

New members. . .

Tuma to press for education, legislative reform

Rep. Jim Tuma (IR-Northfield) is the first to admit it.

"I'm an anomaly in many ways," he said.



Rep. John Tuma

The first-term legislator comes from a long line of DFLers. His father has been politically active in the DFL Party, and Tuma himself sought DFL endorsement in 1992 for the legislative seat he presently occupies. The endorsement

and the race went to Kay Brown, who then lost the seat to an IR-endorsed Tuma this time around.

"I never changed parties, but the parties changed on me," Tuma said. He was always a moderate Democrat and now he's stepped over the line to become a moderate Republican, he said.

Voters in his district hold conservative stances on many issues, but, because many are farmers, they have a hard time shaking the image of Republicans as "all big bankers," Tuma said. Their idea of a Republican candidate is changing with time, he added.

Tuma's father was initially disappointed when his son declared as an IR candidate. He told friends and family his son was more an independent candidate than a Republican, Tuma said.

"But then my dad started realizing we aren't all rich people, just everyday farmers and small-business men like himself. He's now one of my biggest supporters," Tuma said.

His father, in many ways, gave Tuma his introduction to politics. As a third grader, Tuma was discovered to have dyslexia, a learning disability that affects reading and

spelling ability. His father, Leonard, believed the school district wasn't addressing his son's learning disability, so he took action. He joined the Lakeville School Board.

When it came time for college, Tuma became a political science major at Mankato State University. He attended three nominating conventions as a DFL delegate, served as a student chair for Tim Penny's first campaign for Congress in 1982, and came to the State Capitol to intern for then-Sen. Bob Schmitz (DFL-Jordan) in 1985.

Ten years later, Tuma again walks the Capitol halls, occasionally bumping into people he remembers from his time as an intern. He has a number of issues he plans to address. Legislative reform is one priority.

Tuma would like legislators to hold session every other year and to take a pay cut. He said the Legislature addresses too broad a slate of political issues each session. The state frequently passes laws relating to social and other issues that would be better left for local governments to decide, he said.

"Voters — taxpayers — would rather see us concentrating on the things we're good at — like roads and education — and not get into tangential issues," Tuma said. "For instance, we're over emphasizing social reform through desegregation. We're not leaving enough leeway for local discretion."

Tuma is an anomaly in another way. He works in Northfield as a workers' compensation lawyer representing injured employees. Many IR legislators speak about how Minnesota's workers' compensation system must be retooled to lower workers' compensation insurance costs.

"But I've had a chance to sit down with lawmakers and explain how the system works.

The reason why I'm needed [as an attorney] is . . . because the Legislature tinkers with the system every few years and makes it so confusing people need a lawyer to figure it out," he said.

But Tuma's first love remains education. He serves on the House Education Committee. He calls himself a "special education kid" shaped by his childhood educational experience. He wants to be a voice for other special education kids, and would like to see a low-cost program that would allow children with learning disabilities to be taught in the same classroom as other children.

Tuma lives in Northfield with his wife, Wendy, and their 22-month-old son, Cal. The couple is expecting another child in August.

He considers his new job training for his parental role.

"The long days here are physically preparing me to stay up 24 hours with a new baby," Tuma said.

—Jean Thilmany

District 25A

Population: 32,603
Distribution: 55.96 percent urban; 44.04 percent rural
Counties: Dakota, LeSuer, Rice, Scott
Largest city: Northfield
Location: south central Minnesota
Unemployment rate: 4.02 percent
Residents living below poverty level: 8.51 percent
1992 presidential election results:
Bush/Quayle 27.55 percent
Clinton/Gore 46.89 percent
Perot/Stockdale 23.89 percent
Other: 1.67 percent

Today's legislators, particularly those serving areas far from the Capital City, must spend a great deal of time away from their families.

Such was the case in 1927, when Rep. Chauncey Peterson of Duluth and 31 of his colleagues "thought they were entitled to at least three trips home during the session," wrote J.W. Witham in *The Minnesota Legislature of 1927*.

So Peterson sponsored HF373 as a way to fund member visits to the home district. As introduced, the bill set aside a maximum appropriation of \$10,000 to serve as a reimbursement fund for travel-

Do you know?

ing expenses from the Capitol to a member's home. The funds were to be available to each member, for a maximum of three trips home, until the \$10,000 kitty had been spent.

But when the bill was reported back from the Committee on General Legislation, the only reference to an "allowance for additional mileage" was found in the bill's title. The bill itself now sought to raise the annual pay of legislators from \$500 to \$750.

When debated on the House floor, Rep. Hannah Kempfer was the only one of the 31 co-sponsors to speak against the bill. "She

repudiated the measure, declaring she had not signed as the co-author of such a bill and refused to vote for it," Witham wrote.

Then-Speaker John A. Johnson admitted that had anyone questioned the content of the bill it never would have been approved, because he would have ruled it was "not germane to the original bill."

The bill passed both the House and Senate and was promptly vetoed by Gov. Theodore Christianson.

The annual legislative salary stayed at \$500 until 1945, when it was raised to \$1,000.