

Donning a new hat

Goodwin draws on experience as researcher, lobbyist, and policy expert in new role as legislator

By Jonas M. Walker

Rep. Barbara Goodwin (DFL-Columbia Heights) describes her ascent to office as an extension of her previous work developing state policy.



Rep. Barbara Goodwin

As a first-time member of the House of Representatives, she joins the caucus whose legislative services office she used to direct. She has also led DFL research efforts on matters of state policy, and later represented the Minnesota Association

of Professional Employees as a lobbyist in the capitol.

Her expertise led to a position as a planner for children's mental health policies in Hennepin County, a position she plans to keep, at least part-time, while lawmaking.

Goodwin now represents District 52A, an area covering several suburbs north of Minneapolis. She takes the seat most recently occupied by Sen. Satveer Chaudhary (DFL-Fridley), who successfully ran for state Senate.

Although she has lived most of her life in the area she now represents, Goodwin says the decision to run for the House was itself an educational experience.

"I wasn't totally aware of all the issues in my district when I decided to run," she said. "You don't really know an area until you knock on doors for five months. But I knew that whatever issues they were, I would be able to jump on those pretty quickly."

Goodwin lists health care, transportation, and education as matters of keen concern to her constituents.

She says she was aware that health care concerns troubled the minds of many Minnesotans, but was surprised to discover the extent of hardships facing people living in her own community. She cites her encounters with the disturbing trend of elderly couples on a fixed income having insufficient funds to purchase medication.

"They had to choose who was going to get their prescription and who was not," she said.

The issue is especially relevant in Goodwin's district, as 60 percent of her constituents are over 55, and many have only marginal health insurance coverage, she said.

Goodwin further explained the mixed blessing of economic development, which her district has seen with the addition of one company's corporate headquarters. Medtronic Corporation recently placed its global headquarters in Fridley, bringing with it 5,000 well-paying and secure jobs.

While Goodwin says she is thankful for the placement, and welcomes the company, her

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constituents are concerned about the increased traffic on an already congested portion of metropolitan freeway that runs through her district — Interstate 694.

"Anytime we can get an employer that provides health benefits and decent wages, we're really lucky," she said.

She is hoping the proposed NorthStar Corridor commuter rail system can help alleviate what she fears will be an undue traffic burden in her area.

Goodwin says her district "has a lot of school districts running in the red." She says that is due partly to changes increasingly facing inner suburban districts like her own.

"My area is becoming more like an inner city than a suburb," she said. Goodwin explains that an increasing portion of students in those districts require special counseling or instruction in English, services that only recently became necessary.

Goodwin says her committee assignments, including the House Education Policy and K-12 Education Finance Committees, will allow her some leverage in shaping policy important to her district.

Perhaps the striking example of such a difference can be found in the attitudes of Goodwin's constituents toward one issue that consistently divides urban areas and wealthier suburbs. "I asked people about property taxes and they said, 'No, they're pretty good,'" explains Goodwin.

She also said she looks forward to working with her colleagues in the Republican caucus, and remembers enjoying success with those members as a former lobbyist for state professional employees.

"I had Republican votes on a lot of the legislation that was promoted by the members I worked for, so I don't expect that (being in the minority) will be an overwhelming problem," she said.

Though she hopes to serve her constituents as a House member for many years, Goodwin says she is already impressed by the stamina demonstrated by her more senior colleagues. "There are plenty of people here older than me, but I can't count on having that kind of energy at that age," she said. Legislating is "a lot of work, a lot of time, a lot of energy."

DISTRICT 52A

1998 population (estimate): 32,437

Largest city: Fridley

County: Anoka

Location: Northern Twin Cities suburbs

Top Concern: "My most important priorities will be health care, transportation, and education."

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