

# Farmer friendly

As one who lives off the land, Koenen looks to improve the livelihood for many rural Minnesotans

By JEFF JONES

A string of Christmas lights lines the window ledge of Rep. Lyle Koenen's (DFL-Maynard) new office. They are yellow and green and in the shape of John Deere tractors. Regarding them with an expert eye, Koenen says, "That's a model 4020. I've actually got one of those."



Rep. Lyle Koenen

A life-long farmer, Koenen has spent years keeping an eye on legislative policies that affect agricultural Minnesota. Koenen started making trips to St. Paul when he became active in farm organizations such as the Minnesota Farmer's Union. "I started coming down here to lobby legislators on proposed bills that were being written and trying to influence those decision-makers on what they would do because of the direct effect it would have on farmers and working people," he said.

That interaction with lawmakers led him towards political action. "I came to the realization that it was impossible to outwork poor policy decisions," Koenen says. "That led to the next step — helping the candidates that I felt best represented the ideals that I was looking for." He would soon become a candidate himself. After an unsuccessful run for the Senate in 2000, Koenen won the House seat vacated by now-Sen. Gary Kubly (DFL-Granite Falls).

Like many Minnesota farmers, Koenen has been forced to take a second job to make up for sagging crop prices. Over the years he has driven school busses and hauled milk from dairy farms to processing plants to earn extra money, but he hopes his newest job will give him the chance to make life a bit easier for his fellow farmers.

"I would love to see that farmers could get their entire income from the farm," he said. "I'd like to see livestock on every farm, too, or almost

every farm. That would be ideal because then it would be full-time work. In the wintertime you'd have livestock to take care of."

Koenen owned livestock himself until earlier this year when he sold his herd of beef cows. For him the decision wasn't economic, but a necessity of his work at the Legislature. "There's no way I can be here and take care of livestock so they had to go," he said. "Otherwise I would have kept them, but I can't do both."

Other rural DFL legislators elected Koenen to chair the House DFL Rural Caucus, which meets weekly to discuss rural issues.

In that capacity, Koenen hopes to work with rural Republicans to deal with issues of common interest. "There's so many of the votes that

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really aren't partisan. I would say way over half aren't partisan," he said.

Bills to improve veterinary facilities at the University of Minnesota and to encourage rural economic development are among the issues receiving bipartisan support from rural lawmakers, he said.

Koenen has signed on to a bill that would provide tax incentives for job creation and retention in rural Minnesota. "We both represent rural Minnesota and we have common concerns," says Rep. Dean Urdahl (R-Grove City), the bill's sponsor. "Lyle brings a sincerity and dedication to the job."

Koenen serves on both House agriculture and both environment committees.

Economic development is among the issues Koenen puts at the heart of his agenda.

One obstacle to development, he said, is the deterioration of roads in rural areas. He said

good roads are necessary for safe transportation of livestock, grain and fertilizer. "They don't need to necessarily be four-lane roads in those light population areas but they do need to carry heavy traffic," he said.

Maintaining school funding is another important issue in his district. Declining enrollments result in lost state dollars, he says. "Our school districts get clobbered. Every year they have budget issues to deal with."

Koenen has remained close to his roots. The farm where he and his wife, Sandy, live with their two children sits outside Maynard, where he went to high school. He has attended the same church all his life, the Reformed Church of Clara City. "The reformed church is socially pretty conservative, so I tend to be that way myself," Koenen said. "Being a Democrat, you wouldn't think of being to the right on that issue. I'm maybe not as far over as the church is, but it draws me to that side."

One thing he learned growing up was to always be evenhanded in the decisions he makes. "Fairness is the first thing," he said. "Other than

that, my own life experiences affect the way I look at things, and then I always, always, think back to the district and what is best for the district or what the majority would like to see. And so you roll all that together and that's where my positions come from."

## DISTRICT 20B

**2002 population:** 36,953  
**Largest city:** Montevideo  
**Counties:** Chippewa, Renville, Yellow Medicine  
**Location:** west-central Minnesota  
**Top concern:** "When all budget considerations are made, they'll be done fairly."

— Rep. Lyle Koenen