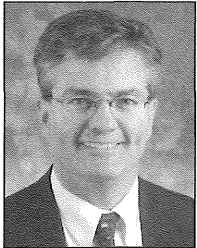


Making connections

Demmer brings backgrounds in agriculture, business, and education to his new role as state representative

By TOM LONERGAN

Most legislators take notes, but the tools of modern technology, such as personal digital assistants (PDAs), are only slowly creeping into legislators' daily lives. For first-term Rep. Randy Demmer (R-Hayfield), all tools toward learning his new job are valuable.



Rep. Randy Demmer

"Back home I'm known as the computer guy," said Demmer, who brings a varied background in business, education, and agriculture to the Legislature. The 46-year-old owns a computer and accounting software company, is part owner of three auto parts stores, and was a school board member in Hayfield for more than 10 years.

Deb Towey has been an employee of Demmer's computer business for the past 19 years. "When I introduce him as 'my boss,' he goes, 'No, we work together,'" she said. The company helps small businesses and farmers in southeastern Minnesota automate and update their financial records.

Wendy Shannon, superintendent of Byron Public Schools, has worked with Demmer on education issues. "He's going to be helpful to school districts in the state," Shannon said. "He has really learned what our issues are. He understands the negotiations process and budget issues."

Demmer said "an interest in being a part of making decisions" was why he ran for the House. For a decade, he was a constituent of House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) and Sen. Dick Day (R-Owatonna). Sviggum urged Demmer to run after re-districting in 2002 moved Hayfield, Demmer's home, into a newly drawn district with an open House seat. "The timing was good for me," said Demmer, who has also raised corn and soybeans and now rents the farmland he owns.

"I don't come with a specific agenda," Demmer said. "But I'm not one to sit back and do nothing. I want to be effective and learn

how things work." The University of Minnesota graduate has a degree in agricultural business administration. He's a member of the House Agriculture Policy, Agriculture and Rural Development Finance, Education Finance, and Education Policy committees.

His district 29A, west of Rochester, includes Dodge County and part of Olmsted. New residential subdivisions characterize the eastern portion of Demmer's district, which includes two Rochester precincts. Rochester's job growth in health care and information technology during the 1990s led to a residential boom in small towns like Byron, west of the city. As a result, land management and

"The challenge is how to manage a growing rural residential population with agriculture. The state and county have a role, but it (annexation) starts as a local issue. We should not be telling someone in Byron, Minnesota what they should be doing with their farmland."

— Rep. Randy Demmer

annexation issues have become increasingly important, Demmer said.

"The challenge is how to manage a growing rural residential population with agriculture," he said. "The state and county have a role, but it (annexation) starts as a local issue. We should not be telling someone in Byron, Minnesota what they should be doing with their farmland."

Agriculture remains a backbone of his district, Demmer said. "We have to keep agriculture productive and profitable. It's a huge industry."

Demmer said he wants to see the state's K-12 education funding formula changed. Families with fewer children, and fewer rural residents across the state in general, contribute to declining enrollment in rural schools, he said. "We have to find a fair and equitable way to fund rural districts. It troubles me that we have so many districts in statutory operating deficit."

When a school district falls below a certain level in its unreserved operating funds, it's

placed in operating deficit status by the state Department of Children, Families and Learning. During the 2001-02 school year, 33 districts, including Hayfield, were in statutory operating deficit, as were eight charter schools. The state works with school districts to eventually balance their books.

Demmer favors a state education policy that's more focused on elementary and secondary school basic academics. Toward that end, he's sponsored HF517, which would rename the department the Minnesota Department of Education, as recommended by Gov. Tim Pawlenty. "Changing the name of the agency is just one small step to take us in that direction," Demmer said.

He struggles to define what should be included under the K-12 education umbrella. Adult and community education programs in school districts are valuable, Demmer said, "but are really outside of the kids. While it's very important that a 30-year old immigrant gets help with learning English, should that

be under K-12 education?"

Demmer won his election last November by more than 3,000 votes (18 percent) in a district he describes as conservative. "Even the Democrats are conservative," he added. The Independence Party candidate garnered 11.45 percent of the vote.

His campaign motivator was his wife, Kathy, a nurse with Mayo Health Systems. "She's the biggest reason I'm here," Demmer said. They have three daughters, ages 20, 18 and 13.

DISTRICT 29A

2002 population: 36,793

Largest City: Rochester

Counties: Dodge, Olmsted

Location: southeast Minnesota

Top concern: "We have some major challenges. As we go forward, my hope is that we listen to people on both sides of the aisle and not act out of haste."

— Rep. Randy Demmer