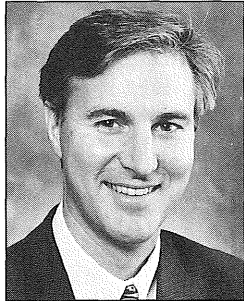


After 20 years of waiting, Opatz takes a seat

Editor's note: For the next several weeks, Session Weekly will profile at least two of the House's 33 new members in each issue. Accompanying each profile will be a box of district traits, lending some perspective to each member's constituency. This is the first of those installments.

The first time Rep. Joe Opatz (DFL-St. Cloud) tried to run for public office, it took the U.S.



Rep. Joe Opatz

Supreme Court to stop him. It was the spring of 1972 and 18-year-olds had just been granted the right to vote. Opatz, then a 19-year-old college student, decided to run for a seat on the St. Cloud City Council.

But Minnesota law required office holders to be at least 21. Opatz challenged the law and appealed his case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled that the minimum age requirement was constitutional. So Opatz was kept off the ballot.

For nearly 20 years, Opatz put his dream of holding public office on hold as he pursued other

goals. Now 40, he is the author of three books on wellness and the workplace, director of the Atwood Center, (the St. Cloud State University student center), and an adjunct professor in the university's applied psychology department. His Ph.D., from the University of Minnesota, is in higher education studies.

With age no longer an obstacle, Opatz's biggest hurdle to being elected to the state House was his district's historical tendency to vote Independent-Republican. The last time a DFLer represented District 16A, which comprises Sauk Rapids and the northern part of St. Cloud, was in 1978.

In a vigorous campaign that included a lot of door-knocking, Opatz emphasized his strong family ties to his district. Unmarried, he is the second of 10 children and has numerous relatives in the area. Both an uncle and a brother own a business in Sauk Rapids.

People he met during the campaign were constantly saying, "I go to church with your grandma," or "I buy insurance from your brother," he said.

"I have to give a lot of credit to my family," Opatz said of his victory.

The campaign was exceptionally amicable. Opatz's opponent, Paul Bugbee, is a personal friend who contributed \$100 to Opatz's cam-

paign before being persuaded to enter the race as the IR candidate.

Opatz is bringing his expertise in the fields of health care and education to the Legislature. As the state implements MinnesotaCare, its newly authorized health care plan, Opatz said he wants to make sure the emphasis is on wellness and preventive medicine. He also plans to work on reform in higher education and in government.

"The bureaucratic model we use grew out of the '30s and '40s," he said. "We have to come up with a new model that is more consumer-driven."

— Ruth Hammond

District 16A

Population: 33,117

Counties: Benton, Stearns

Largest city: St. Cloud

Location: Central Minnesota

Largest employer: St. Cloud Hospital, 2,200 employees

Topography: A highly urbanized district, all 33,117 (100 percent) residents living within municipal borders

1992 presidential election results:

Clinton/Gore: 41.1 percent

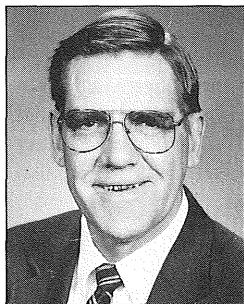
Bush/Quayle: 34 percent

Perot/Stockdale: 24 percent

Other: 0.9 percent

Ness seeks less government, more efficiency

"A genuine interest in public service" is what led Rep. Robert Ness (IR-Dassel) to run for the Legislature when the District 20A seat opened last year.



Rep. Robert Ness

The previous year, Ness, 57, retired following a 34-year career in education: 21 years as superintendent, 10 years as a principal, and 3 years as an industrial arts and health teacher. He is wellacquainted with the effects that state

funding and regulations have on education. The recessionary year of 1982 was a particularly tough one, when hundreds of changes in government mandates, rules, and regulations had to be implemented, he said. At the same time, budget cuts forced the layoff of 50 employees in his district along with other cuts.

"I have had a growing concern about the amount of government in every phase of our life in our society," Ness said.

He is also concerned that government needs to

be more efficient. He cites, for example, a state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) program that provides free fishing licenses to senior citizens — but only if they first pay for the \$4.50 license, save their receipt, and mail it to the DNR for a refund check. This reimbursement program also affects nursing home residents who may only go fishing once or twice a year, he noted.

"There's certainly a need for the government to assist for the betterment of the people and for the common good," Ness said. But, he added, when government goes too far, creativity and the entrepreneurial spirit are stifled.

Ness believes the breadth of his experience helped convince voters that he was the most qualified for the job. He grew up on a family farm and earned his master's and specialist degrees in education from the University of Minnesota. His present work, as a construction manager and consultant, gives him an appreciation of business interests. He and his wife Marianne have four grown children, three of whom work in the medical field — two as dentists and one as a surgeon — giving him a special familiarity with health care.

One of Ness' chief goals is to stimulate the rural economy. That goal coincides with his emphasis

on family values. People who commute an hour or more each way to daily jobs pay a price far greater than the cost of gasoline, he noted. A price is also paid in terms of time stolen from family life and community, school and church involvement.

"There's just no energy left," he observed. "It's not in the best interest of the state to require people to move or have to commute to make a living. We need to help the rural economy in every way we possibly can."

— Ruth Hammond

District 20A

Population: 32,916

Counties: McLeod, Meeker, Stearns, Wright

Largest city: Hutchinson

Location: South central Minnesota

Largest employer: Litchfield Precision Co., 325 employees

Topography: District almost evenly split between urban and rural areas with 17,564 residents (53.4 percent) living inside an incorporated city.

1992 presidential election results:

Bush/Quayle: 36.1 percent

Clinton/Gore: 34.1 percent

Perot/Stockdale: 29.4 percent

Other: 0.4 percent