

Reassessing priorities

After years of public service, Berns steps down to focus on his family

By Nick Busse

Just before Rep. John Berns (R-Wayzata) was elected state representative in 2006, his wife, Beth, gave birth to their third child. Although he's been proud of his service in the House, Berns has found the grueling pace of the legislative session and the normal demands of his family life to be a tough act to balance.

"Most people would say it's a little bit more challenging for legislators with young families," Berns said. "By no means would I say that it's worse for me than for anybody else here. ... But it's just my wife and I have had many, many discussions about this, and about what our long-term plans are."

Those plans, for the time being, do not include his serving another term as state representative. In an e-mail to constituents May 12, Berns announced he would not seek reelection.

"It's a very, very difficult decision for me — but I have to make my family a priority, and that means finding something else to do," he said.

Although Berns is only in his first term, he has worked in public service for virtually his

entire adult life. He has been a prosecutor, a city council member, a conservation district board member — and until his election to the House, a top lawyer on Gov. Tim Pawlenty's staff. Although he's proud of his long and varied record of public service, he concedes that it has its downsides.

"One of the sacrifices of public service is a lot of time away from your family — and you don't make as much in income. And, you know, I have three kids to send to college," Berns said.

Less than two years ago, Berns was one of a handful of Republicans to join the House as freshmen amid an electoral wave that swept DFLers into power with an overwhelming legislative majority. Berns said he has helped his fellow Republicans play an important role at the Capitol.

"Overall, I think we've done a good job for the people of Minnesota in holding the line on spending and trying to keep their taxes at a reasonable rate — and I was one small part of that," he said.

Berns points to many bipartisan achievements as well. He is particularly proud of environment and energy legislation he helped to pass.

Among other things, Berns was the sole Republican conference committee member for last year's Next Generation Energy Act and this year's greenhouse gas cap-and-trade bill.

"People are really cognizant of how important it is to be good stewards of our environment, and that's something I feel really strongly about. And I'm very happy to play a very small role and help

move those issues forward in a balanced way," he said.

Balance, according to Berns, is often lacking at the Capitol. He points to debates on environmental legislation as an example.

"Some people say it's the environmentalists on one end and the business community on the other. I don't think that's fair. I think in both groups there's reasonable people, and they want to come to a compromise to protect the environment and also to make sure that we have a good, strong economy," Berns said, adding that it's important for lawmakers to work together to find a middle ground.

Berns isn't quite sure yet what he'll do after he leaves the Legislature. He plans on working in the private sector, but he hasn't really started looking for jobs — and probably won't until session ends.

He isn't completely leaving the public sector, though; Berns has been a volunteer firefighter for several years, and will continue to serve with his local department.

"I will at least get my fix of public service when my fire pager goes off," Berns said.



PHOTO BY SARAH STACKE

Rep. John Berns is stepping down after two years in the House to spend more time with his family, including his 2-year-old daughter, Katie, and 4-year-old son, Lincoln.

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. John Berns
Republican
District 33B — Wayzata
Terms: 1 (elected 2006)

Advice to successor: "It's the same advice I got from my predecessor: listen. There's no way a legislator can know the answers on all the issues. You have to immediately rely on experts — people who understand the myriad of issues. But more importantly, just hear people out. Even if you disagree with them, just take the time to listen to them and let them know you care."