

Skare brings experience to property tax debate

First-term Rep. Gail Skare (DFL-Bemidji) enjoys reading. In fact, when she came to the Capitol back in January, she brought a book by a Bemidji author with her, hoping that she would get a chance to enjoy it in her spare moments.



Rep. Gail Skare

"I haven't touched it. Lately, I spend most of my time reading things like this," she said, pointing to a thick stack of bills, summaries, and revenue impact statements on the table next to her. "This is my bedtime reading tonight."

Nor has she had the time to indulge in one of her other favorite activities: cross-country skiing. "Meanwhile, my husband's back in Bemidji, getting out every day," she said.

These days, most of Skare's time belongs to the state, in the form of hearings, meetings, and long hours hitting the books, learning as much as she can about the issues that confront a new representative who sits on four committees.

Yet Skare would have it no other way. She is, after all, a legislator.

"Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed," she said with a quick grin, "but I'll walk into that House chamber and a little thrill wells up inside me . . . I'm really part of this!" Which by no means should imply that Skare is some neophyte just happy to have a place at the table.

On the contrary, Skare made her share of tough calls as a Beltrami County Commissioner, a post she held for 10 years before she won election to the House. That job, she

said, was great training for her current role. Indeed, she's more than familiar with property taxes and local government/social services funding formulas. For the most part, she said, the issues are the same; only the perspective has changed. No longer can she confine the scope of her decision to Beltrami County; with her seat in the Legislature comes the obligation to consider the impact her vote will have on the entire state.

Winning that seat, though, was no walk in the northern Minnesota woods.

Things looked good in the beginning, Skare said, but before it was over she had to endure some tough — yet effective — campaign tactics at the hands of her Republican opponent. Polls showed that at one point Skare led her challenger by a nearly two-to-one margin. Yet when all the ballots were counted, she had won by less than 2 percent — a mere 277 votes.

She attributes the erosion of support to a questionnaire mailed out by the National Rifle Association to political candidates in the closing days of the campaign. The organization gave her a low grade, and awarded her opponent a much higher rating.

"He capitalized on it," Skare said. "He sent out a letter saying I was anti-hunting and anti-gun. I could feel the support slipping away."

In fact, she said, nothing could be further from the truth. Her husband is an avid hunter, as are her sons.

"I've never been anti-hunting," she said. "I've got bear rugs in my basement. It was hard to fight that statement eight days before the election."

Skare looks forward to working hard over the course of her term, particularly on property tax reform. She sits not only on the Taxes Committee, but also on the group's Sales and Income Tax Division. She also has a place on the Agriculture Committee and the Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs Committee.

In addition to property taxes, Skare said, many of her constituents have told her education issues are a high priority, along with welfare reform, particularly how the new federal mandates will affect services on a local level. But as a first-termer who happens to have more than a little experience in local government, she's realistic about just how much she can change things on the state side.

"I'm not hung up on . . . having to carry a bill — not that I won't," Skare said. "My role is to use my background on how things affect local government and try to give perspective from that end."

— F.J. Gallagher

District 4A

1996 population: 34,564

Largest city: Bemidji

Counties: Beltrami, Hubbard

Location: northern Minnesota

Top concern: "My desire is to better the relationship between state and local governments — distribute resources more equitably between communities and provide some flexibility in how communities execute state mandates."

— Rep. Gail Skare

Committee deadlines

Each year the House and Senate set deadlines by which most bills must be heard in a committee and forwarded through the process. The deadlines serve to weed out some of the several thousand bills introduced each year.

The first committee deadline is **Wednesday, March 26**. That means all bills must be passed out of all policy committees in their house of origin to receive further consideration this session. If a

House bill hasn't been approved by House policy committees by the deadline, but its Senate companion has, the bill has met the committee deadline.

By the second committee deadline — **Wednesday, April 9** — all bills other than those containing appropriations, must be passed out of all policy committees in both the House and the Senate. The deadline does not apply to the finance divisions of the committees or the Rules and Legislative Administration Committee, the Taxes

Committee, and the Ways and Means Committee.

By **Friday, April 18**, all appropriations bills must clear their policy and finance committees and move to either the Taxes Committee or Ways and Means Committee.

Of course, there are exceptions to the deadlines. Any lawmaker may try to convince the Rules and Legislative Administration Committee, which includes leaders from both party caucuses, to hear a bill after the deadlines.