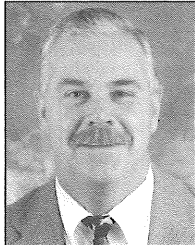


# Trading places

## Cornish, former lobbyist and conservation officer, hopes he can help link agriculture and environment concerns

By TOM LONERGAN

Rep. Tony Cornish (R-Good Thunder) is no stranger to the State Capitol's halls and committee rooms.



Rep. Tony Cornish

His 10 years as a lobbyist for the Minnesota Conservation Officers Association served as a legislative apprenticeship for the 51-year-old Vernon Center native. "It got into my blood," Cornish said.

Family occasions have also provided Cornish with opportunities to talk politics. He's an uncle of former first lady Terry Ventura, and brother-in-law of William Negaard, of Vernon Center, who unsuccessfully ran for the state Senate in the mid-1990s.

His election last November was close, with Cornish winning by 571 votes. He didn't get any advice from his niece's husband, former Gov. Jesse Ventura. In fact, according to Cornish, Ventura good-naturedly needed him last year during a chance meeting in Rochester. "He said, 'Tony, what in the heck are you doing running as a Republican?'"

Cornish's Jan. 6 retirement from the state ended 27 years in law enforcement — 22 as a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) conservation officer and five in local government.

"In that time I was hit in the mouth, bit in the leg, my clothes were torn off me, I was shot at twice, and a couple of guys in a bar put a contract out on me," Cornish said. "Looking back at that, I think I'm ready for the Legislature."

Although the budget deficit "outweighs all of the problems right now," Cornish said, he sees "changes I think I can make for the better." He was appointed to the committees he requested — Environment and Natural Resources Policy, Environment and Natural Resources Finance, Agriculture Policy, and State Government Finance. He's also an assistant majority whip.

His priority, Cornish said, will be to "weld together agriculture and environment" issues.

"I don't like it when people think farmers aren't environmentalists," he said. "We can mention both in the same sentence." Cornish tried farming for several years and now rents farmland.

Regarding agriculture, he said the state should support "sound management priorities and common sense environmental policies."

His rural district south of Mankato doesn't have a town bigger than 2,500 people, Cornish said. The gains enjoyed by the state's larger metropolitan areas in business and construction, he said, have led to a "vacating of small towns." Cornish said he'd like to even out those

imbalances with more "aid for rural economic development."

Possibly the first state conservation officer elected to the Legislature, Cornish is now serving on committees with jurisdiction over his former employer, the DNR. "I'd like to ask for more conservation officers because they are spread so thin," Cornish said, "but the huge deficit prohibits that."

"I want to be known as a friend of the DNR, but not as a sole protector," he said. The state agency must improve communicating with the public, Cornish said, and explain its regulatory decisions. "It's not just a regulatory agency about what people can and can't do," he said.

Lobbyists who become legislators are "few and far between," said Rep. Dennis Ozment (R-Rosemount), chair of the House Environment and Natural Resources Finance committee. As former chair of the environment policy committee, he's worked with Cornish for several years.

"He's willing to jump right into issues and tackle problems," Ozment said. Cornish's "real life experience," Ozment added, is valuable in discussions about the impact of state laws. "He'll talk about what it's like in the field. He has a first-hand knowledge of what's happening out there."

An issue Cornish said he's been "dogging for nearly 30 years" is relaxing state restrictions on handgun possession. "I lobbied against the existing law," he said, which gives city police chiefs and county sheriffs broad discretion in handgun permit decisions. Cornish said the existing law puts too much control in the hands of local law enforcement officials. "They can tell you to buzz off," he said, without providing a reason for denying a permit. The House passed a so-called "concealed carry" bill during the 2001-02 legislative session, but the bill did not pass the Senate.

Off the job, Cornish said, he's a "resource user," pursuing hunting and fishing. He spent 30 nights last year camping in the woods. One

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— Rep. Tony Cornish

winter recreation activity he'll lend support to in the House is promoting snowmobiling, which Cornish said helps the retail trade in his district's small towns.

## DISTRICT 24B

**2002 population:** 36,658

**Largest cities:** Janesville, Lake Crystal, Wells

**Counties:** Blue Earth, Faribault, Waseca

**Location:** south-central Minnesota

**Top concern:** "State decisions in environment and agriculture policy directly affect my district. I want to mold agricultural and environmental issues into a working relationship."

— Rep. Tony Cornish