

On her way to meet with Sen. Sandra Pappas, Rep. Carly Melin paused to talk with Department of Labor and Industry Commissioner Ken Peterson.

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## Medical marijuana bill pioneer navigates tough political terrain

Rep. Carly Melin walks fine line between legalization supporters and law enforcement.

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Carly Melin, the young state representative at the center of a high-profile push to legalize medical marijuana in Minnesota, likens her lawmaking style to a treasured T-shirt that belonged to her late grandmother and political inspiration.

"It said, 'I'm not opinionated, I'm just always right,'" said Melin, a 28-year-old lawyer from Hibbing. "Sometimes, unfortunately, I get that mentality as well, and I probably inherited it from her."

This session, Melin's pursuit of her ideals on medical marijuana policy is bumping up against the issue's tricky legal and political terrain. Gov. Mark Dayton, a fellow DFLer, has been a tough sell on medical marijuana, forcing Melin to offer a compromise that one-time allies in the cause saw as a betrayal.

Melin has only been in the House since 2011 but quickly established herself as a Capitol player. Even as she deals with the impending birth of her first child at the end of June, Melin has juggled the medical marijuana bill with other high-profile tasks, including leading the

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# Marijuana bill backer navigates tough terrain

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House on a high-profile bill to level the state's economic playing field for women.

Dayton wound up signing that bill, the Women's Economic Security Act, on Mother's Day.

The first woman elected to represent Minnesota's politically important Iron Range in the Legislature since the 1980s, Melin has generated buzz as a rising star for Democrats. Colleagues see her on a fast track that could culminate in House leadership or higher office.

But first, Melin must try to bring the explosive medical marijuana proposal to the finish line in the session's closing days.

"It sometimes is good to be paid attention to, but there are drawbacks. Folks will be gunning for you too, and all of a sudden you're under the microscope," said Tony Sertich, a former House majority leader — also from Hibbing — and a political mentor to Melin.

"It takes a lot more out of you personally than you realize going into it," Sertich said, "But that's the way folks learn to be a good legislator."

Sertich gave Melin her first Capitol job, as a legislative intern when she was still a law student at Hamline University.

When Dayton appointed Sertich to lead the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board in early 2011, Melin beat a field of four other Democrats to succeed him.

Politics run strongly through the Melin family tree. Her great-grandfather was a Beltrami County commissioner who made family history the day he met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House. One grandmother was a school board member in the 1950s, the other

a DFL activist. Melin's mother, a recently retired social worker in Hibbing, has long been active in politics as a member of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, one of the more powerful unions in the state.

"There was certainly a family interest in it, which she probably absorbed, but it was never a plan for her," Nancy Melin said of her daughter.

As an undergraduate at Bemidji State University, Melin first pursued a social work career before gravitating to law school. Melin got involved in campus Democratic groups at Bemidji State and Hamline, and started to see the possibilities of a political career.

"She said she wasn't interested in trying to interpret bad law," Nancy Melin said. "She wanted to be instrumental in changing laws that needed to be changed. She got on her own path, and there she is."

An experienced hunter with a flat northern Minnesota twang to her voice, Melin has an older brother who is a police officer in Eveleth. Her father, Mike, a retired police officer and law enforcement instructor, calls her "my country girl."

## Medical marijuana

Melin got involved in the medical marijuana issue after she was contacted by Angie Weaver, a Hibbing mother whose daughter Amelia has a rare form of epilepsy that causes rampant seizures.

Parents who want the option of treating their seizure-prone children with a cannabis-based oil have been among the loudest advocates for medical marijuana.

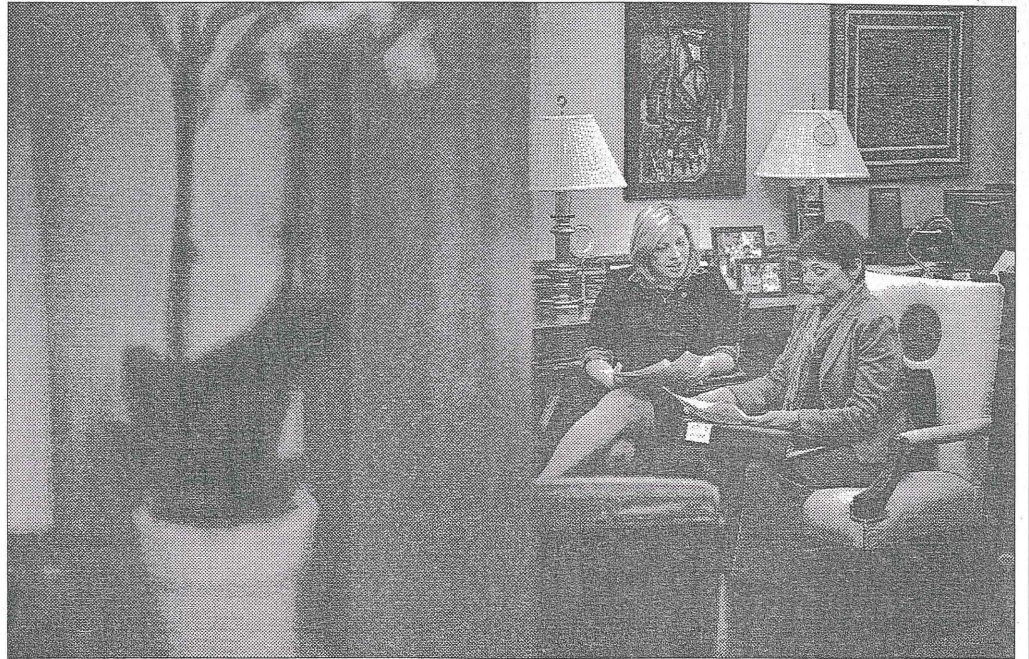
As Melin initially pushed for a broader medical marijuana proposal, she frequently criticized law enforcement lobbyists fighting the bill. At one point she suggested police and

prosecutor groups opposed medical marijuana because they would lose financial benefits that come with drug forfeiture laws.

"I grew up with law enforcement. All my dad's friends were cops," Melin said. "I've always known, and I still believe it to be true, that law enforcement officers are very reasonable and honorable people."

But Melin raised eyebrows even among fellow Democrats when she appeared at a news conference in late March where medical marijuana advocates unleashed a torrent of criticism against Dayton. Several mothers of sick children said the governor advised them during a private meeting to buy marijuana on the street, a charge the governor denied. Melin stood by silently.

"I think that one got a little out of control, and I think Rep. Melin and the governor would both have wished that hadn't



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Rep. Carly Melin, left, a prime mover behind the medical marijuana bill at the Legislature, talked with Sen. Sandra Pappas recently about the Women's Economic Security Act bill that Melin authored.



taken place," said Rep. Tom Anzelc, a fellow Iron Range Democrat.

Asked now about the controversy, Melin says only that "I wasn't in that meeting," referring to Dayton's meeting with the advocates.

After that news conference, Melin retreated from talking publicly about medical marijuana for nearly a month. During that time the Senate took up its more expansive bill. Meanwhile, Melin met with House leaders to quietly retool her proposal.

With House Speaker Paul Thissen and Majority Leader Erin Murphy at her side, Melin in early May unveiled a scaled-back proposal that won quick backing from law enforcement groups, but angered many pro-medical marijuana activists. Melin admitted she would have liked to go further but said it would have cost her the governor's support.

"She basically wants to have it both ways," said Sally Jo Sorensen, a liberal blogger and medical marijuana supporter who has been heavily critical of Melin on social media. "It's like she wanted to be seen as courageously defying law enforcement, but in the end she did their bidding. I think that's where a lot of the ire is coming from."

The House and Senate now have widely different bills: The Senate's plan would have the drug available at up to 55 dispensaries statewide for a broad number of ailments, including intractable pain. Melin's proposal limits availability to those who qualify for "observational research," with fewer eligible conditions and only three distribution sites statewide.

Dayton has signed onto Melin's bill. DFL Sen. Scott Dibble, sponsor of the Senate

bill, wrote in a weekend letter to Melin and Dayton that the House bill "falls short in a number of ways." But he said Monday he's open to a final medical marijuana bill that incorporates aspects of both the House and Senate proposals, and said he'd be willing to see the number of dispensaries drop.

"If you want a friend in politics, get a dog. Sums up my past week," Melin tweeted last week. Her dog, Oscar, is named after her late great-grandfather Oscar Thyren, the county commissioner. It's a quirky Melin family tradition to name dogs after deceased family members.

While Melin offers glimpses of personality on social media, in public settings she typically is no-nonsense. Anzelc said she has succeeded without adopting the backslapping, glad-handing approach common to many Iron Range politicians.

"She'd rather talk about the intricacies of the taconite production tax than how many fish you caught," Anzelc said.

Four decades Melin's senior, Anzelc said he quickly learned to get a read on Melin's mood before cracking wise at her expense.

"If she's not in the right frame of mind, it's going to go over like a lead balloon. Believe me," said Anzelc. "You'll see no smile."

Melin's first child is due on June 29, right as campaign seasons heats up. She's running for re-election, and is already thinking about how to balance a political career with a young family.

"I think it'll be tricky, trying to figure out how to make it all work," Melin said. "But I'll make it work."

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