

Citizen lobbyist takes her seat

Education, health care and tax relief top list of concerns for District 48B's newest addition to the Legislature

BY MIKE COOK

During her campaign, one of Connie Bernardy's campaign slogans was "One of us...Working for us!"



Rep. Connie Bernardy

Bernardy (DFL-Fridley) has lived and been involved in District 48B for her entire life. "I grew up in the community, I've lived here for 37 years. I know a lot of people and I'm one of us."

Now she also represents them.

"The people of the district encouraged me to run," she said.

That familiarity with her community was one pleasing part of the campaign because of her connections throughout the area, be they through former classmates, her former babysitters, parents she volunteers with at her children's school, fellow church-goers, and others.

Bernardy replaces fellow DFLer Alice Johnson, who spent seven terms in St. Paul.

"When I talked to Alice about running she told me 'Connie, if you get endorsed you will win because you are one of us,'" Bernardy said.

It was Christmas 1999 when Bernardy said she began to seriously think about pursuing a seat.

"I did some research on how it would fit with my family, and thought it would be a great fit," she said. "Plus, I get to work on issues that are important to myself, my family and my community."

Her husband, Dan, and daughters Lisa, 18, Brielle, 10, and Kyla, 7, see mom's new adventure as a team effort. "They've all been involved from the beginning in any way they wanted, and they just had a lot of fun with it," Bernardy said.

Now that she has been elected to serve constituents in Fridley, Blaine, Coon Rapids, and Spring Lake Park, Bernardy says she is ready for business.

"I look forward to getting work done," she

said shortly before Christmas 2000. "I've been getting oriented at the Capitol and talking to constituents about things I'll be working on."

Her top priority is education.

As a classroom volunteer, Bernardy has seen firsthand the problems faced by many schools.

"We have very good schools in our district and a strong tradition of supporting those schools," she said. But, like many other dis-

tricts, the schools have been forced to make unwanted program cuts for a number of years.

She supports lowering class sizes, ensuring all schools are smoke- and drug-free, reforming the property tax system, and ensuring schools receive stable and adequate funding.

She says she doesn't believe more money is the only answer, but that it does play a role.

"We just need to make sure we have the systems in place and financial backing that is needed for those services for our young people," Bernardy said, "but we must also think outside-the-box for solutions."

Although she has never held an elected office, Bernardy has experience in education funding at the Capitol.

Two years ago she was part of a grassroots, non-partisan task force of parents, teachers and school administrators that helped attain more state funding than was originally planned. "The governor proposed \$88 per pupil unit for our district, but we needed \$400 to break even after several years of drastic cuts," she said. "We ended up getting about \$300 per pupil unit."

She advocates fully funding special education, be it at the state or federal level.

Health care is Bernardy's second major issue.

"Prescription drug prices is a concern of

people in our district, as is access to quality, affordable health care," Bernardy said. Others have expressed worry about how people can get coverage to pay for mental and chemical health services. "Hopefully we can find a solution to prevent some of those problems up front, so we're not paying for it the long run," she said.

She further supports making prescription drugs more affordable for seniors and ensuring privacy of medical records.

Tax relief is also a concern for those in District 48B. "When we have the opportunity for tax relief I want to see that it benefits all people of our district." Like many people in her district, she advocates rebate checks for constitu-

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ents, but at the same time wants to make sure necessary education funding is in place.

Bernardy is a strong advocate of intergenerational dialogue. In addition to promoting a program at her church where youngsters and seniors get together, her campaign featured folks of all ages, including one door-knocking volunteer who just turned 74.

"Our youngest door knocker was 3 years old," Bernardy said. "She had to pedal her bicycle with training wheels on it up to the doorstep, get off and ring the doorbell. I couldn't do it because that was her job."

DISTRICT 48B

1998 population (estimate): 34,382

Largest city: Fridley

County: Anoka

Location: Northern Twin Cities suburbs

Top concern: "We need to make sure our school districts are not in crisis and that they can provide the programs students need."

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