

New members . . .

Bakk represents land of 'three Ts': timber, taconite, and tourism

Unlike most candidates on the campaign trail, Tom Bakk (DFL-Cook) didn't knock on a single door.



Rep. Tom Bakk

He said it wasn't practical to meet voters by strolling through the sprawling District 6A in northeastern Minnesota, which encompasses part of the Iron Range, Lake Superior's North Shore, and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Instead,

Bakk relied on mailings and appearances at city council meetings and civic events.

His strategy worked. Bakk emerged from a crowded field to win the seat held for the last 18 years by former Rep. Dave Battaglia.

Last summer, the DFL district convention failed to endorse a candidate from among five contenders, and the "floodgates kind of opened up," Bakk said. Eleven candidates filed to run in the DFL primary. With 17.5 percent of the vote, Bakk emerged the victor and then took the general election by a comfortable margin.

Although he will miss his two teenaged sons' basketball games during the legislative session, Bakk is looking forward to serving on committees that will consider legislation important to his constituents. The economic bedrock of his arrowhead district is composed of what Bakk called the "three T's: timber, taconite, and tourism." He noted an upturn in both the wood products industry and mining.

As the business manager for the carpenters' union on the Iron Range, Bakk is looking forward to sitting on the House Labor-Management Relations Committee.

"That's probably the easiest committee for me to be on, because I'm so familiar with the labor-management issues," he said. "The workers' comp debate I expect to be real difficult, though."

Bakk vowed to oppose any reforms that would reduce benefits to injured workers. "Roughly 22 percent of the premiums [employers] pay for workers' comp actually ends up going to the injured worker. Now there's 78 percent there that's in the bureaucracy somewhere." Part of the solution, according to Bakk, lies in regulating the insurance companies, as they do in Wisconsin.

Department of Natural Resources (DNR) officials can count on getting an earful from

Bakk when they appear before the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee. Bakk and his constituents would like to know what the DNR is doing with all the money it collects in license fees. He opposes any fee increases.

"One of the things I want to look at is lowering the price of deer licenses for young kids," said Bakk, who objects on principle to charging children and adults the same fee for a hunting license. "For a lot of people, it's a matter of economics. I know when I go buy a deer license for myself and my two sons, it's 69 bucks! Sportsmen ask themselves, 'What is the DNR giving me for 69 bucks?'" He pointed out that kids under 16 don't need a license for fishing or hunting small game.

A framed photo of his older son wearing his football uniform hangs on the wall of Bakk's office. When he isn't "following his teenaged sons around to football, basketball, baseball, and track," Bakk enjoys hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and canoeing in the Boundary Waters, which begins nine miles from his home on Lake Vermilion — "the most beautiful lake in Minnesota," he claims.

Bakk said that he has been closely involved in his sons' education, even taking them to their pre-school medical screenings. And he is proud to say that he has never missed a school conference. He says it's difficult being away from them, and that he's looking forward to a long weekend with them — snowmobiling and ice fishing.

The sacrifices will be worth it if Bakk can fulfill some of his expectations. He hopes to help make Minnesota a better place for his children to live in — better than it was for him. "That's partly what has driven me into becoming a labor leader — trying to provide the leadership in the workplace that will help accomplish that," he said.

— Mordecai Specktor

District 6A

Population: 32,676
Distribution: 23.32 percent urban; 76.68 percent rural
Counties: Cook, Koochiching, Lake, St. Louis
Largest city: Two Harbors
Location: northeastern Minnesota
Unemployment rate: 10.15 percent
Residents living below poverty level: 12.18
1992 presidential election results:
 Bush/Quayle 24.96 percent
 Clinton/Gore 50.72 percent
 Perot/Stockdale 22.92 percent
 Other: 1.4 percent