

Rep. Steve Sviggum . . .

Minority leader's success will be measured Nov. 8

To those who know Minority Leader Steve Sviggum, there's no question about his sincerity.

He's a staunch believer in the principles of the Independent-Republican Party of Minnesota, and a well-known conservative in its ranks.

So when it comes to choosing between family and politics, there's no question upon which side this 42-year-old lawmaker, devoted father of three, farmer, and part-time basketball referee falls.

Blood wins every time.

When asked what he would do if any of his children decided to join the DFL, he paused and said: "I'd be a bit disappointed, but I would respect their decision."

He has a dream of some day campaigning for his grade school daughter, Marit, for a seat in the U.S. Congress. "I could never go to Washington myself, but she could. . . . Of course I'd campaign for her harder if she ran as a Republican," he joked.

The Independent-Republican from Kenyon in southeastern Minnesota has served as minority leader for nearly two years, which qualifies Sviggum as an elder statesman for the post.

Since 1960, the average tenure for minority leaders has been just 2.7 years. Some leave, burned out from the frustration of seldom winning legislative battles. Others, like managers of professional sports teams, are asked to leave.

"I enjoy the job a lot, but I enjoy my family, too," said Sviggum. "Could I do it for 10 years? No."

The down side to minority rule is clear: Fewer Independent-Republican bills make it into law or are heavily compromised if they do.

"You run for office to make decisions, to set the agenda," Sviggum said. "It is frustrating when you can't."



Minority Leader Steve Sviggum

Although he spends less time with his mother and two brothers on his 440-acre beef, corn, and soybean farm, he tries to work there whenever possible. The farm duties and basketball refereeing offer necessary distractions from the day-to-day grind of state politics.

Fifth Judicial District Judge Terry Dempsey, Sviggum's predecessor as minority leader, said his replacement has done well handling his leadership role.

"He is articulate and well-informed on the issues. . . . Steve doesn't make enemies. Maybe that is [due to] his background as a referee — he can make a decision without causing a riot."

Being in the minority isn't pretty, Dempsey said. "You have to be negative. You're com-

plaining all the time. . . . People say, 'Here we go again — gripe, gripe gripe.'

"You are constantly being blamed for things and you have no control over anything. The minority has no rights."

In politics, success as a minority leader means getting more of your own party elected, winning a majority, and controlling the legislative process.

With all 134 House members up for re-election this November, Sviggum hopes the IRs will do just that. The IRs have won control of the House just once in the past 20 years, and that was 10 years ago.

Although the DFL has had its public relations troubles this year, Sviggum said IRs must shine this legislative session to ensure victory at the polls.

"We can hope for more stubbing of the toes" by the DFL, but IRs must present a positive agenda of important bills and maintain a confrontational, watchdog-style on the floor with DFLers, said Sviggum.

This session, IR legislation will revolve around several familiar themes. Some include 'no new taxes,' a ballot question on term limits for state and federal elected officials, workers' compensation reform, tougher crime legislation, welfare reform, and the expansion and creation of jobs through the elimination of state sales tax on equipment purchased by businesses.

So, like winners and losers in the basketball tournaments he often referees, Sviggum's tenure as minority leader will be measured by a single event — in this case the Nov. 8, 1994, elections.

"He needs another 25 IR members [elected to the House] and then he'll be outstanding," said Dempsey.

— K. Darcy Hanzlik

Do you know?

Liquor and ballots did not mix for the 1878 Legislature. That year, lawmakers declared that for voters to cast ballots coherently on election day, all Minnesota bars should shut down for most of the day. The law closed saloons from 5 a.m. until 6 p.m. on election days. Liquor stores were barred from opening at all. "Experience had shown that in the larger

intelligent exercise of the cherished elective franchise," Folwell added.

To ensure that the law was followed, violations carried stiff fines. Saloonkeepers serving drinks faced \$25 to \$100 fines for each offense. Additionally, every mayor had to remind bar owners of the law. Mayors who forgot to make a proclamation faced up to a \$1,000 fine and 60 days in jail.