

Finding his muse

Thissen draws on common principles from his life, and 'The Boss,' in new role as state legislator

BY MIRANDA BRYANT

Political inspiration comes in many forms. And for freshman legislator, Rep. Paul Thissen (DFL-Mpls), it comes partly from one of America's most famous rock 'n' rollers.



Rep. Paul Thissen

Bruce Springsteen has a huge fan in the 36-year-old Thissen, who has attended 15 Springsteen concerts since his high school days. In fact, the Harvard-educated lawyer sings the older of his two children, 4-year-old Emily, to sleep every night to Springsteen's *Thunder Road*.

"I think he speaks in a profound way about ordinary people's lives and the challenges they face that has always resonated with me," said Thissen.

Thissen said Springsteen doesn't judge where people are in their lives, but rather recognizes that circumstances can lead to situations that are good or difficult. This perspective, said Thissen, is something that should be remembered in government.

Prior to his election in District 63A, Thissen worked as a litigation lawyer for Briggs and Morgan. There he was chair of the *pro bono* program that provided legal services to selected low-income individuals, nonprofit ventures, and public interest causes free of charge.

"Government and policy are things I've been interested in for a long time, and public service," said Thissen, who has served on various nonprofit organizations' boards of directors.

But two situations pointed him to the State Capitol. First, the 2002 redistricting process created a new district closely reflecting the areas Thissen knew well from a childhood in Bloomington and an education in Richfield. Second, he believed legislators showed a "lack of vision" last year in addressing the state budget deficit.

"My wife said, 'You ought to put your money where your mouth is,'" Thissen said.

Thissen spent the next months contacting the 150 DFL convention delegates, ultimately

winning their endorsement. Then he started visiting people in the district.

He said that process taught him a lot about the issues. Voters told him they wanted fairer funding for schools, improved prescription drug benefits, greater options for long-term care, preservation of veteran services, and relief from ever-increasing traffic snarls.

Thissen will be able to address those issues on the House committees to which he's been assigned: transportation finance, state government finance, and government operations and veterans affairs policy.

"Paul not only has an intense interest in issues, but he knows them well," said Rep. Jean Wagenius (DFL-Mpls). "He is already contributing new solutions for the budget problems that we face."

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Thissen envisions creating social service outreach offices at schools, such as the three at Achievement Plus schools in St. Paul, to increase access to government services. Sometimes the only place people encounter the government is in a school, he explained.

Fairer funding for schools is becoming more critical, said Thissen, with the number of families living in poverty and the growing population of students who don't claim English as their first language.

"We need to recognize with our funding that these districts are facing challenges and we need to fund accordingly," he said.

Veteran services is another vulnerable area, said Thissen, noting the large population of aging military personnel in his district.

"I think it's really important that especially in these budget times that they're not one of the groups that bears the brunt ... We need to be vigilant about that."

Related to veteran services are Thissen's

concerns about prescription drug costs and in-home health care. Thissen said he will be attentive to any prescription drug reform bills and what groups are covered under such bills. He also hopes to see legislative reform to the long-term care system.

"I've heard many, many stories about people who have really made great sacrifices to take care of a loved one, but it's really difficult and I think we can help those folks without costing the state a lot of money," Thissen said.

Traffic congestion is an issue that Thissen confronts daily. With interstates 494 and 35W and highway 62 in his district, the representative understands his constituents' bottleneck blues. Unless quick action is taken, the problem will worsen, he predicted, as new workers begin coming to Best Buy's new headquarters near where the two freeways merge. The business is expected to draw 6,000 to 7,000 workers to the area.

The solution lies in increased transportation funding and alternative transportation, Thissen said. The Northstar commuter rail line makes sense, but bonding for new construction has costs that must be considered, he said.

Thissen said the state has traditionally paid for new transportation construction with cash.

If the state sells bonds for the same, it may have to sacrifice a new road to simply pay interest and financing charges.

Increasing the gas tax, as well as the sales tax in affected communities, should be explored, he added.

"I think we need to look at a variety of funding sources."

DISTRICT 63A

2002 population: 36,726

Largest city: Minneapolis

County: Hennepin

Location: central Twin Cities area

Top Concern: "Coming up with solutions to the (traffic) congestion problem is one of my top priorities."

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