

Past to present

Lanning brings decades of local government and higher education experience to St. Paul

By **MIKE COOK**

Being elected to the House is a case of what goes around comes around for Rep. Morrie Lanning (R-Moorhead). He replaces Kevin



Rep. Morrie Lanning

Goodno, a student of Lanning's in college who later won the dean's former seat on the Moorhead City Council.

"It's great to be able to leave the House and know that you have left the district in good hands," Goodno said.

Lanning learned that Goodno might step down, so when it happened last May Lanning quickly entered the race. "I had some time to ponder a run, but if his resignation had come as a complete surprise, I'm not sure I would have been ready to announce the next day."

A trip to St. Paul seemed unlikely less than a year earlier.

In August 2001 Lanning said he would not seek re-election as Moorhead's mayor after serving 22 years, and six years on the city council, but did not rule out a political return at some point. "If anybody had asked me what positions I would run for this would not have been on the list, in part because I thought Kevin would be here indefinitely."

After talking with his wife, Ruthie, and noting that his children are "out of the nest," Lanning made the run. Ruthie, a retired teacher, will stay with her husband in St. Paul. "Not wanting to be separated might have kept me from doing this," he said.

Lanning said his 28 years of city government experience would benefit his constituents.

"I've seen firsthand the effect that good and bad policy at the state and federal level can have on a local level," he said. "We have to balance budgets and we're forced to deal with unfunded mandates."

He tells of a dispute Moorhead had with the state Pollution Control Agency and the Environmental Protection Agency regarding

compliance with water quality standards that the city found to be out-of-date. The city prevailed, saving its residents \$29 million while still improving water quality at less cost.

As a legislator Lanning wants to hear cost-saving ideas. "I'm asking local units of

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government, educational institutions, any entities that depend on state support and are likely going to get cut to tell us what we're doing to drive up their costs. In that way cities can in effect tell the state 'You're cutting our revenue and why don't you help us cut our costs by getting rid of these things that are unfunded and unnecessary.'"

"That experience of dealing with people and dealing with difficult situations will definitely help him as a legislator," Goodno said.

Lanning lists the budget deficit as his top priority, saying, "Nothing is off the table." He did not take a no new taxes pledge, but said raising them would be a last resort after all spending has been reviewed. "I've been telling people there is no way any part of the budget can go unscathed."

In Moorhead, property tax wealth per capita is one-half the state average and local government aid accounts for more than 50 percent of the budget. "As a border community (relying on property taxes) would not only kill any potential for growth it would cause people and jobs to move to the other side of the river."

To save money Lanning said the state must make sure that those with the ability to pay do so instead of relying on government support. "We must do that so we have enough money

to take care of those that really can't take care of themselves. I'm talking about seniors who have no assets and who haven't played games in transferring assets to their kids in order to have taxpayers pay their nursing home bills, I'm talking about the disabled who can't work due to no reason of their own ... the folks who really in large part depend on government support."

As an administrator at Concordia College Lanning sees firsthand the effects of reduced financial support for higher education.

He said financial support has barely kept

pace with inflation in the last four or five years whereas other parts of the state budget have increased as much as 30 percent.

"In higher education you not only need to keep pace with inflation but you have to keep making programmatic improvements. The technology demands of the educated workforce are such that you can't stand still else you're going backwards. That costs more than just inflation. It's not like other parts of the budget where the status quo is not necessarily a problem."

DISTRICT 9A

2002 population: 36,798

Largest city: Moorhead

County: Clay

Location: northwest Minnesota

Top concern: "We need to find ways to cut costs and expenses and reduce spending while still protecting those things that are really critical such as education funding, local government aid, and a safety net for the people that are most vulnerable."

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