

New Senate aide Steve Sviggum says he'll fight to keep his regent post, too

By Cyndy Brucato | 01/18/12

Steve Sviggum sees no conflict between his new job at the Minnesota Senate and his seat on the University of Minnesota Board of Regents and says he will fight to keep the regent's post even as the board launches a review.

"That's very disturbing and surprising," Sviggum said of the regents' intent to evaluate whether his new job as the executive assistant and communications director of the Senate's Republican majority caucus conflicts with his duties as regent.

"I spoke to the board's counsel, executive director, chair and vice chair [about the job possibility]. I was thrown under the bus before, so I wanted to cover the bases," he said, referring to a board decision earlier this year that Sviggum could not simultaneously be a regent and hold a position at the U's Humphrey School of Public Affairs.



Steve Sviggum

This time, Sviggum said in an interview with MinnPost, he asked them their opinion about a series of hypothetical jobs, including as an employee of the Legislature.

He recounted a conversation with board chair Linda Cohen in which he said they agreed those kind of employees are not decision-makers and, hence, pose no conflict. Cohen's comment, according to Sviggum, was "'Precisely.' "

University board reviewing Sviggum arrangement

Nevertheless, in a Tuesday statement, Cohen said, "The Board will carefully consider this situation under the terms of its Code of Ethics and determine what steps are necessary to take in the best interest of the Board and the University."

Sviggum said he will not volunteer to give up the unpaid regent post.

"I would not have applied for the Senate job if I had to leave the Board of Regents," he said. Sviggum views the board as possibly the most important economic development tool for the state after the governor. "I really believe it's the opportunity for public service," he said.

Public service is the reason Sviggum says he took the Senate position.

Senate Majority Leader Dave Senjem, his longtime friend and colleague, offered him the hybrid executive-communications job last Friday and Sviggum accepted on Monday.



Senate Majority Leader Dave Senjem

"Senjem convinced me this was a good place for me," he said. "I represented the kind of change the caucus needed."

"Restoring the credibility" is how Sviggum describes his new duties. "The Senate lost a month, maybe even six weeks, of taking a good message to the people of the state," he said of the drama that surrounded the ouster of Amy Koch as majority leader and the firing of the man he's replacing, Michael Brodkorb.

At age 60, with an over-stuffed political portfolio, Sviggum doesn't assume false modesty. "One of the things the Senate was interested in is that I have been there and done that," he said.

Yes he has. Sviggum has run for governor, led the Minnesota House as speaker, ran his Republican caucus as minority leader and, under Gov. Tim Pawlenty, served as commissioner of the Department of Labor and Industry and the state's budget office. So perhaps it was inevitable that one of those jobs would clash with another.

New role for political veteran

Even without the possible conflict with the Board of Regents, Sviggum's appointment drew attention well beyond the usual level for a legislative staff position. He acknowledges that going from boss to hired hand will require mental gymnastics.

"I have to continually remind others as well as myself, I work for the Republican majority caucus," he said.

Just add the identity issues to the list of challenges that Sviggum takes on in his new job. "The

challenge is to get the Senate to be a team," he said after the turmoil created by the Koch demotion.

"I was crushed at the developments that occurred," he said. "It was the cover-up part that was the problem," he said, referring to Senate leadership's admission that they had changed their story of when they learned about Koch's personal relationship with a subordinate staff member. "Especially Republicans, it's pretty tough not to live those values. Better walk your talk."

He describes Koch as "a wonderful leader and shining star. I'm going to assume that we are good; we are going to be OK."

Like any politician with long service, Sviggum has enemies, but he has a longer list of friends. "I have very good relationships," he said.

They will be tested. There's already a tangle of reporting responsibilities, because as executive assistant and communications director, Sviggum is a peer with chief of staff Kevin Matzek. Sviggum says the caucus is still sorting out some responsibilities and organization.

Outside the caucus, Sviggum likely will call upon old Capitol friends and colleagues as the Senate, House, and governor wrangle over bonding, the stadium, and what Sviggum describes as the No. 1 priority — government redesign and reform.

On those issues and more, he expects that the senators, who are his bosses, will turn to him and ask, "What would Steve do?" He says that he will give that advice only upon request.

As with his stand on the Board of Regents position, Sviggum invokes his new mantra, "I have to appropriately and respectfully remind myself that the senators are my bosses. I'm not the decision-maker."