

Second time's a charm

After losing in the general election, Otto replaces her initial opponent in the House of Representatives

By PATTY JANOVEC

Rep. Rebecca Otto (DFL-Marine on St. Croix) campaigned for six months last year only to lose her bid for the District 52B House seat.



Rep. Rebecca Otto

Department of Natural Resources.

Most people agree that a democracy is about healthy debate, explained Otto, something that she says many people believed had been lost on a state and national level after the 2002 campaigns. "People, including a lot of Republicans, staunch Republicans who would have never voted for a Democrat, were passionate about getting me elected because they felt there was no balance left," she said.

Otto said she hopes to improve that balance and focus on issues rather than partisanship.

"A lot of people say 'I don't belong to a party, I look at the individual' and I think they are savvy enough to make their own decisions," Otto said.

As for the additional three weeks of special election campaigning, Otto said, "It felt really good, it was really nice, I worked hard." Telephoning people and walking the neighborhoods allowed constituents to ask her questions, she said. "I think the personal contact was very important, people really appreciated it, and they could ask me whatever they wanted to." She defeated her closest challenger in the special election by 10.8 percent of the vote.

Otto and her husband, Shawn, have been small business owners in property management for several years. She moved away from the business to become a seventh grade life

and environmental science teacher. After five years she stopped teaching to stay home with their son, and she quickly got involved with the parent-teacher board and volunteering in the classroom.

That's how she began her pursuit of public office.

She ran a successful campaign for her local school board. She also said she chaired the local levy referendum campaign while running for the board. That experience helped her recognize a "lack of communication and trust between the community and this district," she said.

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Lynn Steenblock, superintendent for the Forest Lake Area School District, describes Otto as "an individual who cares about all children." In working with Otto as she ran for the school board, Steenblock said Otto's love for children was clearly apparent. He says she has concerns with the quality of education and "wants the same things for all children in Minnesota."

Those very same instincts that nudged her to become active in the school district, are the same skills "that have brought me to this point in my life," said Otto.

A graduate of Macalester College, she said she was inspired to run by a quote from Kofi Annan, the secretary-general of the United Nations. She paraphrased him, saying, "Sometimes when the public institutions are in the worst shape and have the biggest problems, people need to be creative, and step forward and work on it." Otto said, "I feel like I'm walking into a really tough situation, and there's a lot of hard decisions."

Two distinct concerns became apparent during the campaign, she said. First, "people really

cared about education," she said. The other top concern is the environment. Otto said the St. Croix Valley area is one of the most beautiful in the state with lakes, trout streams, and the river. Property taxes were also a concern for her constituents, because of the small tax base, she explained.

Passionate about the environment, Otto and her husband built a renewable energy home. A wind generator provides 80 percent of the home's power, and has been featured in local and national publications. She said they've "saved a lot of money and it was a great investment." They use the home to educate people around the state and from other countries by letting them tour the house.

Otto admits that her schedule is a busy one as she serves on four House committees: Agriculture and Rural Development Finance, Agriculture Policy, Environment and Natural Resources Policy, and Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs. "I certainly want to do

my share," she admits. Otto said that House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) said he assigned her to the agriculture committees because her family owns a hobby farm, complete with horses and her family bails their own hay.

Otto doesn't mind the fast pace that comes with being a legislator, saying she has the perfect job. "I love to learn, I learn a lot everyday."

DISTRICT 52B

2002 population: 36,813

Largest city: Stillwater

County: Washington

Location: eastern Twin Cities metropolitan area

Top concern: "Education drives everything. It's one of the soundest economic investments we can make as a state. It determines our future."

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