

# 'Rip Van' Welker returns 10 years later

It seems like déjà vu all over again for Rep. Ray Welker (R-Montevideo). Had Welker fallen into a deep sleep much like Rip Van Winkle did, he would have awakened to much the same scenario he left behind 10 years ago.

The fourth-term legislator who served in the House from 1979 to 1985 says the current legislative script reads the same way as when he was first elected.

But despite facing the same complex issues he confronted when former IR Gov. Al Quie and the DFL-controlled Legislature wrestled with a budget shortfall, Welker says he's glad to be back.

"I enjoy the energy of this place [the Capitol]" he says.

And like many legislators, Welker says he hopes to iron out some of the wrinkles surrounding the issues of education, health care, taxes, and workers' compensation reform. He adds that "working with his constituents . . . teaching them the dynamics of the government process" is also a priority.

Welker represents about 26,000 people from three counties in southwestern Minnesota — Chippewa, Redwood, and Yellow Medicine — a district he describes as "very rural" and "very conservative and independent."

With farming being the most important industry in the area, Welker says his district "runs on the amount of rain we get. If we have good rain we have good



## Ray Welker

District 20B

Age: 51

Occupation: Businessman

**District traits:** The rural district is dominated by mid-sized farms and has lost population while the proportion of elderly residents has increased. The district voted for Rudy Boschwitz over Paul Wellstone in the 1990 U.S. Senate election by a 55.2 to 44.8-percent margin.

crops . . . and if we have good crops, everything seems to work well."

Welker says he first became involved in politics because of "a concern that government was too large, spending too much money, and involved too much in people's private lives."

With those sentiments in mind, he says one of his top priorities is to reduce the size of government.

After serving three terms in the House, Welker resigned to rescue a failing lumber business, which he rebuilt and sold in 1989. He also is the owner for 23 years of an office supply business in Montevideo.

He says he decided to rejoin the political arena after former Rep. Howard Miller resigned in 1990. "Howard and I are in the same party and are friends," he says. "I helped him campaign [in 1984] to win my seat."

Although the issues surrounding the

projected shortfall are nearly identical to 10 years ago, Welker says there are noticeable differences at the Legislature.

"There is a doubling of the pressure from lobbyists and an increase in the amount of constituent mail," he says, adding that "the mail is welcome because that shows more people are getting involved [in government]."

Welker says he's setting no deadlines for retiring from politics, but adds, "I'll stay for as long as its enjoyable and as long as I feel like I'm doing a good job."

He says that although the job is exciting and re-establishing old friendships is great, the job does have its downfalls. There were seven special sessions during the turbulent Quie years when Welker last served.

He hopes things go a lot smoother this time around.

## Do you know?

"Fish bait," or "where fish bait abounds," probably isn't the type of slogan you'd find in a tourism brochure from Watonwan County. But it is the Dakota Indian derivation of the county's name.

Established Feb. 25, 1860, Watonwan County takes its name from the Watonwan River, which flows through the county. According to the Dakota, however, the more accurate phonetic spelling is "watanwan."

The county was settled slowly until the railroads came through in 1870. Following this technological breakthrough, waves of Germans, Swedes, and Norwegians poured into the northern Watonwan region to take advantage of the rich soil.

The county courthouse was built in St. James in 1895. Former Gov. Henry Sibley was asked to name the town that would later become St. James. He selected a long Dakota name that even he couldn't pronounce.

The president of the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad angrily responded to Sibley's stumbling by insisting the name be one that all could pronounce. He chose St. James, and the title remains today.

