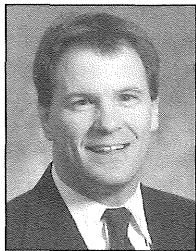


# On a rural mission

## Marquart vows to consider how every issue affects rural Minnesota

BY THERESA STAHL

Rep. Paul Marquart (DFL-Dilworth) compares his experience as a legislator to that of a college student.



Rep. Paul Marquart

"Being a rural legislator, and being away from home is kind of that same feeling as living in the dorms when you were in college," Marquart says, only this time he's living in a hotel.

The committees he and other legislators serve on are much like sitting in class, he said.

"I am a teacher, yet I'm a student down here," says the former Dilworth mayor and social studies teacher. "Every night I go home and do my homework."

Marquart said he plans to spend most of his "class time" promoting and educating others on issues that affect non-metropolitan parts of the state.

"I look at every issue that comes up as to how it affects rural Minnesota," he said.

While he will focus mostly on education and agriculture, Marquart says he will also advocate affordable housing and incentives to create new jobs and new businesses in rural areas, lowering prescription drug costs for senior citizens, and campaign finance reform.

The committees on which Marquart serves reflect his areas of concern: Commerce, Jobs, and Economic Development Policy, Education Policy, and Higher Education Finance. He said the only committee he requested but was not assigned to was agriculture.

Marquart's top concerns in education pertain to declining enrollment, he says. Between September 1999 and September 2000, nine of the 11 school districts in his House district lost enrollment, totaling more than 300 students.

"The governor is asking school districts to be more accountable, to look at achieving higher quality standards, and a lot of districts are just looking at how to survive and move on to the next year," he said. "It's going to be

difficult to retain the high quality, much less improve it."

Schools in Marquart's district have had to cut their language and industrial technology programs. Elementary classrooms are growing from class sizes of 20 to 25 students, he said. "It's starting to erode at the quality of our education."

Marquart points to a struggling agriculture economy as another circumstance that's hurting rural areas in Minnesota. He has pledged to support permanent agricultural property tax relief and promote policy supporting the small family farmer.

He sees potential for diversifying products

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—Rep. Paul Marquart

such as ethanol and soy and wants to promote their uses statewide. Marquart said he is aware of agricultural needs that reach higher than the state level.

"A lot of concerns in agriculture and the lower commodity prices certainly are federal problems, but there are some things to do as a state," he said.

It is important for legislators across the state to be aware of rural issues, Marquart said.

As examples, he cited the development of affordable housing, creating incentives for businesses and new jobs, and bringing high-speed Internet access to remote areas of the state.

"Legislation needs to be flexible in state law as to how can it apply to various areas and communities in the state," Marquart said.

He also stressed the significance of bipartisanship. "It's important that Democrats and Republicans work together on rural Minnesota issues."

Marquart speaks with knowledge about politics from his 11 years as the mayor of Dilworth, a small town near Moorhead. During his time as mayor he worked closely with Ken Parke, Dilworth city administrator, who says Marquart will be missed.

"People didn't feel like they were losing him, but just representing them in another way," Parke said of when Marquart won the election.

Parke describes Marquart as very personable, someone who always promoted the positive. "When people had concerns he always followed through," he said. "He spent a lot of time improving the quality of life in Dilworth. He's a person that doesn't sit for very long."

Marquart's love for government, leadership qualities, and his background as mayor and in teaching government make him an excellent politician, Parke said.

"He's a political figure that was actually sincere about the things he was saying," he said. "Everybody knows he's going to be hard to replace."

Marquart says he misses his family — wife Colleen and daughters Lindsey, 14, and Ashley, 9 — but running for state representative was a decision they made together. In fact, Marquart said one of the reasons he didn't

pursue the position earlier is because he felt his children were too young, but "now they understand what's going on."

Now, Marquart wants to focus on crucial issues that are important to rural Minnesota and will return to Dilworth-Glyndon-Felton to teach each fall. "That's something I would never want to give up.

"I have the best of both worlds," he said. "Teaching and working with youth one-half of the year, and setting policy for the state to improve the quality of life for rural Minnesota."

### DISTRICT 9B

**1998 population (estimate):** 33,669

**Largest city:** Breckenridge

**Counties:** Becker, Clay, Otter Tail, and Wilkin

**Location:** northwestern Minnesota

**Top concern:** "Declining enrollments and long-term erosion of our high quality of education."

—Rep. Paul Marquart