

Take advantage of tax relief programs

By Rep. Lyle Koenen
 DFL-Clara City

A few weeks ago, Governor Tim Pawlenty unveiled his budget proposal for 2008-2009. In it, he included a modest increase in funding for schools, health care and property tax reductions, three of my priorities for this session. Although I don't agree with all of the specifics in the governor's budget — for example, too much of his education funding comes with strings attached — I do think it will serve as a good starting point for this year's budget debate.

One proposal likely to change is in the area of property taxes. The overall approach the Governor is proposing is pretty good and includes a mix of increased local aid to cities and counties, help with school levies and direct relief to property owners. However, the funding level will probably need to increase to provide more than token relief for most homeowners. Still, this is a good starting point.

In the meantime, there are programs in place right now that can offer immediate relief to property taxpayers. It's called the Minnesota Property Tax Refund Program — also known as the "circuit breaker" — and the Special Property Tax Refund.

Every year, thousands of Minnesotans who are eligible for property tax relief don't take advantage of it, so as your legislator, I want to ensure all of the people who deserve refunds for their property taxes receive them.

The Special Property Tax Refund applies to homeowners who owned their homes on both January 2, 2006 and January 2, 2007, and saw their net property tax on their homestead increase by more than 12% and at least

\$100 from 2006 to 2007. The increase cannot be due to improvements in the home, and refunds do not depend on income.

The second program applies to both homeowners and renters and does have income limits. To be eligible you must be a homeowner with a household income of less than \$91,120; or you must be a renter with a household income less than \$49,160. Higher income limits apply for those with dependents, for senior citizens or for the disabled. Your refund will depend on how high your property taxes or rents are relative to your income.

A program designed specifically for senior citizens is the Senior Citizens Property Tax Deferral Program, which allows taxpayers who are 65 years or older to defer a portion of their homestead property taxes until a later time. In this program, the taxpayer pays only 3% of the preceding year's household income as property tax, deferring the rest until a later time.

The downside of this program is that a lien is put on the property, paid back when the property is sold. I know many seniors choose not to use this program because they are uncomfortable with a lien. This is an area I would like to see changed at some point in the future, but for now, it does offer some relief from escalating property taxes for senior citizens.

For information about the requirements for any of the programs described, call the Department of Revenue at (651) 296-3781 or visit their website at www.taxes.state.mn.us/prop_refund/index.shtml

Or, please feel free to contact me at (651) 296-4346 or rep.lyle.koenen@house.mn.



'Bonding' bill expected this year for urgent projects

LEGISLATIVE

BRIEFS

**By Don Davis
and Scott Wentz**

news@wctrib.com

ST. PAUL — The 2007 Minnesota legislative session's main job is producing a two-year budget, and lawmakers will come back in 2008 with a goal of deciding what projects should be funded by the state borrowing money.

However, there likely will be a so-called bonding bill in 2007 for projects lawmakers consider urgent.

Sen. Keith Langseth, chairman of the Senate committee dealing with bonding, said making payments on \$135 million in bonds already is factored into budget plans (after a \$1 billion bonding bill last year). But it will take time before lawmakers decide what, if anything, rises to the importance of borrowing.

Langseth, DFL-Glyndon, said cash can be used to fund some projects, instead of borrowing money.

"We are going to have quite a bit of one-time money that we shouldn't be spending for ongoing expenses," he said.

For instance, Gov. Tim Pawlenty said funds for the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center's proposed expansion could come from

a \$1 billion one-time surplus.

Langseth said the same could be true for a proposed Capitol basement renovation that would cost an estimated \$120 million for each of its two phases.

A bonding bill could be used to help fix up state college and university campuses, Langseth said, because such routine work often "falls through the cracks" in favor of big construction projects.

Other items that could be included in either a bonding bill or a cash expenditure includes a proposed passenger rail line from downtown Minneapolis to downtown St. Paul, Langseth said.

Help for dairy

Providing tax breaks for farmers is a priority for some rural lawmakers.

Sen. Jim Vickerman of Tracy and Rep. Al

Juhnke of Willmar, both Democrats who preside over agriculture committees in the new Legislature, said they want to pass a dairy investment tax credit this year. The proposal would provide tax breaks for dairy farmers who upgrade their facilities.

Juhnke said he would be

open to expanding the program to include other farmers.

"I'm of the sense, 'the more, the merrier,'" Juhnke said. "If you add other livestock (farmers), you probably get a broader coalition and easier support throughout the process."

Rep. Dean Urdahl, R-Grove City, has sponsored the legislation in past years.

The Grove City Republican said that even though

he is in the minority caucus now, he still hopes to "be a player with these bills."

Not everyone wants to broaden the legislation. Sen. Steve Dille, R-Dassel, said dairy should be the first step.

"The dairy industry's in decline, so that's the one that needs the help," he said.



Koenen

Unfamiliar area

Rep. Lyle Koenen was among at least 35 House Democrats appointed to lead committees during the 2007 session. But

unlike many of the other incoming chairmen who have years of experience on their committee's issues, Koenen

admits knowing little about the topic he'll address.

Koenen, DFL-Clara City, said he looks forward to his chairmanship of the Veterans Affairs Division, but is not well-versed in veterans policy. Koenen didn't serve on a veterans committee during his first two terms in the House, and he never was in the military.

"It'll be quite a learning experience," he said, adding that among his priorities is



Urdahl



to visit veterans service officers in his legislative district.

"I need to get up to speed," he said.

No smokes

One of the Legislature's smokers predicted: "I think we will have a statewide smoking ban."

✓ Not that Rep. Larry Howes, R-Walker, wants one, but it appears to be on the fast track this year.

Howes will fight the measure, and to make a point said he will try to amend the bill to ban the sale of cigarettes.

The ban being discussed would forbid smoking in public places such as restaurants and bars. But Howes said he thinks a bar owned by a private person should not be regulated.

✓ Rep. Dean Simpson, R-New York Mills, said he has "mixed feelings" about proposed smoking bans.

"I like to believe I'm a free-market person," he said, but smoking in public places is a health concern.

"I'm not real sure if my constituents — all of them — are ready for that yet," he said of a ban. "It's a tough issue."

Original source material contains defects



Thursday, February 08, 2007

Support for our veterans

Thursday, February 08, 2007



A top priority for me at the State Capital is to work on legislation that will benefit the men and women in our state who serve in the military.

I was very happy to be named Chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee, which puts me in a good position to address this issue. This week, I was able to talk with Clark Dyrud, Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, about some of the challenges that face veterans - those returning from active duty, retiring or approaching retirement.

Although as a nation we can never truly repay our military and veterans for the sacrifices they have made for our country, there are ways we can show our appreciation. This legislative session the DFL House majority, Governor Pawlenty, and House Republicans have teamed up on bi-partisan legislation to thank veterans and their families.

The "Military and Veterans Support Package" includes over 20 initiatives to aid active military, veterans and their families. If passed, the \$75 million package would affect thousands of Minnesotans who are members of the Minnesota National Guard, Reservists, retirees, and those serving in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines.

The two highlights of the proposal are a 100 percent exemption from state income taxation for military pay and pensions, and the Minnesota GI Bill (loosely modeled after a similar successful program in Wisconsin), to provide education benefits for eligible military veterans and families. Should this initiative pass, Minnesota will join many other states in providing a tax exclusion for military pay and pensions by fully exempting this income from state taxation. This is not only a way to show our appreciation to veterans, but its enactment would also keep and attract veterans to the Minnesota workplace.

The exemption would be phased in over a four-year period, saving veterans and military \$16.5 million in fiscal years 2008-09, and over \$40 million after its full implementation and phase-in. The Minnesota GI Bill would supplement the federal GI Bill by providing eligible veterans, and spouses and dependents of disabled veterans or veterans who have died as a result of military service, up to \$10,000 over five years for higher education in a Minnesota educational institution. In a two-year period, veterans are expected to reap \$30 million in education benefits from the Minnesota GI Bill.

This proposal also includes other initiatives, such as increased funds for the Minnesota Veterans Homes; enhanced outreach to veterans; increased County Veteran Service Officer (CVSO) grants; improved information technology at the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs; an enhanced State Soldier Assistance Program; and preferred state contracting for veteran-owned businesses.

There is a strong desire on the part of legislators and citizens alike to recognize and assist the men and women of our communities who so faithfully serve our country. I look forward to supporting the Military and Veterans Support package as a way to thank our military, veterans, and their families for their sacrifices and service to our country.

Related Links

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2007 Legislature

House passage of renewable energy bill highlights week at Capitol

By Independent Staff

State Rep. Aaron Peterson, DFL-Appleton, said it was gratifying to see a renewable energy bill he authored pass the state House Monday night.

The bill will require utilities to produce at least 25 percent of their electricity from renewable source by the year 2025, including wind, solar, geothermal and other innovative renewable energy sources.

The Senate passed a similar bill and the governor has indicated he'll sign a renewable standard.

It will make Minnesota the 21st state to adopt a standard, Peterson said.

"After years of hard work by all of the parties involved, it is very gratifying to see this nation-leading legislation pass with the overwhelming support of the members of the House," said Peterson. "This bill will make Minnesota No. 1 in the nation in renewable energy, bringing thousands of jobs and millions of dollars of investment into our state."

"It also means significant reductions in global warming emissions, and cleaner air and water."

Peterson said a result study by the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission helped arm his argument.

"The study found that utilities could use wind power to generate up to 25 percent of their energy mix without a significant impact on energy costs (an increase of approximately a half-cent per kilowatt hour)," he said. "This study, titled the Midwest Wind Integration Study, has received national attention because of the wide participation in the council that designed, guided and reviewed the study."

This council included representatives from Minnesota's major energy companies, the Midwest Independent Transmission System Operator (MISO), and other experts on wind generation and power systems, Peterson said.

Peterson said the bill has wide business support, as well. State Rep. Marty Seifert, R-Marshall, said it is clear the bill also has statewide backing and will likely be signed into law next week.

Peterson said the bill is the first of what promises to be several efforts this session

to address environmental issues.

"This standard is the first step in a series of responsible and environmentally-respectful bills that will make 2007 the year for energy in Minnesota," said Peterson.

On other issues this week:

■ The House rejected a deadline for consideration of bills, Seifert said. He said the measure would have been important because it will give lawmakers fair time to absorb information from complex and long bills.

"An amendment offered by Rep. Mark Olson, R-Big Lake, would have set the deadline for conference committee bills (bills negotiated between the House and Senate) to be May 12, 2007," Seifert said.

"The legislature must adjourn by May 21, 2007. This amendment would allow lawmakers eight days to read various large bills before voting on them and it would give lawmakers a chance to send large bills back to conference committee to take out objectionable provisions."

The amendment was rejected, 84-46.

"I think many people are frustrated with lawmakers not having time to read 400 page bills," Seifert said. "This common sense amendment would give legislators time to actually read and fix bills, rather than blame it on a rush of time."

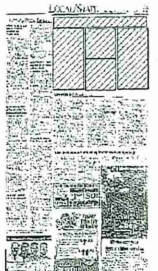
Votes by local lawmakers on adopting the deadline:

Seifert, R-Marshall: Yes
 Peterson, DFL-Madison: No
 Magnus, R-Slayton: Yes
 Koenen, DFL-Clara City: No
 Finstad, R-Comfrey: Yes

■ Another proposed amendment from Rep. Sandra Erickson, R-Princeton, to move the last bill deadline up from April 2 to March 30 was rejected 84-45.

Votes by local lawmakers on adopting the deadline:

Seifert, R-Marshall: Yes
 Peterson, DFL-Madison: No
 Magnus, R-Slayton: Yes
 Koenen, DFL-Clara City: No
 Finstad, R-Comfrey: Yes



Health department writes up vets homes

Rural facilities Falls infractions not as serious as Minneapolis

By Mike Longaecker
State Capitol Bureau

ST. PAUL — Two rural Minnesota veterans' homes violated state policies last year, but neither the Silver Bay nor the Fergus Falls home infractions were as serious as highly publicized Minneapolis problems.

State leaders insisted the deaths at the Minneapolis Veterans' Home were isolated, but reports show state health officials also flagged homes in Silver Bay and Fergus Falls for infractions. The deficiencies found at those veterans' homes were less severe and haven't drawn nearly the response issued earlier this week by Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

On Wednesday, the Republican governor ordered a team of Health Department officials to oversee operations at the Minneapolis home. The rare measure was taken after a report that three purportedly neglected veterans died there last year.

Pawlenty, along with others close to the controversy, said incidents at the Minneapolis home were unique.

"The other four (homes) could be considered models of the industry," said Jeff Johnson, chairman of the Minnesota Veterans' Homes Board of Directors.

A look at 2006 inspection reports from homes in Fergus Falls, Hastings, Luverne and Silver Bay revealed that while none accumulated the amount of red flags as Minneapolis, two of them were not without citations from the state. Three of the 10 deficiencies uncovered by the Health Depart-

ment last year stemmed from findings at the Silver Bay location on Lake Superior's North Shore.

According to Health Department inspection documents, the Silver Bay home was cited for failure to provide social service interventions in a guardianship issue, providing unnecessary drug dosages and not having a plan in place to monitor staff members after a verbal assault incident.

None of the three marks resulted in harm to residents, said home Administrator Michael Bond.

"We're different than Minneapolis," he said, noting that the size of his 87-bed facility allows for more personalized care. "It's easier to manage."

Bond was quick to point out that all three deficiencies were corrected at the home and later cleared by the state.

Minnesota Veterans' Home Public Affairs Director Sandy Larson said that the circumstances surrounding the Minneapolis deaths were isolated and won't result in procedural changes at the state's other veterans' homes.

Larson said she was not aware of any patients or families requesting transfers out of Minneapolis to other veterans' homes.

The Fergus Falls facility — at 85 beds, also much smaller than Minneapolis' 418-bed center — received two citations for minor incidents. One found that cutting boards in the facility's kitchen were worn out, in violation of health department code. The other was because staff failed to schedule one patient's annual dental exam.

No infractions were found in 2006 at the Hastings and Luverne facilities.

While Bond said that his facility took very seriously the charges levied against it, he's also learned that the findings can lead to positive change.

For instance, he said it wasn't until Silver Bay was flagged for distributing unnecessary drug dosages that home staff there realized the use of psychoactive drugs had been increasing over the years. Administration and employees reviewed practices after receiving the alert and brought medication levels down to the minimum effective dosage, Bond said.

The result has "substantially decreased" the dosages given to veterans' without impacting behaviors, he said.

Since news spread of the deaths at the Minneapolis home, questions as to whether the homes are operating under proper oversight model have arisen.

"Something structurally is wrong," said Rep. Al Juhnke, DFL-Willmar, who chairs a House veterans' committee.

Johnson, a Pawlenty appointee, said he welcomes "with open arms" the supervision in Minneapolis, but believes he and the board have been effective leaders.

In coming days, legislative committees will begin reviewing reports from the Minneapolis home.

Sen. Jim Vickerman, DFL-Tracy, said the deaths have left the Senate veterans' committee chairman shaken, but he said he's not ready to jump to conclusions.

"At this point," Vickerman said, "I don't know who to point fingers at."

Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba, DFL-Long Prairie, said legislators sympathize with veterans' and their families. Her late husband was a veteran.

"It's a sad day," said Otremba, who leads a House committee handling funding for veterans' programs.

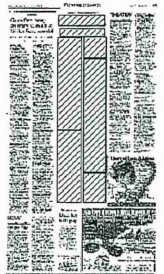
Pawlenty established a Veterans' Long Term Care Com-

mission to handle the Minneapolis problem. He and Health Commissioner Dianne Mandernach ordered a consultant to take over day-to-day responsibility at the Minneapolis home.

"That's a good move," said Rep. Lyle Koenen, who chairs the House Veterans' Affairs committee.

"I agree with what the governor's done so far," the Clara City Democrat added.

State Capitol Bureau reporter Scott Wenthe contributed to this story.



SMOKING IN PUBLIC It's a hot button issue these days in Minnesota, which

took a big step in becoming the 19th state to prohibit smoking in bars and restaurants after a Minnesota House of Representatives vote earlier this week. But some think politicians should leave the decision up to the businesses.

CITIZENS SAY BUTT OUT!

By Rae Kruger • rkruger@marshallindependent.com

SOME SMOKERS AT A CAFE AND AT A BAR AND GRILL IN MARSHALL on Friday morning weren't excited about the prospect of a statewide smoking ban at bars and restaurants.

The House voted Thursday on a ban on smoking in bars and restaurants, including VFWs, but its bill allows for some exemptions for bars that generate most of their income from liquor; those bars could have separate indoor smoking rooms. The Senate has already passed a stricter statewide smoking ban. Gov. Tim Pawlenty has said he supports a statewide smoking ban, and political analysts said the final approved ban will likely be a compromise between the House and Senate plans.

But not everyone's thrilled about such a ban.

"I'm tired of legislators trying to ruin my world," said Melinda McDowell of Marshall.

Smokers PAGE 7A

HOW THEY VOTED

Area votes Thursday as the House, on an 85-45 vote, approved a measure to outlaw smoking in restaurants and bars. Voting yes were 74 Democrats and 11 Republicans. Voting no were 11 Democrats and 34 Republicans:

- ✓ Koenen, D, Clara City: N
- ✓ Seifert, R, Marshall: N
- ✓ Finstad, R, Comfrey: N
- ✓ Magnus, R, Slayton: N
- ✓ Juhnke, D, Willmar: Y

Photo illustration by Per Peterson



McDowell and other smokers said legislators are overstepping their boundaries and denying the rights of individuals and business owners.

The government is trying to regulate individual choice by banning smoking in bars and restaurants, Lois Schunk of Marshall said.

"I think it's a person's choice whether or not they want to smoke, not the government's," Schunk said.

"I think it should be up to the owner of the establishment whether or not to allow smoking," Doug Baune of Wood Lake said.

Baune said he'd be more agreeable to a ban at restaurants, but to ban smoking in a bar is wrong.

Robin Sanow of Marshall said a ban is wrong and it denies rights of smokers and business owners.

A good share of people in a bar smoke, Sanow said. If cus-

tomers don't like the smoke, "don't come into the bar," Sanow said.

Bars could also choose to go non-smoking on their own if they wanted, Sanow said.

Supporters of a smoking ban say it protects non-smokers, including customers, waiters and waitresses and others from second hand smoke, which they say causes health problems.

But Terri Johnson, a waitress at a local bar and a smoker, said people can choose whether or not to work in a business that allows smoking. Instead of a ban, bar owners should be allowed to choose whether or not they'd like to be smoke free, Johnson said.

Theresa Baune of Wood Lake said the mining industry has illness and death related to that work.

"Mining is dangerous work," Theresa Baune said. "It's dangerous for the worker. It's dangerous for the families

because the worker brings in all that (harmful material) into the house."

Yet, no one is talking about banning mining, Theresa Baune said.

The smokers are convinced a smoking ban will negatively affect businesses and their own choices.

Theresa Baune works in downtown Minneapolis where the city has a smoking ban in restaurants and bars.

"It's all non-smoking," Theresa Baune said.

And that cuts down on the time she spends in a business, she said.

"You go in and eat and leave," Theresa Baune said.

"If I have no choice (to smoke), I guess I will eat out less," Doug Baune said.

"It's not gonna be pleasant for the community," McDowell said. "I just won't go out as much."

"If I have no choice (to smoke), I guess I will eat out less."

— Doug Baune



As article appeared in publication.



20B

House education bill supports schools, students

The Minnesota House of Representatives passed the K-12 Education Finance Bill in the early morning hours on April 20 that provides Minnesota schools and students with the resources they need to succeed.

"After years of inadequate funding and funding cuts, we came into this session committed to restoring adequate funding for education," said Rep. Lyle Koenen. "This bill provides that funding, as well as offering meaningful policy changes that will strengthen our schools."

The legislation's centerpiece is a three percent increase in the state-wide per pupil funding formula both this year and next year. Schools will also see significant increases for special education and technology investments along with state funding for voluntary All-Day Kindergarten.

Area school districts would get the following total funding increases over the next two years:

Montevideo – 8.5%
 Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg – 8.5%
 Benson – 8.6%
 Buffalo Lake Hector- 8.1%
 Lakeview – 9%
 MACCRA Y – 8.2%
 Yellow Medicine East – 8.9%

BOLD – 8.5%
 Cedar Mountain – 9%
 GFW – 8.4%
 Lac Qui Parle – 7.9%
 McLeod West – 9%
 Renville County West – 8.1%
 Redwood Area Schools – 8.1%
 Koenen said he is also pleased with the \$125 million for significant property tax relief through levy buy downs.

"Over the last few years, schools have had to rely more and more on property taxes for funding," said Koenen. "This bill renews the state's commitment to our students, parents, and teachers."

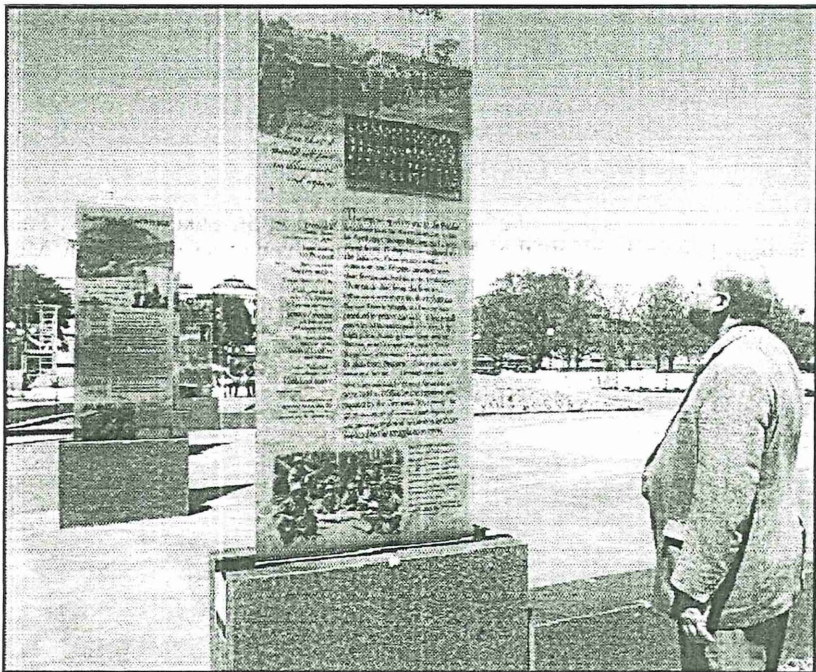
The bill also includes significant reform and accountability proposals including an independent Office of Educational Accountability, Minnesota Teacher Development, and expanded career and advanced placement opportunities in high schools. The bill also includes funding for ECFE, Head Start and School Readiness.

"Over the years, Minnesota has been a national leader with regard to educating our students," said Koenen. "This bill begins to restore that rich tradition."

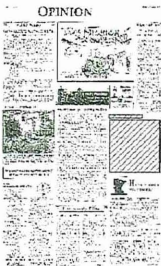


20B

WW II Memorial



✓ DIST. 20B REP. Lyle Koenen, Chair of the House Veterans Division, looks at the new panels that were erected May 2 at the WWII Memorial located near the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul. Dedication ceremonies for the WWII Memorial will be held on June 9.



Key DFL lawmakers, candidates set for fund-raiser Tuesday

Nearly every major state and area DFL lawmaker or candidate is scheduled to appear at the Senate District 21 DFL's third annual family potluck picnic/sweetcorn feed Tuesday night at the Ted Suss farm in rural Lucan.

The field includes five DFL cases for the U.S. Senate seat — Al Franken, Mike Ciresi, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jim Cohen and Peter Agre.

U.S. Rep. Collin Peterson, U.S. Rep. Tim Walz, Secretary of State Mark Ritchie, state Auditor Rebecca Otto, state Sen. Gary Kubly, and Reps. ✓ Aaron Peterson and Lyle ✓ Koenen are also scheduled to attend.

Also, former state Rep. and current President of the Minnesota Farmers Union Doug Peterson is scheduled.

The event starts at 5 p.m., with speeches starting at 7 p.m.

The Suss farm is located two miles north of Lucan on Redwood County Road 10, then a half-mile east on 270th Street.

There is a cost, and guests are asked to bring their favorite dish and a lawn chair.



Special session 'almost inevitable'

By Dana Yost

dyost@marshallindependent.com

LUCAN — There is likely to be a special session of the Minnesota Legislature in the wake of the Interstate-35W bridge collapse, and if one is called, it will likely address broader transportation infrastructure issues beyond just the bridge, local lawmakers said.

✓ "A special session is almost inevitable," state Sen. Gary Kubly, DFL-Granite Falls, said Tuesday night at a party fund-raiser near Lucan. "It sounds like the governor has had some sort of conversion experience — now he's talking about a gas-tax increase."

Gov. Tim Pawlenty had vetoed two previous bills that included gas-tax hikes but has said since the bridge collapse that he'll now probably back an increase to pay for road and bridge work.

Kubly thought there would be bipartisan support.

"I think this is something (lawmakers) will be able to come together on," Kubly said.



Kubly

✓ State Rep. Marty Seifert, R-Marshall and the House minority leader, said there'll be a special session only if terms are agreed upon by the governor and lawmaker ahead of time.

Session PAGE 3A

He said it appears that a gas-tax increase will pass, even if House Republicans don't like the bill because Pawlenty has made a large "concession" on the issue, and the DFL has the majority in both houses.

Seifert added that the special session could get bogged down if lawmakers spar over other forms of road funding, such as a wheelage tax or changes in license fees.

He said because the governor has already made a big concession, he hopes the DFL doesn't try to push too far for too many other things.

Seifert also said it's possible other funding that's already been appropriated for other uses could be looked at to help with transportation funding, and that the budget surplus should be used for immediate bridge work.

Kubly said he thought the bill would address broader transportation infrastructure needs around the state.

✓ So did state Rep. Lyle Koenen, DFL-Clara City,

who expects a special session to be called in September.

Before it happens, Koenen said, he thinks there will have to be agreement on the details of the cost of clearing debris from the bridge site and constructing a new 35W bridge. He said lawmakers will want to know how much the state must provide to match federal funds.

But he said the package, "won't stop with just the bridge. I think we'll be looking at the whole transportation infrastructure and how to fund it."

✓ State Sen. Dennis Frederickson, R-New Ulm, said he expects both a special session to occur and a gas-tax increase to take place.

"I would hope that, first of all, it addresses the I-35W bridge," Frederickson said. "But also has broader transportation (funding) because it's an issue all across the state. Things need to be addressed and addressed now."

Koenen also thought there was a chance a special session could take up two other issues, funding local government aid that was lost in a tax bill the governor vetoed, and also nursing home funding.

He said nursing homes are an important issue to rural Minnesota, both for the long-term care they provide and as a leading employer in many small towns.

Frederickson and Seifert also expected the LGA issue could be taken up.

Frederickson also hoped to see \$10 million approved to leverage federal funding for clean water and clean air improvements.



Help our returning soldiers

Minnesotans across the state are celebrating the long-awaited homecoming of their loved ones as 2,600 brave men and women return home after nearly two years away from family, friends and community.

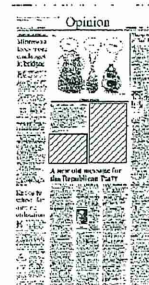
In the midst of this historic transition, we should remember one important fact: Our returning veterans are not victims. They are ordinary citizens who have had extraordinary experiences. Some will need more support than others as they process their experiences and return to civilian life — but it is only a few of these men and women. The vast majority of our service people return stronger, more confident and more inspired than when they left us.

In partnership with the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, a statewide coalition of individuals and organizations has come together to form the Warrior to Citizen Campaign. The purpose of this grassroots campaign is simple: to challenge Minnesotans to think actively and creatively about how returning soldiers can contribute their extraordinary skills and insight to our organizations, businesses, schools and communities — as citizens.

If you are a member or leader of a faith-based organization, invite a returning soldier to tell his or her story at a service or social event. If you work with youth, invite a veteran to teach youth groups new skills. If you are an employer or a chamber member, host a job fair featuring opportunities uniquely suited for returning soldiers. Our local government agencies also could enlist the expertise of veterans when designing local infrastructure. The list is endless. More information can be found at www.publicwork.org.

One of the most important ways we can recognize and honor the efforts of our veterans is by asking them to serve again — as citizens.

- ✓ Gary W. Kubly, State Senator, District 20,
- ✓ Aaron Peterson, State Representative, District 20A
- ✓ Lyle Koenen, State Representative, District 20B



Legislators hope small businesses survive new smoking regulations

By Carolyn Lange
clange@wctrib.com

WILLMAR — In some rural Minnesota communities, the only business in town may be a bar that also sells milk, bread and peanut butter so that residents don't have to drive 20 miles to buy a few groceries.

It's businesses and communities like those that Rep. Bud Heidgerken, R-Freeport, is afraid may lose out Oct. 1 when the state's new smoking regulation kicks in.

"It's going to affect those little rural ma and pa operations quite a bit, and some of them are barely hanging on as it is," said Heidgerken, who did not vote for the legislation.

Heidgerken said he agrees smoking should be prohibited in restaurants, but not bars.

"I know there's going to be some guys going out of business in a period of time," he said.

Rep. Lyle Koenen, DFL-Clara City, shares the same concern. He said the Legislature "went a step too far" by including bars in the prohibition. A non-smoker, Koenen also did not vote for the bill.

"Some of the bars could have a hard time making ends meet," Koenen said. He suspects that those same business owners will be seeking some kind of legislative assistance in the future to stay in business.

"It'll take some time to adjust, certainly, but I think everything will return to normal," said Sen. Joe Gimse, R-Willmar. "People make adjustments."

Implementing a ban on smoking in all indoor workplaces all

across the state will mean all businesses will be "on an even keel" with their competition, said Rep. Al Juhnke, DFL-Willmar. Unfortunately, he said, the border towns will have to compete against businesses in states that do allow smoking in bars in restaurants.

Minnesota is the 20th state to implement workplace smoking regulations. "Minnesota isn't an island," said Juhnke. "There's strong, strong, strong support in our area for a smoking ban."

The new law will have positive health benefits, Juhnke said. "It'll probably save us health care costs in the state and save us lives in the long run."

Gimse said it's important to protect the health of employees, including wait staff in bars and restaurants.

"I'm waiting, like most people, to see how things work out and I think it'll be positive in the long run," said Gimse. Change is tough, he said, but once people see the benefits of smoke-free workplaces, "they'll come to appreciate it and accept it."

Juhnke said service clubs, like American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars posts, may be concerned about a drop-off in business, and therefore communities could experience a decrease in charitable gambling revenues. He said he'd like to see the state consider replacing paper pull-tabs with electronic pull-tabs, similar to slot machines, with a limited number placed in those clubs. He said that attraction could help offset any potential decrease in businesses from the smoking regulations.

The legislators said local governments can enforce even stricter laws, but said they hope cities and counties give the state law a chance to work before doing things like restricting smoking in outdoor areas.

The city of Spicer has already done that. The council voted in July to prohibit smoking in all city parks.



Heidgerken



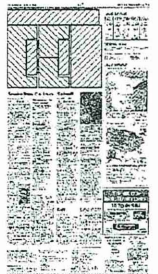
Koenen



Gimse



Juhnke



SESSION POSSIBLE THIS MONTH

Juhnke says there's no question Minn. in need of a special session 'and it should be done as soon as feasibly possible'

By Carolyn Lange

clange@wctrib.com

WILLMAR — A special legislative session could be held in the next couple weeks, according to area legislators.

Or it could not.

"We are preparing for a special session," said Rep. Al Juhnke, DFL-Willmar.

"There's no question we need a special session ... and it should be done as soon as feasibly possible."

Action is needed, said legislators, to deal with emergency funding for flood-stricken communities in southeast Minnesota and to address transportation funding problems, including the collapse of the I-35W bridge.

The decision on whether or not to call a special session lies with Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

Sen. Joe Gimse, R-Willmar, said that once there's a "solid agreement" worked out ahead of time on details of any proposed legislation and there's an "environment of trust" between all parties, then a special session will be held.

That may take some time, he said. "But eventually it'll happen."

Lyle Koenen, a DFL representative from Clara City, isn't so sure. "I'll believe it when the day and time is actually called."

His skepticism is based on Pawlenty's past behavior.

Koenen said before the regular session began this year, Pawlenty promised to work with the Legislature, but later dug in his heels.

Session/ Page A2

Shortly after the bridge collapsed, Koenen said Pawlenty voiced approval for a comprehensive transportation funding package in a

special session, but has now backed off of that.

Koenen said it's possible that if a special session is held, legislators would just deal with flood relief and funding for the I-35W bridge.

The state has a history of holding special sessions to allocate emergency funding for natural disasters, including the flood in the Red River Valley.

Unfortunately, Koenen said, that doesn't necessarily mean a special session will be held to help the people of southeast Minnesota.

Buffalo Lake, a community he represents, didn't receive state assistance until two years after a tornado nearly wiped out that small town because Pawlenty failed to call a special session that would have provided emergency funding sooner.

Juhnke, who was in several of the flooded communities on Wednesday with a legislative committee, said the devastation there is "unbelievable."

The faces of the residents show they are "tired and worn out," as they try to clean up their homes, farms and businesses. Without assistance, Juhnke said, people will leave and the small towns will disappear. "There's a need for some immediate cash infusion," said Juhnke.

Gimse said in order for Pawlenty to call for a special session this year, legislators will have to agree to a very narrow and focused agenda.

He predicts that agenda will include funding for flood victims and a funding package for transportation, including a 5-cent-a-gallon gas tax increase and bonding, a proposal that Gimse

said he'd support.

Koenen said that unless there is a prior agreement between the governor and legislators, a special session should not be called. "It wouldn't be productive and it would be wasteful," he said.

Gimse cautioned legislators not to pile on issues to the agenda. Pawlenty has claimed DFLers want to put too much on the special session plate, a charge that Juhnke called "rhetoric" from the governor's office.

But even Rep. Bud Heidgerken, a Republican from Freeport, has some non-emergency issues he'd like to see cleaned up during a special session, which he predicted would take place the third week of September.

Heidgerken wants to revive a bill that didn't quite make it through the regular session that would exempt townships from using the special electronic voting devices for people with disabilities during their March elections.

Many townships don't have the costly machines, he said.

If they're forced to follow state law in March, Heidgerken said townships could end up spending 25 to 30 percent of their budget for an election that often generates fewer than 10 votes.

Heidgerken also wants to see the tax bill brought up during a special session so that small towns could receive additional Local Government Aid funds. Pawlenty vetoed the bill after DFLers attached controversial requirements for using inflation during revenue forecasts.

Heidgerken said cities have had to increase their levies because of the cuts in Local Government Aid. If



(over)



that portion of the tax bill could be passed in the special session, it would help local taxpayers, he said.

The added issues wouldn't add a lot of baggage to a special session. "It's a matter of rapping the gavel," Heiderken said.



Gimse



Pawlenty



Koenen



Juhnke



Tribune photo by Bill Zimmer

Traffic is seen Thursday on Highway 12 west in Willmar. Transportation projects have been at the forefront of Minnesota politics since the session ended. Although legislators are planning for a special session, it is not known if one will definitely take place. Willmar's senator says for Gov. Tim Pawlenty to call for a special session this year, legislators will have to agree to a very narrow and focused agenda. Sen. Joe Gimse said that agenda will likely include funding for flood victims and a funding package for transportation, including a 5-cent-a-gallon gas tax increase and bonding.



20B

House Capital Investment Committee to tour area

The House Capital Investment Committee will travel to the region next week to visit project sites that are under consideration for inclusion in next year's Capital Investment Bill. State Representative Lyle Koenen (DFL-Clara City) will accompany the committee.

On October 25, the committee will be at the Heartland Corn Products plant in Winthrop from 1:45-2:45 p.m. where they will consider improvements to the Prairie Line that will allow trains to move faster and carry more product.

From there they will travel to Fort Ridgely from 3:30-4 p.m. for consideration of the Heritage Trails project, then to Granite Falls to learn about a water system improvement project. That evening the committee will also

hear a presentation on the Agriculture and Transportation Museum in Hanley Falls.

On Friday, the bonding tour will continue in Clara City to consider funding for a pedestrian trail. From there, they will travel to Appleton to view the Minnesota River Trail proposal, to Benson for the East Pacific Avenue improvement project, and finally to Sibley State Park where they will learn more about proposed facility improvements and native prairie conservation and protection projects.

"All of these projects are very important to our area and are worthy of funding," said Koenen. "However, because of the Governor's veto of last year's bonding bill, the competition for funding will be even more intense next session."



State charter policy, funding has Yellow Medicine East in a bind

By Tom Cherveney
tcmc@wctrib.com

GRANITE FALLS — Some of the oldest public school buildings still in use in Minnesota can be found along the western corridor of U.S. Highway 212 in the Renville County West and Yellow Medicine East school districts.

The YME district operates in a 1930's high school building.

It is struggling with whether to continue investing in an aging building and its inherent disadvantages for modern technology, or trying to find voter support for the high costs of building new, Superintendent Dwayne Strand told Sen. Gary Kubly, DFL-Granite Falls, and Rep. Lyle Koenen, DFL-Clara City, on Monday.

At the same time, the state has authorized two different charter schools in the YME district, which serves to siphon away students and state aid.

Charter/ Page A2



Kubly



Koenen

To make matters worse, the state sends significant dollars to the charter schools to

assist them with the lease of their buildings, Strand told the legislators.

Strand and YME board members invited the legislators to the informal meeting to hear if there was any possible state help, but the message was not encouraging.

"I know the need is there," Kubly said of the financial plight many rural districts face. But he and Koenen said they did not foresee any major changes in how the state funds education.

YME is facing an especially difficult situation as the result of having two charter schools within its boundaries. Strand said the YME elementary school in Clarkfield had an enrollment of over 100 students last year. It now counts only 45 students in grades K-5, as a result of the opening of the Clarkfield Charter School.

The enrollment decline will mean a drastic cut in state aid. "Next year that will hit us big time," Strand said. It could eventually force the district to close the Clarkfield elementary school, and make the YME district the first to be "cannibalized" by a charter school, he said. He noted that the charter school's enrollment is almost entirely made up of students living in the YME public district.

"We're not opposed to charter schools," Strand said. But he charged that the curriculum and offerings at the charter school in Clarkfield are really no different than what YME has offered and continues to offer in its public elementary school. Charter schools should only be allowed when they offer a real alternative to what pub-

lic schools offer, he said.

Another hard pill to swallow for the superintendent is the state funds sent to charter schools to assist them with leasing private facilities. Strand said the Echo Charter School receives nearly \$250,000 a year in lease aid payments from the state for a building it purchased from the YME district for \$1. The school serves about 300 students.

"That is an injustice," he said. He said the state sent approximately \$33 million in lease aid payments to charter schools in the state during the 2006-07 fiscal year. The public dollars are being used in private buildings, he and board members pointed out.

Charter schools also are benefited by state start up monies that give them an operational advantage, the superintendent said. The Clarkfield Charter School will receive \$360,000 in state funds for operations in its first two years. It makes it possible for the new charter school to offer a fifth-grade program with only six students. It's a student-to-teacher ratio the public school could never afford, according to the superintendent.

Neither Koenen or Kubly said they anticipate a change in state laws governing charter schools. Nor do they believe that the state would use bond funds to assist rural districts with aging buildings. Kubly said school districts in Lincoln County went to the Legislature with similar problems last year offering to form one countywide district, but found no help.



Nursing homes deserve more funding

✓ By State Rep. Lyle Koenen

Although the 2008 Legislative session is still four months away, it is not too soon to start talking about some of the top priorities we will focus on beginning in February. For me, one of the issues that is especially important is improving funding for our nursing homes. In Greater Minnesota, local nursing homes are a cornerstone of our communities. Not only do they enable us to keep our friends and family close to home, they also provide important jobs.

Unfortunately, as the result of funding decisions that have been made over the past few years, it can easily be said that our nursing homes — especially in rural Minnesota — are in crisis.

A few years back, the state legislature froze the payment rates to nursing homes because of the budget deficit. In addition, another \$32 million was trimmed from payments nursing homes traditionally received. Since then, the funding increases for nursing homes have continued to be less than adequate. The result has been serious financial strain. According to research by the Long-Term Care Coalition, 26 percent of Minnesota's nursing homes and

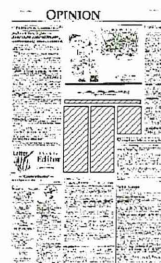
long-term care facilities are at risk of closure and operating with a margin of -5 percent or less. In some parts of the state, the rate is even higher, especially in rural parts of the state. If state support were to remain the same, nearly half of the state's long-term care facilities would go under by the year 2015.

Nursing home staff pay a price, as well. There are fewer staff persons with greater responsibility, as well as more residents to care for. After three years without even an inflationary pay increase, in 2005 we succeeded in giving them a cost of living adjustment. Still, their wages lag behind the wages of hospital staff and other caregivers. As the result, nursing homes cite the inability to retain good staff as one of their top challenges.

Last year, we passed a bill in the House that would have provided a six percent increase for nursing homes. Unfortunately, the Governor vetoed this bill and the final funding package was much less. Our bill included a provision that 75 percent of the increase would go to direct care workers, with the remaining 25 percent given to the provider. This was also lost with the veto.

We also made an attempt to equalize the reimbursement rate for metro and rural nursing homes, funding has not been adjusted since 1983, when a metro, rural and deep rural payment structure was created. As the result, metro nursing home reimbursement rates have continued to rise, while rural homes continued to receive less and less.

I am confident that many of these provisions will be introduced and passed by the House again next session.



House bonding committee will conduct two-day tour of area next week

From staff reports

ST. PAUL — State legislators will be touring area projects that are seeking state bonding help.

The House Capital Investment Committee will visit projects in the area Oct. 25-26.

The schedule Oct. 25 includes looks at the improvements to the Prairie Line Railroad in Winthrop and the Heritage Trail proposal at Fort Ridgely State Park.

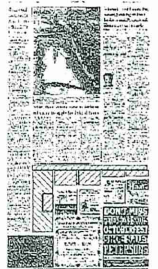


Koenen

The committee will also view proposals to improve the water system for the Upper Sioux Community.

On Oct. 26, the committee will visit Clara City, where officials hope to develop a walking trail. The committee will then travel to Appleton to look at Minnesota River Valley trail plans. It will continue on to Benson, where the city is looking for help improving East Pacific Avenue. Officials in Benson would like to pave the gravel road, which is one of the few alternative routes for emergency vehicles when trains block the main intersections in town. The committee will conclude its tour at Sibley State Park.

The committee is chaired by Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, and includes Reps. Al Juhnke, DFL-Willmar and Dean Urdahl, R-Grove City. The committee will be joined on its tour by Rep. Lyle Koenen, DFL-Clara City. In a news release, Koenen described the projects as important to the area, but warned competition for state funds will be intense due to last year's veto by the governor.



Page 1 of 1



Lawmakers tour outstate Minnesota for different perspective

Tuesday, October 16, 2007

By Carol Stender

Agri News staff writer

SAUK CENTRE, Minn. -- The Minnesota House Agriculture, Rural Economies and Veterans Affairs Policy and Finance committees recently took a road trip through southwestern and central Minnesota.

The two-day trip, headed by committee chairs Rep. Al Juhnke and Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba, included stops at Ridgewater College, Jennie-O Turkey Store, Fibrominn, Chippewa Valley Ethanol and Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Cooperative. They also made stops at Whole Food Co-op in Long Prairie, CampHill Village and the Long Prairie Veterans Memorial.

Juhnke says such excursions are important because committee members get to see the businesses and programs located in other parts of the state.

Rep. Lyle Koenen of Clara City agrees.

"The trip was to get us out in the state," Koenen said.

Each stop included a tour and discussion time when House members asked questions about the business or organization.

CampHill Village offered representatives a model for the developmentally disabled. CampHill is one of 100 similar villages in the United States, Canada and Europe, said CampHill administrator Bill Briggs. The concept started in Scotland after World War II.

Sauk Centre-based Camp-Hill Village is the only one in the central United States.

Angela Michieli is the site's farm manager. The farm has 15 brood cows and 45 to 50 head of beef. There are 500 acres on the site, with half the acres farmable and the rest in wetland and forest.

The village has seven houses where staff and residents live. All but two staff members live on site.

Some staff members come from other CampHill village sites in Europe to work for one or two years.

The village has a weaving shop where residents make rugs on one of several looms. The kitchen is a licensed facility where residents and staff bake cookies sold at local stores. The village opens the kitchen to individuals who need to use a licensed kitchen to make and then sell their products.

A large auditorium is also available for community use and is the site of community plays.

Fifty-two people live in CampHill Village.

CampHill Village was built in 1980 on the request of several parents who had learned about CampHill.

CampHill is self-sustaining, Michieli told the lawmakers. They raise produce in the garden and can or freeze vegetables and berries. Wood, used to heat the houses, is cut from their own groves.

They've also restored a prairie area with 80 to 90 species of grasses.

Long Prairie's Whole Farm Co-op was the group's next stop. Members are from central Minnesota. Whole Farm Co-op markets produce, meats, cheeses, coffee, and eggs from its site in Long Prairie, through the Internet and on stops to customers at several homes and churches.

Lawmakers urged to bolster support for rural ambulance, EMS needs

By Deb Gau

dgau@marshallindependent.com

MARSHALL — It's of vital importance, but it's not visible until disaster strikes.

That was the description of emergency medical services offered by several people during a meeting sponsored by the Minnesota Ambulance Association on Wednesday night. The nature of the job often creates serious challenges for rural ambulance crews, EMS workers said.

Representatives from ambulance services in an 18-county area attended the meeting in the Marshall Fire Department training hall to talk with lawmakers before the next state legislative session. Minnesota Sens. Gary

Kubly and Jim Vickerman and Reps. Marty Seifert and Lyle Koenen were present to hear concerns and suggestions.

"We try to hold these meetings throughout the state," said Buck McAlpin, MAA president. McAlpin

Ambulance PAGE 9A

presented legislators with the MAA's proposed agenda for 2008, and asked for additional feedback from area ambulance staff.

Two of the biggest concerns rural ambulance services face are funding and recruitment, ambulance staff said.

Most rural ambulance services are not able to offer their personnel as much pay or benefits as metro-area ambulances can. Even in areas where the ambulance is staffed with volunteers, it's often hard for them to leave work during the day. An aging rural population also means the pool of available emergency medical technicians is shrinking.

"It's just really important for rural areas to have funding or bonuses to keep us motivated," said Allisa Wendland, captain of the Balaton Ambulance service. Incentives or reimbursements for ambulance workers' employers might help, too. "It's really hard to get people to understand this is a huge commitment."

It's an important commitment, too. Balaton's is the only ambulance service in a 36-square-mile area, Wendland said. The nearest hospital is 20 minutes away.

"If Balaton Ambulance wasn't there, it could

be a 40-minute wait. And for many medical issues, time is of the essence," she said.

McAlpin said Minnesota loses one or two ambulance services per year. In southwest Minnesota, the most recent local ambulances to shut down were in Belview and Russell.

The MAA is actively lobbying for tax, training or other incentives that would help recruit and retain ambulance volunteers, as well as regional funding options for 2009 and other legislation to help rural ambulances, McAlpin said.

If possible, McAlpin said, the MAA would like to see a change in the way mental health transfers are handled in the state. In rural areas, transferring a person to a mental health facility often means tying up an ambulance for several hours when it could be needed elsewhere.

"It takes the ambulance out of the area," he said. "We don't want to treat (mental health transfers) any differently than other patients, but a lot of them don't meet the criteria for medical necessity."

Rural ambulance staff also expressed interest in changing regulatory language that would allow them to fill out ambulance crews with qualified non-EMTs. For example, a firefighter wouldn't be qualified to give people medical treatment for liability reasons, but might be allowed to drive the ambulance if needed.

Dan DeSmet, manager of North Ambulance in Marshall, said personnel shortages make it hard for ambulance crews to respond to emergencies.

"You run into problems a lot, where you can get the first rig out there, but if it gets to a point where you need any more than that, it gets tough," DeSmet said.

Another suggestion was to set up training and recruitment incentives for veterans. Many soldiers coming back from Iraq have medic or combat lifesaver training, McAlpin said, and could make excellent ambulance personnel.

The legislators seemed receptive to the ideas presented at the meeting, although Koenen and Seifert recommended caution.

Seifert said a projected \$373 million state budget shortfall was "not the end of the world," but likely meant lawmakers wouldn't want to spend as much to expand programs.

"I think the session will mainly focus on bonding and policy changes," Seifert said.

Kubly said he planned to work to help maintain benefits for rural EMS workers, including measures to retain volunteer ambulance staff. He



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(Over)



said he liked the idea of longevity awards to encourage ambulance workers not to quit.

"We could have something like a graduated longevity award that would come in at five, 10 years and so on," he said.

Kubly said the lack of pay and benefits for an intense, often dangerous job with long hours is a barrier to a lot of smaller ambulance services. But at the same time, rural communities don't have the tax funds that more populated areas draw on.

Kubly told the audience he believed in the quality and importance of Minnesota's emergency medical services. One major example was the integrated response to the I-35 bridge col-

lapse this summer, he said.

"The media came to document the chaos that the EMS people would find themselves in responding to this," Kubly said. "It didn't happen."

DeSmet said he thought the meeting was a positive experience, in that local EMS representatives got to share their needs with local legislators and share ideas with each other. After the meeting, Wendland shared similar feelings.

"It's nice to hear we have politicians willing to support us," she said. "It's good to be able to speak your mind. Maybe the more people speak up, the more people will be aware."



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Taking veterans matters to heart

■ Democrat from Tracy is championing a \$75M vets package this year.

By Mike Longaecker
State Capitol Bureau

ST. PAUL – With a farm and family to watch over, Jim Vickerman stayed behind decades ago when his brother headed off to the military.

Vickerman, now a Minnesota state senator, has watched as others close to him served.

"I missed something," the Tracy Democrat said. "Since then, I've been trying to do everything I possibly can to help them."

In his 21 years in the Legislature, Vickerman has been an ardent supporter of veterans' causes, and he's pushing a \$75 million military and veterans' package this year.

He was concerned when a Prior Lake veteran committed suicide in January after returning from Iraq.

"That shouldn't have happened," said Vickerman, chairman of the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Committee.

Jonathan Schulze reportedly contacted a Veterans Affairs center in St. Cloud claiming to be suicidal. According to media reports, he was told to take a number.

Four days later, Schulze was dead.

"They shouldn't be on a waiting list," Vickerman said.

The senator points to a bill that would increase grants available to county Veterans Service officers by \$2.8 mil-

lion. Funds in the bill would center on outreach efforts and reintegration of combat veterans.

The legislation is part of Gov. Tim Pawlenty's veterans' package, championed in the Senate by Vickerman.

But as legislators await the actual amount of money they'll have to spend this biennium, it's looking less likely that the package will receive full funding.

Vickerman said he suspects it will fall short, although it's not stopping him from soldiering on for the total amount. The package totals \$75 million, but Vickerman said about half of that amount is realistic at this point.

Though hesitant to deliver fiscal predictions, other key legislators agreed that veterans' funding won't rise to its sponsors' original expectations.

Instead, lawmakers may shape portions of the package to address the immediate needs of recent combat veterans and National Guard members due home later this year, said Sen. Tom Bakk, DFL-Cook.

He said his Senate Tax Committee will take up a bill in the veterans' package next week. That legislation calls for a full state income tax exemption for military pay and pensions.

But since abating the taxes would mean replacing them with \$16.5 million in state funds, Bakk said the scope of the bill should be narrowed.

"If there's money to do something, then we'll do something," he said.

To soften the blow, the tax breaks also could be phased in, said Rep. Lyle Koenen, DFL-Clara City, who leads the House veterans' affairs committee.

Vickerman said he knows the tax bill and the package's biggest component – a \$30 million Minnesota GI Bill – will undergo the greatest scrutiny.

Under Pawlenty's proposal, the GI Bill would supplement the federal version by providing up to \$10,000 in higher education funding for eligible veterans or dependents.

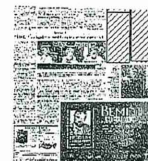
Koenen, comparing the bill to similar efforts in Wisconsin, said he doubts the funds should total the estimated \$30 million. The number of people – proposed to include children and spouses of deceased or permanently wounded vets – covered under the legislation could be scaled back, he said.

"In reality, that doesn't happen," Koenen said of the breadth of coverage provided by the bill.

Sen. Richard Cohen, DFL-St. Paul, chairman of the Senate finance committee, agreed that \$30 million may be on the high side.

Still, Vickerman pledged victory. Even if each portion of the package doesn't see full funding, he's confident each part will survive.

"I will get something for every one of these" bills, he said.



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Veterans' proposal highlights

- ▶ **\$30 million:** Minnesota GI Bill to provide eligible veterans or dependents college tuition aid
- ▶ **\$16.5 million:** exemption from state income tax for military pay and pensions
- ▶ **\$8 million:** improve state-operated veterans' homes
- ▶ **\$2 million:** increase wounded veteran program funding
- ▶ **\$1.5 million:** establish reintegration program
- ▶ **\$4 million:** extend Veterans Affairs communication and outreach
- ▶ **\$1.9 million:** expand veterans' higher education offices on campuses
- ▶ **\$2.8 million:** grants to county veterans service officers
- ▶ **\$3.5 million:** National Guard armories' maintenance
- ▶ **\$560,000:** increase in veterans' support staff

– Mike Longaecker