

For Westfall, fewer laws often can be a better solution

It seems some Minnesota lawmakers were born political, reared in households where opinions on current events were passed at the dinner table along with the potatoes and green beans. Others were not, and talk of family and farming dominated meals.



Rep. Bob Westfall

"I grew up in a family that wasn't very political," said Rep. Bob Westfall (R-Rothsay). His parents didn't discuss politics at home

and wouldn't tell their children who they voted for. "They said that was a secret."

But since 1962, when he attended his first precinct caucus, Westfall has not been shy in expressing his opinions among the Republican faithful. At that first caucus, he was elected a delegate to the county convention. "I don't think I've missed a caucus or convention since then," he said.

Westfall's first run for public office led to a six-year stint on the Rothsay School Board in the 1970s. Later, he served four years on the board of the West Central Education Cooperative Service Unit (WCECSU) at Fergus Falls. WCECSU is one of nine Education Cooperative Service Units in the state that provide a range of shared educational services to schools.

He was first exposed to the Legislature on lobbying trips to St. Paul for WCECSU in the early 1980s. But he said those lobbying trips

didn't whet his appetite to become a lawmaker. "It just didn't appeal to me at the time," Westfall said.

He did, however, answer the Republican party's call to duty and challenged District 9 Sen. Keith Langseth (DFL-Glyndon) in 1990.

"The party needed a candidate, and nobody else wanted to run," Westfall said. He lost by nearly 6,000 votes.

Two years later, Westfall again was recruited, this time to challenge District 9B DFL incumbent Rep. Marvin Dauner. He lost by more than 2,500 votes.

In a second shot at Dauner's seat in 1994, however, Westfall came within 543 votes of winning. The term would be Dauner's last. He announced that he would not run again in 1996.

Westfall's persistence paid off in 1996 when he defeated the DFL-endorsed candidate John Young by 321 votes for the vacant seat.

With his wife, Darlene, and his oldest son back home minding the family's crop and livestock farm, Westfall is now devoting his full attention to representing his district's concerns at the Legislature. Along the North Dakota border in the west central Minnesota district, property taxes are a big issue.

"Property tax reform, everybody wants it," Westfall said. The solution is to hold the line on spending. "Our mentality is that someone else is going to pay for it. People have to realize that if we are going to spend, we [all] have got to pay for it."

He is also hearing from retailers back home

who are upset about Gov. Arne Carlson's proposal to pay for a new stadium for the Minnesota Twins with a 10-cent tobacco tax increase. "They say they are already getting too much competition from the Indian casino." (Nearby Shooting Star Casino is able to sell tobacco free from state taxes.)

Westfall also campaigned on term limits for state officials and plans to introduce pertinent legislation, although he admits its chances of passage are slim.

While some have come to the Capitol with a detailed agenda, Westfall subscribes to the theory that no government action can often be a better solution.

"If there is a need, I'll definitely do the best I can," said the Republican farmer from Rothsay, Minn. "But I didn't come [to the Legislature] with the idea of being the first out of the chute with a bill."

— Steve Compton

District 9B

1996 population: 34,572

Largest city: Breckenridge

Counties: Becker, Clay, Otter Tail, and Wilkin

Location: northwestern Minnesota

Top concern: "I think we need to keep some of our school funding local, so that we can control [the schools] locally. School boards spend too much time on state mandates. I don't think any state mandate should go out without the funding to back it up."

—Rep. Bob Westfall



Marquis Maggiefield, left, and Ho Nguyen, fifth graders at Anderson Open School in Minneapolis, testified before the K-12 Education Finance Division of the Education Committee Feb. 26 in support of a bill that would expand a pilot breakfast program established in 1994.