

Aiming higher

After four years in House, Gray says he can't pass up the opportunity to run for state auditor

By DAVID MAEDA

Rep. Gregory Gray's (DFL-Mpls) tenure with the House didn't exactly go as planned.

"I knew at some point I would want to move on and do some other things, but in my mind I kind of figured three terms," he said. "The first term you probably are not going to get a lot done. The second term you kind of learn the ropes and you're making progress. The third term you can really cash in and do some important things."

Gray received the DFL endorsement for state auditor May 5. As a result, a third House term will have to wait. He said the decision to run for the office came after he discussed the position with the current auditor, Judi Dutcher.

"I felt it was an opportunity for me to continue public service on a broader scale, a full-time scale, and that it was too good an opportunity to pass up with the skill set I have," he said.

Gray holds a law degree from Hamline University and spent 10 years in the private sector auditing corporations, including Pillsbury, Land O' Lakes, Dayton Hudson, and Marquette Banks.

Recalling his first election to the House, Gray said K-12 education was a top priority in his north Minneapolis district. But being a new member meant he didn't have the seniority to be appointed to the House K-12 Education Finance Committee. Instead he served on the House Education Policy and Family and Early Childhood Education Finance committees.

"As it turns out, I'm glad fate put me on early childhood because I had a great time. It's a neglected area that has so much potential. The one message I would leave my colleagues is to give a much higher priority to early childhood education. We have an opportunity to intervene in kids' educational life in a positive way and save millions and billions of dollars."

Gray said it's been a struggle just to preserve funding for early childhood programs let alone expand them.

"In many people's minds, early childhood

education is still the province of mom and dad," he said. "Mom and dad should raise kids until they go to kindergarten. I would never try and suggest that mom and dad are not the pivotal players, but we have moms and dads all over the state saying they need help."

Being one of two African-American House members, Gray predicts the diversity in the Legislature will soon grow, and there will be three times as many minority members six years from now, which will lead to a better process.



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

Rep. Gregory Gray will leave the House after two terms to run for state auditor.

"We can't come up with good laws unless we understand what the people of Minnesota want. And we can't understand what the people of Minnesota want unless we have a diverse group who are involved in putting those laws together," he said.

Rep. Carlos Mariani (DFL-St. Paul) said that coming from a "humble" background and a single parent household has made Gray a passionate lawmaker and a "very eloquent" advocate, particularly for children's issues.

Mariani, who is Hispanic, said that because there are only three members of color serving in the House, that he, Gray, and Rep. Neva Walker (DFL-Mpls) have developed a special camaraderie.

"I've been here for 12 years and I don't necessarily come here looking to make a long

lasting friendship," Mariani said. "But I made a long lasting friend."

He said when Gray first arrived Gray had his "eyes opened" by the disconnect between "what gets talked about here and what gets talked about in the community."

Gray said his biggest disappointment was the failure to pass a bill last session that would have required a study of racial profiling in the state and mandatory data collection.

"It's rare you find any community united, but across economic lines, African-Americans, Latinos, and others were solidly saying racial profiling is a problem, and collecting the data is the minimum thing we'd like you to do," Gray said. "And the door was slammed in our face."

Gray said he expects the issue will be back in the near future because it still has a significant impact on the people of Minnesota.

Rep. Harry Mares (R-White Bear Lake), chair of the House Education Policy Committee, praised Gray's contributions to the committee and to the Legislature as a whole.

"He is honest and he is truthful and he is a person of his word," Mares said. "He is a very good legislator. He supports his positions with facts and information. Although I understand his decision

to move on it would have been great if he remained in the Legislature. He will be sorely missed." ❁

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Gregory Gray
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Terms: 2

Career notes: Gray has been an advocate for increased early childhood education funding and was a leading proponent to study racial profiling and mandate data collection related to the practice in the state.