

Youth and understanding

Finstad brings range of experience with agricultural issues, seeks to be a vocal ally for state farmers

By MIRANDA BRYANT

It's true that Rep. Brad Finstad (R-New Ulm) is the youngest male legislator currently in the House of Representatives. But it may also be true that his experience outweighs his 26 years.



Rep. Brad Finstad

The first-time legislator served two years as the agriculture advisor to U.S. Rep. Mark Kennedy (R-Minn.). And he arranged for a group of 20 Minnesota farmers to meet with U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney last year to discuss value-added agriculture and alternative energy sources.

"However old I am doesn't matter," said Finstad. "I have a passion. ... I'm here to learn."

His largest experience with local farming issues, however, was gained as an area director

effective voice for his constituents."

Finstad used his voice to land himself on the House Agriculture Policy and finance committees. There he will likely share his opinion that state regulations and excessive environmental rules are making it increasingly difficult for the farming industry.

Today Minnesota has 6,500 dairy farmers. But 10 years ago it had 13,891, according to the state Department of Agriculture.

When a farm closes, Finstad said, it takes away an opportunity for a future generation to farm.

The son of a farmer, Finstad understood the message he heard repeatedly from farmers while campaigning: "Bring back our kids." Finstad was one of 76 in his high school graduating class. Today, only 10 classmates live within 25 miles of their hometown. The

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for the Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation. His territory encompassed 13 southwest Minnesota counties.

Finstad was charged with developing policy, communicating with lawmakers, and helping farmers understand the legislative process. He walked many farmers through the system, explaining how to testify at a hearing, what occurs in committee meetings, and what takes place during the legislative session.

"I saw first-hand how one person can make a difference," Finstad said. "I also saw first-hand how common sense and a voice for agriculture are underserved."

Chris Radatz, director of governmental affairs for the federation, says he is confident in Finstad's ability to succeed at the capitol.

"I think that even though he's a freshman he comes in with some really good work experience that should really put him ahead on the learning curve," Radatz said. "I think he can be a real

others left for better job opportunities, lamenting the loss of an excellent quality of life, said Finstad.

Finstad himself originally wanted to farm with his father, Howard, on the family's 300-acre operation. But his father laughed when he heard that, said Finstad.

"He always would tell me, 'There's a better life than farming for you,'" said Finstad, who graduated from the University of Minnesota with an agricultural education degree. "He wouldn't be saying that if we got better prices for crops."

Economic development is key, said Finstad, to rectifying the situation.

One measure Finstad supports toward that goal is HF3, which calls for the creation of tax-free zones. If enacted, the bill would allow businesses in the zones to forgo sales, income, and property taxes for up to 10 years. Individual property owners would be exempt from

property or individual incomes taxes. And investors would not pay business income and capital gains taxes on relative investments.

"It's important for us to stimulate business growth and create an environment where people want to come out" to rural areas, said Finstad.

The freshman legislator was also assigned to the House Health and Human Services Finance and Policy committees. Admitting that he didn't request such assignments, he is preparing himself by reading copious amounts of background information.

"I consider myself a student of this," he said, patting a thick three-ring binder titled "HHS" on his desk. Already he has noted the importance of issues affecting rural ambulance service and an aging population.

When the countless acronyms often used in the health and human services field stymie him, Finstad consults his wife, Jaclyn, who recently became administrator of an assisted living facility.

Finstad said he was proud to have his parents at his swearing-in ceremony Jan. 7. It was an opportunity for him to demonstrate to his parents that their hard work in raising him had paid off. The best part about the ceremony, said Finstad, was seeing his dad "trying out" his son's desk in the House chamber.

Brad and Jaclyn's first child is due to be born May 20, one day after the legislative session must constitutionally draw to a close.

The couple's child will have the benefit of the same overall philosophy that Rep. Finstad said he learned from his father and mother, Sharon.

"Take one day at a time. Remember God gave us an opportunity."

DISTRICT 21B

2002 population: 36,817

Largest city: New Ulm

Counties: Brown, Redwood, Watonwan

Location: south-central Minnesota

Top concern: "We need to make sure we're not regulating farmers off the farm."

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