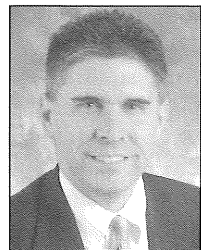


Fresh ideas

After a decade as mayor, Atkins brings his interest in the budget and innovative problem solving to the Legislature

By Mike Cook

Rep. Joe Atkins (DFL-Inver Grove Heights) has spent most of his adult life making policy at the local level, and he is now doing the same in St. Paul.



Rep. Joe Atkins

After three years on a school board, Atkins became mayor of Inver Grove Heights at age 27. While some may have seen his youthfulness as a negative, Atkins did not. "We did things that other people never

thought would work, and I think it's because I didn't know any better."

For example, a community center was built without using tax dollars. "I made a comment after the referendum failed that people wanted the community center but they didn't want to pay for it," he said. "I said 'Why can't we do it without tax dollars?' and you could have heard a pin drop because people knew that you just couldn't do it that way. The next thing you know, after about 300 meetings later in people's kitchens and living rooms seeking donations, we built a community center." The city also partnered with its school district and with some civic organizations.

"Once we did that it was like, 'Well if we can do this what about these other good things?'" In his hometown, that has included improvements to the city's main street, and the construction of a library and an indoor aquatic center.

Atkins, now 37, believes similar ideas can be repeated across the state.

"We've talked about revenue and expenses, but what everybody seems to be missing is the partnership component," he said. "There are thousands of civic organizations that can play a role in the state's business. We did \$30 million in public improvements without tax dollars in a city that only had 25,000 people."

As mayor, Atkins filled a seat once held by his father, Gene, who served from 1971 to 1978.

"I learned a ton from him, but I learned as much from my mom, 'Andy,'" he said. "She quietly and doggedly presses on no matter the obstacle."

Atkins said the family mayoral tradition might now have to wait until the youngest of his three children gets a little older.

"My kids and I were driving along one day, and my son, John, turns to me and says 'Dad, I'm not going to be mayor. I want to be a fireman.' Then my son, Tom, says 'Dad, I'm not going to be mayor, either. I'm going to be a football player.' Finally my daughter Katie, who was 3 at the time, says 'Daddy, I'll be mayor.'" His children are now 9, 8, and 6. At home, Atkins said his wife, Julia, is considered the mayor.

Atkins calls himself a numbers wonk. His 63-page senior paper in law school was on the

"I volunteered for the tax committee," he said. "I can talk with Rep. Ron Abrams (the committee chair) for an hour. I love the numbers. I just hope we get an opportunity to get our hands dirty in the budget."

To solve the deficit, Atkins said he thinks everyone must contribute. "I want to be sure that at the end of the day the Pawlenty family and the Atkins family are pitching in our fair share. If that happens then I think it's going to be a fair kind of budget solution," Atkins said.

Education is also a top issue. "Many people have lost sight that education is an investment, it's not merely a cost. We've got to make sure we're getting the best return we can on that investment," said Atkins, who has previously taught classes at a community college.

Being mayor was the best job Atkins said he's had, but that he stepped down because "the state needs more help than the city did."

He replaces his friend, eight-term Rep. Bob Milbert, after the latter chose not to seek re-election.

There is one worry that Pugh has about Atkins: his choice of sports.

Pugh and Milbert are hockey players. Atkins is into basketball. "That's a big drawback,"

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equities of school finances.

"He's coming in as though he's mayor of Minnesota, in terms of the budget in sitting down with the books and trying to make the numbers match up, without ever having served a day on an appropriations committee," said Rep. Tom Pugh (DFL-South St. Paul). The two have been law partners since 1996.

While Atkins is doing his best to understand all the numbers, Pugh said, one of his strengths is being able to put what he knows into terms every resident can understand.

That is important as Atkins sits on the House Taxes Committee, as well as the Civil Law and Commerce, Jobs and Economic Development Policy committees.

Pugh said, laughing. "In fact, I think he's only skated a couple of times. That's the only grave concern we have about him."

DISTRICT 39B

2002 population: 36,656

Largest city: Inver Grove Heights

County: Dakota

Location: southern Twin Cities suburb

Top concern: "The budget and education issues are probably the things I heard the most about as I traveled door-to-door."

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