

Vanasek hopes to tone down partisanship

He'll be spending the next several months running the show in the House of Representatives, but Rep. Robert Vanasek (DFL-New Prague) will remain a member of his community's volunteer fire department.

The department is good training: As speaker of the House, Vanasek will have plenty of political fires to put out.

If Vanasek has a goal for the session, it's "that we finish on time, with a balanced budget, with a correct set of priorities." The top three priorities, as reflected by HF1, 2, and 3, are wetlands, health care access, and school funding.

And "on time" for Vanasek means May 20; he doesn't see a need for a special session.

But before the Legislature decides what it wants to do with those issues, it has a big blaze to douse — a \$197 million budget shortfall for the remainder of this biennium.

Vanasek says he believes Gov. Arne Carlson's proposals — cutting aid to local government, slashing transportation projects, and freezing state employees' pay — need serious discussion. But, Vanasek adds, "I would not close the door on using some of the budget reserve."

Once the problem of the current biennium's budget is resolved, Vanasek and the rest of the Legislature will have to wrestle with the next biennium, for which a \$1.2 billion revenue shortfall is predicted. "We're not planning on any tax increase, so we're going to have to look at existing budgets," he says.

Of Vanasek's top three priorities, he says all are controversial yet have some chance of passing this session:

- Wetlands: Rep. Willard Munger's (DFL-Duluth) HF1 is expected to have challenges, but Vanasek foresees that, with some modification, it will succeed.
- Health care access: Rep. Paul A. Ogren (DFL-Aitkin) has introduced HF2, a wide-ranging health care access bill that would appropriate money for a state health insurance program. But the governor says he'd like to hold off on the bill until 1993. That, Vanasek says, will make it hard to pass Ogren's

complete package. "I think [the Legislature] is unlikely to fully fund the proposal as proposed by the Health Care Access Commission," Vanasek says.

• School funding: Some of the inequities in school district debt service and referendum levies were corrected in 1989, says Vanasek, but more work is needed.

During his first three years as speaker, Vanasek says he tried to reduce the level of partisanship. It's a course he expects to follow this session as well, but this will be the first year since being elected speaker that he will work with an Independent-Republican governor.

"There are times when partisan debate is appropriate," Vanasek concedes, but he adds that many issues facing the state are not defined by party orientation. He expects new House Minority Leader Terry Dempsey (IR-New Ulm) to help moderate the level of partisanship.

Although this session has started with gloomy reports of a national recession and the war in the Persian Gulf, Vanasek points to the state's diversified economy and strong budget reserve as reasons for optimism.

"Minnesota is as prepared as any state in the country to weather a recession," he says.

—Andris Straumanis



House Speaker Robert Vanasek