

Continuing his public service

Eken running for open Senate seat to avoid race with close friend

By ERIN SCHMIDTKE

Rep. Kent Eken (DFL-Twin Valley) was looking ahead to November's election when he got a surprise. Redistricting pitted him against his close friend, Rep. Paul Marquart (DFL-Dilworth).

"We never expected we'd actually be in the same district. But what excites me about running for the Senate is that I'm not going to be serving with Paul in the House, but he's going to be my teammate in the same district," said Eken. He hopes to replace retiring Sen. Keith Langseth (DFL-Glyndon).

Eken and Marquart are already planning to campaign together. Eken has even offered Marquart the shared use of his donkeys, which live on the Eken family farm when they are not participating in campaign parades. One of them, Floyd B. Olson, is named after Minnesota's first Farmer-Labor governor.

Marquart shares Eken's enthusiasm for the upcoming months.

"I have an excellent senator in Keith

Langseth, and it would be real special to have Kent as my senator, also," Marquart said.

As a Senate candidate, Eken's goals as a legislator will remain the same. During his decade as a state representative, he has been a staunch advocate for Greater Minnesota. He cites education funding, flood mitigation and property tax reform as issues that heavily impact rural areas.

"It shouldn't matter where you live. Everybody, every child deserves to have a good, quality education. Every citizen deserves to have access to affordable health care. Every community deserves to have good roads, bridges and infrastructure for economic prosperity," Eken said.

One of the first bills he sponsored was the fixed cost revenue bill, which would financially weigh the first 500 students in a school district more heavily than any additional students.

Eken, a former high school social studies and economics teacher, explained that every

district has fixed costs it can't avoid. Those costs become easier to bear when spread across a high number of pupils, which Eken believes is a disadvantage for small, rural schools. Though the bill hasn't passed, Eken hopes to pursue efforts like this in the Senate.

To Eken's disappointment, the Legislature's focus on Greater Minnesota is the part of politics that he has seen change the most since he first entered office. He hopes to mend what he calls a "systematic dismantling" of local aid for less wealthy areas of the state.

Along with his rural roots, another driving force for Eken is his family. His brother, who was diagnosed as mentally disabled during childhood, had two options for care: move to a faraway institution, or stay at home and receive little education.

"I remember dad saying that neither one of those two options was acceptable," Eken said.

His brother's diagnosis led Eken's parents to become activists for those with mental disabilities. This effort eventually led his father into politics as a state representative in the 1970s and 80s, where he worked on behalf of those needing long-term medical care.

"Even if you're mentally gifted or mentally disabled, everybody deserves a chance. And that was kind of my dad's principal and he never even dreamed of going into politics. He never went to college and was a farmer. But that led him into politics and that was what led me into it as well," Eken said.

Eken incorporated his father's energy into his own political life, making long-term care a key political issue for himself. When his father developed Alzheimer's disease and needed to live in a nursing home, the issue became even more personal.

Now, Eken says his biggest accomplishment as a legislator is his work to ensure that type of care is readily accessible in all parts of the state. That's one issue he hopes to continue as a senator.


"A lot needs to be done between now and November. But it's going to be a lot of fun," Eken said. 



PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Kent Eken said he will remain a "staunch advocate" for Greater Minnesota, if he is elected to the Senate.