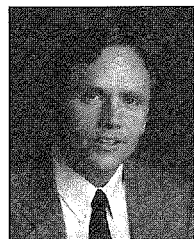


Anoka lawmaker hoping for a successful rookie year

By Sarah Hallonquist

Rep. Jim Abeler (R-Anoka) said he feels a little bit like Minnesota Twins rookie Chuck Knoblauch during the 1991 World Series.



Rep. Jim Abeler

Abeler, 44, is a freshman legislator serving in public office for the first time, and his party is in the majority in the House for the first time in 13 years.

"I'm a man very blessed," he said.

Abeler fills the District 49A seat vacated by former Rep. Charlie Weaver — now the state's public safety commissioner — who ran an unsuccessful bid for state attorney general last November.

Abeler narrowly defeated DFLer Jerry Newton, a Coon Rapids City Council member, with 51 percent of the vote. During his campaign, Abeler focused on three issues: education, taxes, and crime.

His House committee membership will only allow him to work directly on one of his campaign platform issue. He serves on three important education-related panels.

And Abeler said he plans to work in other ways to fulfill campaign promises to lower taxes and support law enforcement.

One of his main legislative priorities is changing the formula for compensatory funding for school districts. He is one of 17 legislators representing the Anoka-Hennepin School District, one of the largest districts in the state. Some districts, Abeler said, have a large population of students with special needs, but they are spread out over a large area and the money doesn't always go where it's needed most.

Abeler serves on the House Education Policy, K-12 Education Finance, Family and Early Childhood Education Finance, and Health and Human Services Policy committees.

Even though he's a first-termer, he's confident his personal abilities will help him succeed in his legislative career. In his committee work, Abeler said he hopes to focus on the big picture when considering complex, controversial issues.

"I'm good at deciding where to plant the next tree in the forest," said Abeler. "I'm not a detail guy."

He said he believes his strengths will balance with those who tend toward an interest in technicalities.

Abeler is well-versed in education concerns. He and his wife, Barb, co-founded a charter school, Parents Allied with Children and Teachers (PACT), now in its fifth year of operation. Five of his sons have attended the school.

Helping to establish PACT is a good example of Abeler's support of local control.

Parents, he said, should be actively involved with their children's education. And local school boards should be given more freedom to make decisions that best suit their districts, he said.

"It's not one-size-fits-all," he said.

Abeler believes community members will become better leaders if they are given the chance to make decisions — and mistakes — on their own.

After attending Hamline University and the University of Minnesota, Abeler graduated from Northwestern College of Chiropractic. He owns and operates Abeler Chiropractic Clinic in Anoka with his brother. The clinic

was founded by Abeler's father in 1951.

Twenty years working in health care have provided him with an understanding of all different kinds of people in many facets of society, Abeler said.

"I have a real spot in my heart for the working poor," he said. "You have to help them transition."

To explain his views, Abeler uses a favorite analogy of government acting as the training wheels on a bicycle. He said at some point, the training wheels do have to come off to let people ride on their own. He wants to use job development to help people come off state welfare rolls and enter the work force.

"It's important to recognize the lower and lower-middle classes aren't static," Abeler said. "My dream is to help them on their way through."

One way Abeler would like to help is finding ways to get more child care for poor families. Too many people are on waiting lists for sliding-fee child care subsidies, he said.

Abeler and his wife live in Anoka with their children: Jamie, 16; Jesse, 14; Jordan, 11; Josiah, 9; Jude, 6. The couple's sixth son, Judson, was born Jan. 5. In his spare time, Abeler plays piano, enjoys novels by Tom Clancy and John Grisham, sails, and cross-country skis.

District 49A

1995 population: 34,469
Largest city: Coon Rapids
County: Anoka
Location: Northwestern Twin Cities suburbs
Top concern: "The top concerns I have for my district are strong academics, lower taxes, less government, strong families, and an infrastructure that works."

— Rep. Jim Abeler



Rep. Peggy Leppik (R-Golden Valley) donned a black feather boa and white gloves during the first meeting of the House Higher Education Finance Committee, which she chairs.

"I do feel thoroughly prepared to meet with the governor — at least halfway," she said, throwing the boa over her shoulder.

Rep. John Tuma (R-Northfield) noticed Leppik's newfound attitude as she scolded him for being tardy to the meeting.

"Not only do you look like him, you're as tough as he is," Tuma said.

"Basically, Minnesota is a very hard working state," State Demographer Tom Gillaspay told the House Jobs and Economic Development Finance Committee Jan. 13.

According to Gillaspay, the state ranks third among states in the proportion of population employed (72 percent). It ranks second in participation of women in the labor force (69 percent). It ranks third in participation of men in the labor force (81 percent). And it

ranks first in proportion of workers with more than one job (10 percent).

Gillaspay said that the demand for workers will only increase, given the state's labor shortage. He said that while high employment is good, it does raise serious policy questions about the costs — physically, emotionally, and financially — on the state.

"We also need to be concerned about people working too much," he said.