

Walking the talk

Legislative role is a 'hands-on experience' for Anderson, a high school government teacher

By TOM LONERGAN

Rep. Jeff Anderson (R-Austin) can teach a government class, belt out a song, or tell you about close elections.



Rep. Jeff Anderson

The first-term representative from Austin won District 27B last November by 378 votes (2.48 percent), making him the first Republican to win the closely contested Mower County seat since partisan election of state legislators resumed in 1974. In 2000 Anderson lost by 520 votes (3.32 percent) to DFL former Rep. Rob Leighton, who did not seek re-election last year.

Following that narrow loss, Anderson talked it over with his family and local Republican Party officials and decided to run again. "We wanted to try it at least one more time," he said. Yet, after all the hard work, evening and weekend campaigning, and a nail-biting election night, Anderson described his victory as "bittersweet."

"I love teaching," said the 12-year Austin High School government and politics teacher who is taking a leave of absence during the legislative session. "But this is going to be a nice, hands-on experience."

Anderson's committee assignments include education policy, higher education finance, and judiciary policy and finance. The 35-year-old father of four young children said he will focus on education and rural development issues.

He plans on sponsoring a bill to help law enforcement prosecute the producers of methamphetamine, an illegal drug made from a mix of agricultural, household ingredients, and common cold medications sold over the counter. "Meth labs" are primarily located in rural and semi-rural areas.

"Our district has a problem with methamphetamine," Anderson said. He has attended

task force meetings with Austin police and the Mower County prosecutor to learn more about the issue. Austin Police Chief Paul Philip said a "precursor law," as Anderson seeks to introduce, would make it a crime to have the materials of a potential "meth lab" together in the same location.

"It's only a crime when the methamphetamine is made," Anderson said. "The state has not addressed the issue from the scope I'm looking at."

A souvenir Spam can on Anderson's office window reminds visitors of Hormel, Austin's largest corporate citizen. The Austin area has remained stable with companies like Hormel and Mayo Health Systems, but the county's

rural areas need some help, Anderson said.

Mower County has lost potential businesses to Iowa because of the neighboring state's economic incentives, he said, citing an auto parts supplier recently drawn there. "There's not a lot of economic development to keep young people in the area," Anderson said. "We need to champion rural areas. They're a great place to raise a family. The cost of living is less."

To better educate those in the rural areas, and elsewhere in Minnesota, Anderson wants the state's Profile of Learning education standards repealed. "It boils down to who is best able to determine what curriculum is to be taught," Anderson said. "Is it a federal government official or a state government official? I don't think it is. These decisions should be made by parents, teachers, and local school boards."

The freshman representative welcomed his appointment to the House Higher Education Finance Committee, because several thousand

students in his district attend institutions in the Minnesota State College and Universities (MnSCU) system. It wasn't too long ago when he served in the leadership of the student association at then Mankato State University where he earned a bachelor's degree in education.

Anderson campaigned last fall with former Republican Sen. Grace Schwab, who narrowly missed re-election to a second term in a court-challenged election.

"You don't just meet Jeff, you meet his family, too," Schwab said. "His family strengthens his commitment to children across the board. He'll bring his knowledge of education and kids forward."

He'll also bring his voice.

Anderson and his wife, Heidi, sing duets and solos for weddings and other events. He's sung in his college choir and professionally with "The Continental Singers."

"Music is important in our household," said Anderson, who sang his first solo when he was 3 years old. His repertoire covers classical,

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contemporary, and gospel music.

A close election behind him, Anderson is confident he represents "the majority of people" in his district. "A lot of issues are not Republican or Democrat," he said. "There are times you align with your caucus and times you align with the region you're from. A lot of legislators feel that way."

DISTRICT 27B

2002 population: 36,865

Largest City: Austin

Counties: Fillmore, Mower

Location: south-central Minnesota

Top Concern: "We need to look at how we fund education and the criteria we base it on. Most rural school districts are not fairing well financially. There are areas where we can be more equitable."

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