

Westerberg begins by working to end marriage penalty

By Paul Wahl

Rep. Andrew Westerberg (R-Blaine) was content to work behind the scenes in Republican politics for nearly 25 years before deciding to run for office.



Rep. Andrew Westerberg

He worked on campaigns for other people, served in various capacities for the party, and helped organize and run conventions.

He recalls one particular convention at the St. Paul Civic Center some years back.

"I was called off the convention floor to go to Unity Hospital where my wife was having a baby," Westerberg said. "The hospital had one of those two-sided elevators and as I stepped in one side, they wheeled my wife in from the other side and we went up and had a baby."

Two hours later, he was back on the convention floor.

"I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be involved," Westerberg said. "I wanted to make a difference."

The 1998 election was not the first time Westerberg had faced his opponent, former Rep. Mike Delmont. Two years earlier, Westerberg lost by about 800 votes. This time around, Westerberg won by a similar margin.

His campaign centered on tax-cutting themes.

"We're the second highest-taxed state in the nation," Westerberg noted. "That's ridiculous."

He said his message was simple, and voters understood.

The overwhelming popularity of Gov. Jesse Ventura in Westerberg's district didn't hurt, either. Although Westerberg said his hard work was the key, he acknowledges the "Jesse factor" probably did have something to do with his margin of victory.

"I'm happy he's our governor," Westerberg said. "I really support him. I like the way he speaks his mind. I like the way he's not afraid to tell people the way it is. He makes mistakes. I fully expect to make mistakes. That's going to happen sometimes when you're trying."

Two initiatives Westerberg is sponsoring this session are closely linked to policies advocated by Ventura.

One proposal would reduce the so-called "marriage penalty" in the state's tax code. Under current law, married couples who file joint tax returns end up paying more than individual filers at the same income level.

"Not only is this a tax penalty, but it's a penalty against families," Westerberg said. "We need to do whatever we can to strengthen families."

He is also sponsoring a bill that would continue funding for a program in the Centennial School District to study the impact of smaller class sizes on the overall learning environment.

Westerberg recognizes that a freshman lawmaker probably would not get a shot at leading the charge for such an important piece of legislation as eliminating the marriage penalty were it not for his party's status as the new majority in the House.

So he is enjoying the opportunity. His name is on several pieces of legislation stemming from his work on the House Crime Preven-

tion Committee. He also serves on the House Jobs and Economic Development finance and policy committees.

But he also notes that being in the majority party often brings more responsibility, leaving less time to work on individual legislative initiatives. He said that with the crush of a busy schedule during the session, it's important to prioritize.

"I went from spending 60 hours a week in my insurance business to five hours in the month of January," Westerberg said.

His method of operation for the past 20 years in business has been to learn everything about every single aspect and facet of insurance.

"I tried to do that here with everything that touched my desk and soon found that, hey, this is not going to work," Westerberg said. "You must specialize in certain areas."

Westerberg has turned his focus toward being a clearinghouse for information, funneling as much of what crosses his desk as he can back to his constituents.

"The best way to be a good representative is to be a good communicator," he said.

District 51A

1995 population: 36,032

Largest city: Blaine

County: Anoka

Location: northwest metro

Top concern: "To restore accountability and responsibility in government. Government should take care of essential services and work together with the private sector to help accomplish what individuals cannot accomplish on their own."

— Rep. Andrew Westerberg

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