watch out on the next one.'"

The freshmen typically met once a month during session to get to know each other better, and some of them are planning a summer trip together to Coors Field in Denver to see a Colorado Rockies baseball game.

Emmer had the honor of filling in as House speaker during several floor sessions; a duty he performed like a seasoned leader.



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"That is amazing. It's an incredible experience," Emmer said. "It is not only an unbelievable experience, it's truly humbling. It can be an intimidating place to be."

Representing constituents in the State Capitol gives members such as Moe a feeling of pride for his district.

"What has happened more in this session is that I've grown so much more protective of the district that I represent," Moe said. "The paternalism I feel for my community is greater

"I most enjoyed those moments when we forged coalitions across geographic and political divides and worked together on solutions to issues big and small."

Rep. Diane Loeffler
DFL-Mpls



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If this year is any indication, the new members will provide plenty of excitement and ideas during the second half of their first terms. They enjoy serving the state, which Dean said makes this class special.

"We thought servility was still cool," Dean said. 🌿

House veterans are impressed

As the newest House members came into their own this session, they faced scrutiny not only by their constituents, but also by veteran legislators.

The senior members liked what they saw. "This state is fortunate to have such great public servants," said Rep. Mike Jaros (DFL-Duluth), now serving his 15th nonconsecutive term. "A lot of them have had previous public service experience and have worked in different professions. I think we need that experience."

Jaros said that experience and the level of knowledge about issues that the freshmen class brought to the House distinguished them from previous classes.

Rep. Ron Abrams (R-Minnetonka), now in his 17th year of service, commended the Class of 2005 for bringing new ideas and perspectives to the Legislature.

"There are a number of outstanding freshmen here on both sides of the aisle," he said. "This is one of the strongest classes I've seen in a long time. They put aside partisan politics to a large extent."

House Minority Leader Matt Entenza (DFL-St. Paul), now in his sixth term, agrees.

"This new group of Republicans and Democrats had a big impact on the House," he said. "They are particularly articulate and had helped move forward significant legislation. I believe we passed a great bonding bill because of the new members."

House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon), first elected in 1978, was impressed that many freshmen jumped right into the process.

"They're certainly a good group that got involved in legislation right away. The message that their citizens gave them was to cooperate and get the job done. Some have followed through in that direction; some have not."

Many new members said they made a conscious effort to be nonpartisan, and Rep. Irv Anderson (DFL-Int'l Falls), who has been serving nonconsecutively since 1964, observed that to be true. "They are more bipartisan in their approach."

(B. MARTIN)

First-term members

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|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Rep. Mike Charron | Rep. Leon Lillie |
| Rep. Lloyd Cybart | Rep. Diane Loeffler |
| Rep. Matt Dean | Rep. Frank Moe |
| Rep. Denise Dittrich | Rep. Joyce Peppin |
| Rep. Tom Emmer | Rep. Neil W. Peterson |
| Rep. Patti Fritz | Rep. Sandra Peterson |
| Rep. Pat Garofalo | Rep. Jeanne Poppe |
| Rep. Paul Gazelka | Rep. Maria Ruud |
| Rep. Rod Hamilton | Rep. Brita Sailer |
| Rep. Rick Hansen | Rep. Bev Scalze |
| Rep. Melissa Hortman | Rep. Steve Simon |
| Rep. Larry Hosch | Rep. Andy Welti |
| Rep. Tina Liebling | |