

Where his heart is

After years away from hometown and labor roots, Rep. Rob Leighton plans to spend more time with Austin family

By LISA HILTON

When Rep. Rob Leighton (DFL-Austin) leaves office this year after four terms, he will still keep a keen eye on political issues in the state.

Since 1994, Leighton, 36, has represented the city of Austin, the place where he was born and raised, and where the Leighton family has lived since the 1800s.

Growing up there, Democratic politics was a way of life for Leighton, whose father ran for the State Senate in 1958 at the age of 29. Although he lost, Robert Leighton, Sr., remained politically active and was friend to many Minnesota politicians, such as Hubert H. Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, and former Gov. Karl Rolvaag.

It was his father's involvement that

issues such as workers' compensation, migrant worker protection, and increasing the state's minimum wage.

As a freshman legislator in 1994, Leighton was vice-chair of the House Labor-Management Relations Committee, and he now serves on the House Commerce, Jobs, and Economic Development Policy Committee. In addition, he has been a member of the Worker's Compensation Advisory Council for five years.

He also served as House assistant majority leader from 1997 to 1998, and then as assistant minority leader from 1999 to 2000 after Republicans won the majority in the 1998 election.

While Leighton also serves on the House Taxes Committee, and has served on K-12 Education Finance Committee and others in the past, his focus remains on labor.

His interest in labor issues was sparked during the Hormel plant strike in 1984-85, when he saw many people in Austin out of work and charged with crimes related to the strike.

That strike had a life-long impact on him, Leighton said.

It was also at a rally during the strike that Leighton met a Carlton College professor named Paul Wellstone, who would later become a U.S. Senator.

Leighton remains a strong Wellstone supporter and plans to work on Wellstone's re-election campaign, as well as campaign for other Democratic candidates.

Leighton especially credits legislators from the Iron Range for guiding him during his first years and helping him fight for labor issues.

In fact, some House members used to refer

to him as the "Baby Ranger," since Leighton's district is known for having many, "pro-labor Democrats in a sea of Republican districts," he said.

Leighton predicts the newly released redistricting maps will benefit DFL members, adding that new districts may mean his political party will have a shot at reclaiming the majority in the House.

Although he will miss the friends he has made and the people he has worked with in the House, Leighton said it will be nice to have more time with his wife, Shawn, and his 5-year-old twin sons Tanner and Taylor. The family also has a dog that the boys named Britney, after singer Britney Spears. It could be worse, Leighton says with a laugh.

It is especially difficult being a legislator from a rural district, since the job requires so much time away from his family, Leighton said. "The time commitment goes beyond what most people expect."

When he took office in 1994, he was single, but now that he is married and has children, it is more difficult to be away, he said.

Although he said he will try to keep in touch with his friends at the Capitol, Leighton knows it will be difficult since he lives so far from St. Paul.

"It's kind of like your family away from family," he said of the Legislature.

His plans for the future include focusing on his law practice, spending time with his children, traveling with his wife, and of course, keeping a close eye on politics.



PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

Rep. Rob Leighton will not seek another term in the Minnesota House. He was first elected to District 27B in 1994.

encouraged Leighton to run for office, he said.

And like his father, Leighton pursued a career in law, earning a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Minnesota and a law degree from the University of California-Berkeley in 1991.

During his time at the Capitol, Leighton has been a strong advocate for labor, working on

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Rob Leighton

DFL

District 27B – Austin

Terms: 4

Career notes: Leighton sponsored several employer-employee relations bills that became law during his tenure, particularly those governing workers' compensation and minimum wage. He also promoted legislation clarifying civil actions. During 1998, Leighton was on a list of potential lieutenant governor running mates for DFL candidate Hubert H. "Skip" Humphrey III.