

New job, same focus

Veteran legislator leaves House when president offers new opportunity to shape rural economic development

By Mike Cook

Rep. Steve Wenzel may have left the House for a federal position, but he has not stopped working on an issue that was important to him during 29 years in the Legislature.

Wenzel, a DFL representative from Little Falls, resigned from his District 12B seat in August when President George W. Bush named him the state director of rural development in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"This is an area where I can do a lot of good for all rural communities in Minnesota, not only for my home area," he said. "I want to help keep people located in these areas and keep rural Minnesota strong and prosperous. That's in everyone's best interest."

His new position entails overseeing an agency that generates about \$300 million annually for rural development — much of it in the form of grants and loans to rural areas for developing infrastructure, new housing, and new business. U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development is the federal government's lead agency for rural economic development.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for me to play a hands-on role in promoting our rural economy and helping rural communities create new jobs and build infrastructure," he said, much like he did for nearly the past three decades.

"I've always fought for the best interests of family farmers and rural Minnesota in my time as a legislator," he said. "This position will let me work directly with rural communities and I believe truly make a difference in the quality of life for rural people."

Wenzel laughs a little in that he, a DFLer, was recommended by a Republican, Minnesota First District Congressman Gil Gutknecht, and appointed by a Republican president.

"I strongly share the president's vision for a prosperous and strong rural America," Wenzel said. "He made it clear during his campaign and after the election that he would include Democrats in his administration in order to



PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

Former Rep. Steve Wenzel left the Minnesota House of Representatives when he was named state director of rural development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture by President George W. Bush in August 2001.

achieve national unity. I'm very honored and proud to work for President Bush."

During his legislative career, Wenzel, 54, was a mainstay on the House agriculture committees, including 16 years as chair of the policy committee when the DFL controlled the House.

"Members of both caucuses stated I was always fair to everyone on the committee. I gave most bills that were requested a hearing, regardless of which party they came from," he said.

Wenzel lists among his greatest accomplishments the Minnesota Over-Order Premium law, which placed a surcharge on milk processors to help increase dairy farm incomes. Prior to the U.S. Supreme Court invalidating the law, \$7 million was raised for state dairy producers.

Agriculture was not the only concern he had during his 15 terms. Wenzel said he was also involved in crime prevention, public safety

issues, pro-life measures, education, and special infrastructure and other projects for his district.

He also regards as a significant achievement his sponsorship of a 1989 overhaul of Minnesota's sentencing guidelines that substantially increased penalties and prison sentences for violent crime. Subsequent amendments included the sentence of life without parole for those who commit murder during a rape or kidnapping, and for the killing of a peace officer.

In his home district he is most proud of the creation of the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery at Camp Ripley, a place he refers to as "Minnesota's Arlington."

First elected in 1972, Wenzel never tallied less than 60 percent of the vote in his district on Election Day. Twice he ran unopposed. That great margin may be attributed in part to Wenzel's connectivity to his former constituents. He was known for sending congratulations letters to high school graduates, couples on 25th and 50th wedding anniversaries, and other folks who did something special.

"I could not have asked for a better district or greater people to represent," he said.

His advice to Greg Blaine, the new District 12B representative, is to stay close to the constituents as they have high expectations of whom they elect.

Among them will be Wenzel, who in addition to a willingness to offer any advice, will remain where his roots are. "I'm home every weekend. I'm a lifelong resident of Little Falls and Morrison County. Always have and always will be." ❁

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Stephen Wenzel
DFL

District 12B — Little Falls
Terms: 15

Career Notes: First elected at age 24, Wenzel was tied with three other DFLers (Irv Anderson, Lyndon Carlson, and Phyllis Kahn) for most seniority in the House. He was a mainstay on both agriculture policy and finance committees in the House, including 16 years as agriculture policy chair. During his tenure, he missed just one session day due to the illness of his late mother.