

# Making the choice

Rather than leaving it to others, Ellison hopes his position in the House can affect issues important to him

BY TOM LONERGAN

Rep. Keith Ellison (DFL-Mpls) has a motto he likes to use: "If you want to see change, you have to take personal responsibility for it."



Rep. Keith Ellison

The lawyer and former radio talk show host did just that when he had a choice of running for the Legislature or "sitting at home thinking about safe neighborhoods, community economic development, better schools and not doing anything about it," he said.

"That's the genesis of why I ran," Ellison said. State representative is the first public office the 39-year-old Detroit native has held.

District 58B includes the hub of the African-American community in north Minneapolis and a major portion of downtown, east of the Mississippi River.

The district includes, "people who pay \$300 a month in rent and \$3 million condominiums on the river," Ellison said. "We have a high degree of poverty and unemployment, as well as multi-million dollar deals negotiated in those buildings downtown."

His role in such a culturally and economically diverse district, Ellison said, is to bring people together. "My challenge is how we come to some basic agreement on improving the quality of life for everyone."

Ellison earned his law degree from the University of Minnesota Law School and holds an economics degree from Wayne State University in his hometown of Detroit. He's called Minneapolis home for the past 16 years. Ellison and his wife, Kim, a teacher, have four children between ages 6 and 14.

An attorney by trade, his specialties are in civil rights, employment, and criminal defense law. Prior to entering private practice, Ellison was executive director of the nonprofit Legal Rights Center in Minneapolis. For eight years he was also the unpaid host of a public affairs talk program on KMOJ radio.

"His heart is in the community, without a

shadow of a doubt," said Rev. Al Gallmon, president of the NAACP's Minneapolis chapter. "He is truly an advocate for children." Pastor of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in north Minneapolis, Gallmon recently served on the Minneapolis school board. Gallmon said Ellison has "large shoes to fill," referring to former State Rep. Gregory Gray, who ran for State Auditor last year rather than seek reelection to the Legislature.

Ellison said he wants to "make an impact" on the committees he's been appointed to, including the House Judiciary Policy and Finance Committee. "I'm an advocate of public safety with respect for individual rights," he said. "Public safety and individual rights have to walk hand in hand like twins."

He also serves on the Governmental Opera-

remain a center point for this region of the country depends on support of projects like the Guthrie Theater expansion and a new planetarium." Former Gov. Jesse Ventura vetoed state bond support for the Guthrie expansion in 2000 and 2002 (the Legislature overrode the first veto) and vetoed bonding money last year for the planetarium.

Ellison said the projected \$4.56 billion budget deficit will be difficult to address given Gov. Tim Pawlenty's pledge to not increase taxes and hold the line on K-12 education spending.

"We're saying 60 percent of the current budget is going to bear 100 percent of the cuts," he said. "That's going to be a problem. Any balanced budget needs to be a just budget, a fair budget. Everyone should share a little bit of the pain."

Ellison looks forward to working with the Republican majority in the House. "Republicans are the opposition, not the enemy," he said. "There's a big difference. We all want safe communities. How do we get there? We agree that the economy should be strong for

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tions and Veteran Affairs Policy and Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs committees.

Ellison said his goals during his two-year term are "big and broad."

He wants to increase knowledge and awareness of the political process in his district, particularly among young people. He's a volunteer track coach for several organizations, working with youth between the ages of 5 and 18. "It's a great community building device because it's for all ages and all genders," Ellison said. "Everyone can find a way to fit in."

Local government aid is critical in his district for supporting vital services like police, fire, parks, and recreation, Ellison said. "I don't think there is a city with a better parks system. I believe parks play as vital a crime prevention role as the police do."

Minneapolis' cultural attractions draw tourists from across the state and throughout the upper Midwest, he said. "Whether we can

everyone but we disagree on the methodology."

Ellison doesn't necessarily see issues as city versus suburb. "Brooklyn Center has a lot in common with north Minneapolis," Ellison said. "It's not a matter of the poor cities and the rich suburbs any longer. Not all suburbs are created equal."

## DISTRICT 58B

**2002 population:** 36,687

**Largest city:** Minneapolis

**County:** Hennepin

**Location:** north Minneapolis

**Top concern:** "My goal is to approach this term with a sense of hope and optimism. I want to make people in my district feel comfortable coming to the Capitol and having a voice."

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