

Sviggum: Lawmaking one of 'best things' he's done

Rep. Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) makes the transitions between meetings, interviews, and major press conferences look effortless. Maybe that's because the 1997 session is his 19th as a legislator and his fifth as House minority leader. While serving in office is nothing new to him, he's still enamored with the job. "Outside of my family, being a member of the Legislature is the best thing I've ever done in my life," he said.

In addition, he said, he still feels challenged by the start of a new session. "Working with people means always being in a state of learning. Each session means beginning anew. It means dealing with peoples' attitudes and feelings and with new relationships. I always work to stay aware and keep doors open."

The start of the 1997 Legislative session is unique in several ways. The Republican party was disappointed in its effort to gain a House majority despite Sviggum's best efforts and surest predictions. He attributes it, in part, to weakness at the top of the Republican ticket during the 1996 presidential election with Bob Dole and U.S. Senate candidate Rudy Boschwitz losing to Democrats. "If it hadn't been a presidential election year, the Republicans would be the majority in the House," he said. Still, he added, while the loss came as a blow, the final numbers also reveal a Republican victory. "We're a very close minority at 64-70. It means we'll be real players, especially when you factor in a Republican governor. Many of our initiatives will be looked upon favorably," he said. "The outcome speaks well to the candidates and the issues. We have 10 new freshmen, and they'll be good, solid legislators."

Also new is the apparent goodwill between political parties. "I genuinely feel that there is going to be a bipartisan effort to attend to the peoples' business. Hopefully, we'll focus on policy rather than power politics," Sviggum said.

Still, he's a pragmatist. "Maybe it's just

natural for there to be optimism at the beginning of the session. As the session goes forward, maybe some optimism will give way to reality," he said.

If Sviggum's outlook is tempered, it may be due to his unbending political philosophy. "I'm conservative. I'm not a moderate," he said. "I'm very traditional in my feelings and values." He believes a more conservative viewpoint is a natural outgrowth of maturity. "Maybe you've heard the idea that at 20,



House Minority Leader Steve Sviggum in his 19th session as a lawmaker is still enamored with the job.

one's politics should come from the heart, but at 40, they should come from the head."

At age 20, whether from the heart or head, Sviggum's politics took on a considerably different tone. He cast his first presidential vote for Democrat George McGovern, and joined thousands of others in protesting the Vietnam War. But his immersion in liberal

politics was never very deep. "My farming background influenced me tremendously. It gave me my values and principles; namely hard work, honesty, self-reliance, and individual responsibility." Sviggum and his two brothers farm the same 1,000 acres near Kenyon, Minn., that his family has cultivated for 100 years. Today, they grow soybeans and corn and raise beef cattle.

"One of my favorite pastimes is riding the tractor through the fields. It's very calming," he said. "I also enjoy heading out to the basketball court at night with the kids, just the four of us." Sviggum has three children: Hans, 16; Eric, 14; and Marit, 12. "The biggest accomplishment of my life is having three lovely, good children, with good values and principals." How did he do that? "I have a good wife," he said with a grin. Debbie Sviggum teaches high school in Cannon Falls, Minn. Sviggum also continues his long-standing activities as a basketball coach and referee.

He counts among his greatest legislative victories the bipartisan passage of a workers' compensation bill in 1995. "It helped Minnesota become competitive for jobs," he said. His biggest disappointment? "Not gathering a majority this session." That rates with another one: the failure thus far to pass an equitable funding formula for education in which the state would pick up a greater share of the tab, he said.

At least there will always be lutefisk. Sviggum, who said he's proud of his traditionalism, is also proud to be a connoisseur of lutefisk — cod soaked in lye. "I like it — love it," he said.

"The church [Vang Lutheran] puts on a big lutefisk dinner every year, and we also eat it at home. But you have to develop a taste for it." Do the kids eat it? "No. I didn't at their age either. But they will — that's tradition!"

— Celeste Riley