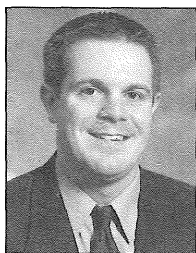


A new generation

Sertich relies on his youth and perspective to bring new prosperity and opportunity to the Iron Range

By JONAS M. WALKER

Barely moved into his new office, freshman Rep. Anthony "Tony" Sertich (DFL-Chisholm) mused early this month on being one of the youngest representatives ever elected to the Minnesota Legislature.



Rep. Tony Sertich

"It's pretty neat," said the 25-year-old. "It's getting a new generation, some new blood into public policy discussion."

Sertich takes over the District 5B seat vacated by David Tomassoni, who moved on to the Senate.

Though he is new to the Legislature, Sertich is no stranger to the DFL caucus at the Capitol, having worked on the staff of former state Sen. Jerry Janezich. Sertich's first exposure to the world of politics came while interning with Janezich, whom Sertich now credits as a mentor and benefactor.

"He was thoughtful," Sertich says of Janezich. "He took the time to listen, no matter the issue."

While learning the art of politics, Sertich never broke contact with another passion, the politics of art. A longtime thespian, Sertich credits Laurel and Hardy among his original theatrical inspirations.

Today, film actor Kevin Spacey can count Sertich among his most loyal fans. As for the stage, Sertich favors the likes of Shakespeare, mentioning "The Merchant of Venice" as his favorite piece.

"It has everything," he said. "Love, politics, religion, money."

Hailing from the same town as Tomassoni and Janezich, Sertich spoke knowingly of the politics of that DFL stronghold.

"If you don't bring jobs, people are going to leave," he said. Sertich explained the difficult position many of his Generation-X Iron Range companions find themselves in. "Many

of us came down to the Twin Cities for college and would like to return to the region, but can't."

Sertich said he plans to follow the tradition of other Iron Rangers at the Capitol and try to find ways to provide some of the state's wealth to his marginalized constituents.

"The state's had an economic boom in the last few years, but we really haven't felt it up there," he said.

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However, Sertich anticipates that accomplishing this goal will be no easy task. One obstacle, he said, is convincing the majority of state residents that parts of Greater Minnesota are suffering.

"It's kind of hard to convince the rest of the state when they see low unemployment" and other positive economic conditions, he said.

The Iron Range has suffered some economic decline in recent years. Sertich said he hopes to address the trends that have become characteristic to the region: a declining school enrollment, the relative scarcity of high-paying new jobs, and the inability of native college graduates to return.

To that end, Sertich is pleased with his appointment to the House Commerce, Jobs, & Economic Development Policy Committee.

Sertich hopes to both steer public resources toward his district and use his position to lobby the private sector on the strengths of the area, which he listed as "tourism, taconite, timber," before adding "technology" to that list. In that particular sector, Sertich's youth may be a distinct advantage. Given his generation's comfort with computing, he said, he looks forward to making a strong case for

high-tech investment in northeastern Minnesota.

He would also like to develop a plan that would gather a list of skilled workers who would pledge to return to the Iron Range if employers will provide desirable jobs.

"It worked in Georgia," Sertich said. Such a plan has never been applied on a regional level, he said, but he's interested in exploring whether the idea could work in Minnesota.

As to the matter of trade, Sertich sketches himself as a "fair-trade" moderate. Having seen firsthand some negative localized effects of global trade, he describes himself as "passionately" committed to the unique problems pressing his district.

Ultimately, Sertich sees himself teaching in

some capacity. Both his parents work in education, and he considers the edification of the masses to be among the most noble of endeavors in a democratic society.

Until then, Sertich will draw on his previous experience in the Legislature to give him a bit of a head start as a first-time representative. "I know where my desk is," he said. "I don't have to run around asking how to do this, or who to talk to about finding that out."

DISTRICT 5B

1998 population (estimate): 31,445

Largest city: Hibbing

County: St. Louis

Location: Northeastern Minnesota Iron Range

Top concern: "I am hoping to find a voice for our generation; to put a new face on public service. If you don't bring jobs, people are going to leave."

—Rep. Tony Sertich