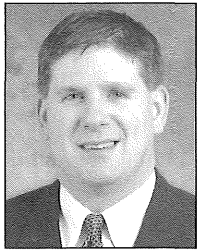


Out front

As newest member of the House, Zellers moves from behind the scenes advisor to role as decision maker

By PATTY JANOVEC

Becoming a state representative means that Rep. Kurt Zellers (R-Maple Grove) still has the same drive to work each day. It's just that his office has changed.



Rep. Kurt Zellers

Zellers, who was the director of public affairs for House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon), is the newest member of the Minnesota House of Representatives.

Zellers earned that seat when he won a Feb. 25 special election in District 32B. He replaces former Rep. Rich Stanek, who was named the state's public safety commissioner in January. Zellers calls himself a seasoned political activist.

In addition to working with Sviggum, Zellers has worked with former U.S. Sen. Rod Grams, and current U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman. If there's one thing he's learned, he said, it's "that everything you do or have experience with, affects every single person (in Minnesota). I think that's one thing people miss about politics, that's why it gets a bad rap."

His grandmother encouraged him "to be a contributor to your community...bring something back or do something good for those around you." As a child growing up in Devil's Lake, N.D., Zellers said his grandmother encouraged him to read all the time. "When I was in fifth or sixth grade, I read biographies on the former presidents Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson. Those were the big ones," he said.

He said she didn't expect him to devise the next great widget or car, but to be a good person. In his teens, Zellers took the advice to heart, in part, as a student-coach for sports in high school and college. While at the University of North Dakota, he helped another student successfully run for the state legislature, beating an incumbent of six years.

Family continues to direct his path.

When his younger brother died at age 17 from a congenital heart defect nearly two years

ago, Zellers said he realized all of the things he would get to see in life that his brother wouldn't. "I promised myself that if any opportunity ever came along, that I wouldn't be afraid of it, too lazy to do it, or make an excuse," he said. "I would never live with an 'what if' or 'but' ever again."

That was especially true when the opportunity to seek a legislative seat arose. Zellers, who had been working for Coleman, chose not to follow the senator to Washington D.C., instead taking a job with the House Republican caucus. Additionally, Zellers said he was trying to settle down after tying the knot with wife Kim in December.

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Sviggum describes the new representative as a "very outgoing, personable, caring individual."

Those traits were necessary as Zellers did a lot of door knocking during the campaign. He said residents told him they are concerned about making sure they have transportation options to get to and from the urban areas for their jobs, but that they enjoy having all the other services they need right in their local community. "We've got everything we need here, and we love it," he said of their comments. "Don't change anything." He describes the district as "relatively safe" and said the people don't want their taxes raised. School equity is an issue, as well as transportation.

Like his predecessor, Zellers says, "public safety is a big priority." One of the first bills he sponsored, HF1066, would give locally based chemical assessment teams more authority to address situations such as chemical spills, in the same manner as statewide emergency response teams. Under current law only certain functions may be performed by emergency teams.

He serves on three House committees: Capital Investment, Taxes, and Education Policy.

Education was one of the key issues he talked about during his campaign. "My wife is a public school teacher along with a few cousins," said Zellers, who is one semester of college away from being able to teach. He also said he requested a seat on the House Capital Investment Committee because it will possibly be addressing transportation bonding this year, a big issue in his district.

As for the projected budget deficit legislators must answer within the next seven weeks, Zellers added he doesn't think "people realize how many different ways their state, local, and federal government touch their lives every single day. I mean that from a law, a service, from a provider standpoint." He explained that now is the time for state government to "define how it is that we deliver services." Whether it's the arts, the historical society, or paving the roads to make sure people get to work to keep jobs coming in, he said, "Now is a tremendous

opportunity."

There are areas where the state isn't going to be able to be as generous as it has been in the past, he said. Additionally, he said the focus should be on practicality, focusing on the state's needs rather than merely its wants.

DISTRICT 32B

2002 population: 36,525

Largest city: Maple Grove

County: Hennepin

Location: northwest Twin Cities metropolitan area

Top concern: "Balancing the budget without raising taxes. With the time I spent with the federal government and the time I've spent down here, it's fairly obvious there's always room for improvement. We're spending more money. There are some areas where we aren't going to be able to be as generous as we have been in the past."

— Rep. Kurt Zellers