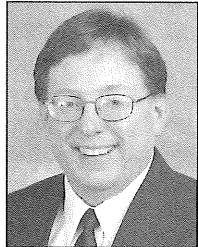


A tall order

From paramedic to politician, Powell fills seat formerly represented by two top state officials: Ken Wolf and Dan McElroy

BY PATTY JANOVEC

Residents in District 40A went from having two representatives in the past year, to one, and then none shortly after the calendar turned to 2003.



Rep. Duke Powell

Last year's redistricting plans put a pair of former representatives, Ken Wolf and Dan McElroy, into the same district, but Wolf then chose not to seek reelection when he was named to a top position in the state Commerce Department. McElroy won the seat in November, but resigned Jan. 6 to become the state's finance commissioner.

"I decided on pretty short notice that I would run for this seat," said Rep. Duke Powell (R-Burnsville). He and his wife, Julie, have three children.

A paramedic in the Twin Cities metropolitan area since 1980, Powell's been a Burnsville resident and health care activist for 30 years. He had worked as Wolf's campaign manager for years, and says the leap to running for legislator wasn't a big one. He's been involved over the years with policy, and was active with local and state Republican parties, he said.

Elected Feb. 3 and having to dive right into the process, Powell said, "I'm trying to keep up with the pace of the place." Laughing, he said, "I haven't dropped too many balls."

He said he's already hearing from his constituents regarding such issues as the bill that would change requirements for granting concealed weapons permits and a proposed wage freeze on public employees. Those who know him well say he's well-suited to handle those concerns.

Charles G. Erickson, a Republican activist and Burnsville resident for 25 years, worked on Powell's campaign and described him as having "a great savvy for politics." He said the representative "has a thorough understanding of what is needed in our district."

Powell said his constituents' main concern is solving the budget deficit. "That was the platform I ran on," he said.

What he is hearing from constituents is that they want the budget problem solved "without raising taxes," he said. "The tax climate has been fairly poisonous."

As an example, he said that the biggest employer in his district recently moved 1,000 jobs out of state because "we're not competitive." Other states neighboring Minnesota, including South Dakota, are in the position to advertise that they have a more friendly business climate, he described. He said he'd like Minnesota to be able to be in that position, but

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— Rep. Duke Powell

can't. "We can't do that now," he said. "We're just scrambling to hold onto what we've got."

Powell also explained that the state can "grow revenues by strengthening the economy." There are a lot of things that government does that gets in the way of businesses conducting commerce, he said.

Also important to the district are transportation issues.

"We have a city that's largely made up of people who commute out of the city to other suburbs and inner cities," he said. The district houses a large manufacturing base, and he said the interest is in building higher capacity roads and making better use of transit. "If we're able to move goods and services around in a more efficient manner" that could also help the economy, Powell said. He explained that it "shouldn't be done through taxes, it should be done through production."

He serves on three House committees:

Health and Human Services Policy, Judiciary Policy and Finance, and Regulated Industries. "Whatever impact I can make there to cut spending and (ensure) the core services are funded is something I will be working on," said Powell.

He explained that the committee assignments fit his experiences well. For one, he worked closely with Wolf, whose interests as a legislator involved the topics under the jurisdiction of the House Regulated Industries Committee. As a paramedic, he said he has firsthand knowledge of the issues affecting the health care field. That job also gives him a firsthand perspective on the issues of public safety, he said, which are covered by the House Judiciary Policy and Finance Committee.

Like many freshman legislators, Powell is slowly learning the ropes.

He joked about his early days as a House member. "How am I going to be able to find my office, which turn do I make when I come out of the elevator... although I'm getting

better at it," he said. Sometimes he says he has to wonder if he was able to get anything done in a day because of the fast-moving pace of legislative activity. "I can't believe how quickly the day goes, suddenly I haven't eaten all day and it's 6 o'clock."

DISTRICT 40A

2002 population: 36,882

Largest city: Burnsville

Counties: Dakota, Scott

Location: southern Twin Cities metropolitan area

Top concern: "The economy, take care of the budget deficit, and grow revenues by strengthening the economy. There's a lot of things that government does that gets in the way of businesses conducting commerce."

— Rep. Duke Powell