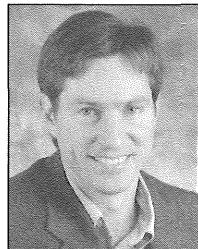


Like father, like son

Eken looks to fight for family farms, quality of life for all as member of the House of Representatives

By TOM LONERGAN

Representing a rural district that has townships named Rosebud, Silver Leaf, and Wild Rice, Rep. Kent Eken (DFL-Twin Valley) says he doesn't think bigger is always better, whether the enterprises are farms, businesses, or cities.



Rep. Kent Eken

The idea that "you can never be big enough" is extreme, Eken said. "The quality of life is declining both in rural and metropolitan areas," the 39-year-old first-term House member added. "We need some balance."

As the number of farms and businesses dwindles and population declines in his district, northeast of Fargo-Moorhead, Eken said the economic and social consequences of those trends aren't limited to Greater Minnesota. Metropolitan areas have traffic congestion and school districts straining to handle more students, he said, while rural communities are harmed economically, with underutilized infrastructure and schools forced to close.

"It's not in anyone's interest to see more migration to cities," Eken said. "We all have a common interest here. I don't see this as a rural versus metro issue at all."

A former economics, government, and history teacher at Saint John's Preparatory School in Collegeville, Eken interrupted pursuit of a doctorate in history to run for the Legislature.

His election last November marked the first time Saint John's "lost a teacher to the Legislature," said Fr. Ian Dommer, upper school principal. "Instead of teaching about government, he (Eken) wanted to be in it," Dommer said. "He enjoys the political process."

Said Eken: "The seat opened up (due to redistricting in 2002) and I saw the chance of following in my dad's footsteps." Willis Eken was a House member from 1971 to 1984, including four years as House majority leader.

Eken serves on the House Agriculture Policy, Education Policy, Education Finance, and

Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs committees.

He's concerned that legislators share "the importance of agriculture issues," Eken said, as metropolitan area representatives become more removed physically and generationally from the state's farm communities.

"When dad was here, there were as many rural (legislative) districts as urban, if not more," Eken said. "We all need food. This isn't just a rural issue."

Preserving family farms and casting a critical eye toward policies that favor "absentee owners," are among his agriculture issue priorities, Eken said. "The bulk of farms (in the state) are still family owned and I'd like to keep it that way."

Eken said he defines so-called factory farms as those "controlled by absentee owners and not controlled by the people who live in the

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community. It's not that they're evil," he said. "It's not their community, so they're not going to be concerned about it."

On education issues, the former high school teacher said he "has a problem with the No Child Left Behind act," the federal legislation governing K-12 public schools.

"I think we could call it 'No Child Left Untested,'" Eken said. "We're trying to test our way into excellence." The federal law mandates increased state testing of elementary grade students and public disclosure of schools that fail to meet minimum academic standards.

Education's primary function, Eken said, should be encouraging students "to think in an analytical way and get them interested in learning."

High academic standards and "rigorous testing" are necessary, Eken said, "but that's secondary to schools and teachers having the resources they need." He's introduced a bill

(HF1088) that would create "small school sustainability revenue" as part of state general fund aid to school districts. Rural districts could use the revenue to attract teachers, finance information technology improvements and enhance curriculums.

"If we implement technology the right way," Eken said, "small schools can offer as many options as large schools."

His hobbies, Eken said, include reading "lots of history," as well as hiking, camping, and canoeing with his wife, Lori, and their three children, who range in age from 16 months to 9 years old.

The children helped Eken in parades during the campaign, along with "Little Bertha," a donkey from the family farm that was supposed to pull the children in a campaign wagon. Eken said he ended up "pulling the wagon more than Bertha."

Prior to redistricting, Rep. Bernie Lieder (DFL-Crookston) represented much of the geographic area that's now in Eken's district.

"He is really pretty sharp," said Lieder, now in his 10th term. "You can't change the world overnight, and I think he's starting to realize that."

DISTRICT 2A

2002 population: 36,566

Largest city: Ada

Counties: Becker, Clearwater, Mahnomon, Norman, Polk

Location: northwest Minnesota

Top concern: "I'm hoping to broaden the debate. We shouldn't be looking at just the short-term, bottom line. We need community impact statements to help people in rural communities protect existing businesses and family farms."

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