

Sviggum promises balance, openness in House

By Sandy Donovan

New House Speaker Steve Sviggum has been a lawmaker for 20 years, but it's his experience as a high school basketball referee that gives him confidence as he assumes his new post.

"Once you've called a foul on someone's daughter or someone's son and they don't think it's a foul, once you've heard those heated words and those criticisms from the sidelines, you can come to St. Paul and take on anything," he said.

Sviggum (R-Kenyon) traded in his role of minority leader — a job he held since 1993 — for the speaker's post after leading his caucus in 1998 to gain its first House majority in more than a decade.

He said the switch will call for a different kind of leadership style, and he pledges to be fair to members on both sides of the aisle.

"I'm truly and honestly going to try to be speaker for the entire House, not just an advocate of the Republican position," he said.

And he said a new level of cooperation will be needed between the Republican-controlled House, DFL-controlled Senate, and Reform Party governor.

"I think that all of us are trying to cozy up to each other," Sviggum said. "None of us by ourselves — not the House, not the Senate, and not Governor Ventura — can enact legislation alone."

Still, Sviggum said the tripartisan setup won't stall the legislative process.

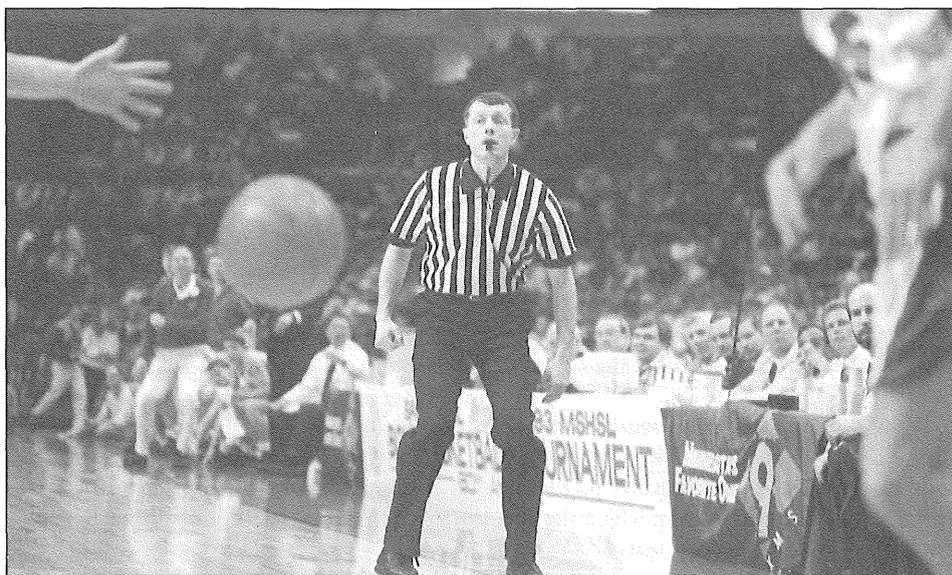
"I'm optimistic that it's not a formula for gridlock, but that the opposite is true, that it's a formula for balance and for openness," he said.

To that end, Republican caucus meetings will continue to be open to the press.

"The strategies, the decisions, and the options are going to be much more available than in the past to the press and to the citizens," Sviggum said.

And the new speaker has already overseen a change in committee structure that he said will streamline the lawmaking process. With five fewer total committees than last year, Sviggum said the new structure will line up more closely with the Senate committee structure and allow for increased efficiency in conference committees.

Also this year, spending bills will go directly from finance committees to the Ways and Means Committee, eliminating a stop at the related policy committees.



When he's not keeping things in order in the House, Speaker Steve Sviggum is a basketball referee. Here he officiates a boys state high school tournament game.

"I think that's appropriate from the standpoint of trying to keep the bills as clean as possible, not getting policy issues into appropriations bills," he said. "I'm not going to say I can entirely prevent that from happening. This is an attempt to do so."

But, Sviggum stresses, neither a third-party governor nor a new committee structure will distract his caucus from focusing on a top-priority.

"First and foremost we need to pass a significant, permanent tax cut," he said.

Education reforms will also be high on the House Republicans' agenda this year.

"That will include enhancing classroom discipline, closing the disparity between the high-spending and low-spending districts, addressing the Profile of Learning, and reducing class sizes," Sviggum said.

Also expected is a package of government reforms including a measure that would require a super-majority vote to raise taxes and closing the revolving door that Sviggum said sends too many ex-legislators into the lobbying profession.

"And we'll certainly be doing some rules changes," he said. "For instance, we'll be expecting that when one offers a spending amendment on the House floor, it will have to be balanced. In other words, you won't be able to just step forward and say you're going to spend more money on nursing homes without saying where that money will come from."

Sviggum said he's looking forward to a good

relationship with House Minority Leader Tom Pugh (DFL-South St. Paul).

"I like Rep. Pugh, and I think he will be fair to deal with and honorable. And that's all I'd ever ask," he said. "I understand we're going to have differences, that he has his job to do, and that that job is to bring forward the (DFL) platform."

As for his own new job, Sviggum said he's waiting to see how well he can maintain a balance between his professional life and his personal one. The former teacher continues to run a farm with his two brothers.

At home, he said, he remains "the fifth most powerful member of the family" — right behind his wife Debra and their three children, 18-year-old Hans, 16-year-old Eric, and 14-year-old Marit.

"I'm just Dad to them," he said. "They don't deal with me as a state representative. They want to know if I can make it to their basketball game."

And basketball, of course, will remain as important part of Sviggum's life.

"My hobby is refereeing, and a hobby is something you need to keep your fingers in," he said. "Just because you become speaker of the House, you don't want to change from who you are. It would be like taking the farm out of me. I'm a farmer so you can't take the farm out of me, or, hopefully, the referee."