

Capitol Life

politicsinmn.com

Thursday, March 27, 2014

On the sidelines, but hardly idle

Longtime House Speaker Sviggum relishes teaching at Humphrey School

BY KEVIN FEATHERLY
Special to Capitol Report

Basketball fans of a certain age and geography will recall a trim, dark-haired, 40-something Steve Sviggum sprinting around the basketball court, often faster than the high school athletes he was monitoring as referee.

Throughout his long life in politics, the now white-haired former House Speaker had sideline jobs as coach and referee, and sports became a kind of metaphor for his public policy approach.

"It's true," Sviggum says. "I come from a real background of team play, whether it's high school athletics, college athletics, coaching or just my children being involved. I see things as being for a greater good of a team."

It's an analogy with its limits, suggests Sviggum's old friend and former House colleague former Rep. Cal Ludeman, a Republican who like Sviggum was swept into office in the 1978 election known to history as the "Minnesota Massacre." And Sviggum understood those limits.

"Steve never saw being a conservative as a competitive sport," Ludeman says. "It wasn't a test about who was the most conservative. It was a test of how we conservatives could build a coalition and a voting bloc, and be effective in a political sense — in other words, win."

Of course, that is all rather academic now — as is Sviggum's current job. Sviggum is a part-time instructor at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs, where his class, "Governing, Minnesota Style," is perennially full, a hit with students.

Larry Jacobs, the Humphrey School's political studies chair, says students appreciate Sviggum's balanced approach to instruction, avoiding the partisanship that once was his stock in trade.

"I think as an instructor, that has completely changed," Jacobs says. "He takes his job as teaching, not to be pushing a party line."

It's a role the gregarious Sviggum relishes, says Ludeman. "He was a high school teacher at the beginning, so he just loves it," Ludeman says. "Teaching is still his dream."

'He's one of your guys, isn't he?'

Sviggum's role at the Humphrey involves fundraising for the school, and also leveraging his vast connections to set students up with high-caliber government and corporate internships. He organizes public forums at the school, including a Feb. 5 debate between current House Speaker Paul Thissen and Minority Leader Kurt Daudt, during which Sviggum seemed to steer the leaders to a state of detente over a possible \$800 million bonding bill for 2014.

The gig, Sviggum says, keeps his hand in the game.

"There is a reason for me to stop at the Capitol," he says. "There is a reason for me to talk to Sen. [John] Marty.



PHOTO: KEVIN FEATHERLY

Former Minnesota House Speaker Steve Sviggum was first elected in the 1978 election. "Steve never saw being a conservative as a competitive sport," said old friend and former Republican House colleague Rep. Cal Ludeman. "It wasn't a test about who was the most conservative. It was a test of how we conservatives could build a coalition and a voting bloc, and be effective in a political sense — in other words, win."

There is a reason for me to read the paper in the morning. There is a reason to stop at the Capitol, a reason to call [GOP Sen.] Dave Senjem."

Is that to suggest that it also gives Senjem a reason to take the call? "That's probably true," he laughs.

Sviggum's long political career started when Jimmy Carter was president and ended, arguably, when he got laid off as a Senate communications staffer just as Barack Obama won a second term in 2012. At eight years, Sviggum is tied with former GOP Rep. Lloyd Duxbury as the second-longest-serving House speaker in Minnesota history. (Only the Depression-era Democrat Lawrence M. Hall served longer.)

There was a time when it looked as if Sviggum might go even farther. In 2001, a gentlemen's agreement led him not to run for governor. It was between himself and close friend and ally Tim Pawlenty, then the House Republicans' majority leader. They agreed, he says, that one should run for governor, while the other remained behind to manage the Republican House caucus. But who?

The answer, Sviggum says, came to him in Monticello, where he was meeting with businessman Scott Van Binsburgen, a former staffer for U.S. Rep. Vin Weber. Van Binsburgen, last rumored to be running for U.S. Rep. Collin Peterson's job, was then being recruited to run for a state House seat.

During their meeting, Sviggum says, Van Binsburgen asked for assurances that Sviggum would "be there for us."

"I said, 'Scott, don't worry, you will be a priority candidate, we'll have field staff here, the caucus will be there for you,'" Sviggum recalls.

"No, you'll be here for us, won't you?" Van Binsburgen replied. "What do you mean?" Sviggum asked. "You're going to keep on as speaker?"

The decision was made in that moment. "I remember driving home from Montevideo that night and calling Tim," Sviggum says. "I said, 'Tim, you're running for governor, I'm going to stay with the caucus.'"

He contends it was one of the best decisions he ever made. "Tim was a star — his strategy, his thoughts, his reasoning, his depth of knowledge completely overshadowed mine," Sviggum says. "I'm a hayseed."

Like almost everything he says, Sviggum tells the self-deprecating story with perfect cheer, peppering it with laughter. It's one of a zillion anecdotes he readily shares about what clearly has been a fascinating political life.

Here's another: The 2004 legislative session is ending with a whimper. Nothing of consequence has been achieved — no bonding bill, no proper budget, no Northstar Rail, no sex offender registry, no gay marriage ban. Republicans hold the House majority, but Democrats fiercely assert their relevance through aggressive resistance tactics. The session's ugliness is perhaps best marked by the acrimonious rejection of Cheri Pierson Yecke as Pawlenty's education commissioner.

Against that backdrop, the clock ticks toward midnight on the session's final day. Much remains to be done. But suddenly, an angered, exhausted GOP committee chairman — Sviggum won't say who and the published record is cloudy — offers a motion to adjourn the session, sine die. If it carries, the session will end immediately with unfin-

The Sviggum File

Name: Steve Sviggum
Age: 62
Job: Half-time legislative fellow and instructor, U of M's Humphrey School of Public Affairs; former House speaker, House minority leader, commissioner, Senate communications chief and university regent. Also a former teacher and coach
Grew up in: Kenyon, Minn.
Lives in: Kenyon, Minn.
Education: B.A., mathematics, St. Olaf College
Family: Wife, Debra, married 35 years; three grown children (two doctors, one pharmacist)
Hobbies: Occasional volunteer middle-school sports referee; big reader. But what's in a hobby? "I love to work," Sviggum says. "My hobby is working on the farm."
Unexpected fact: For the last year, Sviggum has been partnering with activist FartunWeli to teach Somali women to directly affect public policy on poverty and health care inequity issues.

ished business, something not likely to stand well with voters.

Sviggum is aghast and confused. He turns to the Legislature's late, great parliamentarian and unofficial referee, Ed Burdick.

Sviggum Department of Labor and Industry post cut short a run for governor

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"I say, 'Ed, what do we do now?'" Sviggum remembers. "He says, 'Steve, he's one of your guys, isn't he?'" Translation: Deal with it, Mr. Speaker.

Ultimately the session ends in the usual way — as a prelude to a special session. But how did Sviggum avert disaster? "I think through gentle encouragement, we were able to get that motion removed," Sviggum says, laughing. "Education was done."

A tough stretch

Recent years have not always been kind to Sviggum, who left the House at Pawlenty's request in 2007 to take over as Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) commissioner. In a theme that would be repeated, that job probably cost him another, better job.

For about two weeks in 2009, Sviggum actively ran for governor. Someone suggested he should check in with the U.S. Department of Justice to see if his DLI role represented a conflict of interest. Sviggum thought the idea ludicrous, but made the query.

The Justice Department did not think it was ludicrous. Its lawyers sent him an opinion holding that, because DLI oversees federal Occupational Safety and

Heath Administration (OSHA) funding in Minnesota, Sviggum was a de facto federal employee. Federal employees are barred from running for office.

Sviggum decided to stay at DLI and forgo the governorship. It was, he concedes, his last, best chance to win the prize.

Later Sviggum became a University of Minnesota regent, and then started teaching a class at the Humphrey. Other regents told him that was a conflict, so he quit teaching.

Then in late 2011 Sviggum was hired as communications director for the embattled Minnesota Senate following the Amy Koch debacle. Regents didn't like that either, and forced him to choose jobs. Choking back tears, Sviggum bitterly resigned from the board of regents and stayed with the Senate.

That didn't go so well, either. With the 2012 election, the Senate lost its majority. Sviggum got laid off. Thus ended a career at the Capitol that touched four

separate decades.

So now Sviggum sits in the first ring of political outsiders. That perch allows him to mull over politics from different angles. For instance, he recently has been reading "The Righteous Mind" by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, a book that tries to identify the sources of U.S. political and religious divisiveness.

As an academic, Sviggum can afford now to be critical of his own party. Of course, he still believes Democrats are systematically destroying the America's moral values, so not everything has changed.

But Sviggum also thinks newer members of the Republican legislative caucus lack patience and respect for their opponents, some ostensible allies in their caucus, and the institutions of government generally. It's not a prescription for wise governance, he says.

"I might be right and I might be wrong, but I am certainly allowed my

"[Sviggum] takes his job as teaching, not to be pushing a party line."

—Larry Jacobs, the Humphrey School of Public Affairs political studies chair

feeling," he says. "The idea of hoping and working for each other's success as a team doesn't always exist today."

Roger Moe, one of three DFL Senate majority leaders who worked during Sviggum's long term as House Speaker, suspects Sviggum's pointed analysis of his own party suggests the speaker knows his politician days are over.

"I suppose Steve is seeing the reality that, as leader, he had to work out the deal, had to compromise, had to meet halfway on many occasions," Moe says. "And I suppose he probably figures that is a liability with some of the people who are now active."

Not that he wouldn't compete again if the tide somehow turned. For all his sunny, gregarious good humor, Sviggum misses strolling the corridors of power, banging the gavel. He misses swapping fish stories on the campaign trail with farmers on the state's far-flung prairies.

He even misses getting "thrown off the walls" by angry caucus members and the exhausting work of candidate recruitment, a business at which he once excelled.

"I do miss being in the public sphere," he says. "I miss being speaker. I miss it a lot. And I am not afraid to say that."

Capitol Life Briefs

Minneapolis Veterans Home gets CMS certification

A Minneapolis long-term care facility is the first Minnesota Veterans Home to receive certification to qualify for Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement.

The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) announced the certification by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services on March 18.

Certification means that Building 19, a new facility on the Minneapolis Veterans Home campus, meets rigorous care quality guidelines, according to MDVA. Residents receiving care there now may use their Medicare coverage to help pay for it.

Robin Gaustad, an assistant MDVA deputy commissioner, says that the significance of the certification is not that veterans will receive care previously denied them. MDVA has been allowed to charge a sliding fee scale for those unable pay with Medicare or Medicaid coverage, she says.

The real significance is that the Veterans Home system, at least in Building 19, will now be reimbursed for more of the care that already is delivered there, Gaustad says.

"We hope that the end game is to continue to provide expanded,

improved and best-practice care for veterans who have served our country and our state," Gaustad says. "This certainly contributes to our being able to do that."

Building 19, a 100-bed long-term care center, opened in August 2012. It has all private rooms and is built around a neighborhood concept, where care is delivered in what MDVA describes as a "home-style atmosphere."

Gaustad says that being a new facility made it easier for Building 19 to qualify for CMS certification. However, the process was rigorous, requiring voluminous documentation and an on-site survey by a 10-member CMS team.

"Our team worked really hard on developing policies and procedures, and doing additional trainings in order to pass that survey," Gaustad says. "So that was a big milestone for us."

The state Veterans Home system has four additional care centers inergus Falls, Hastings, Luverne and Silver Bay.

The Hastings facility is a board-and-lodge facility with no skilled nursing care. It also is oldest facility, so it is least likely to qualify for CMS certification, Gaustad says.

However, the other three facilities are either new or recently remodeled and might qualify, Gaustad says. She says that MDVA will be filing for CMS certification at those facilities in the coming years.

"We would hope to be successful there," Gaustad says. "We want to make sure we do it at a rate that staff and residents can manage through the change that is necessary."

MPCA forums to study riverway sediment reduction

A new draft report outlining strategies to reduce choking sediments in the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers will be the subject of three public comment sessions next month.

Their schedule is as follows:

■ April 2, 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., at the Blue Earth Public Library, Mankato.

■ April 8, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the St. James Hotel, Red Wing.

■ April 10, 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, Bloomington.

Clay and silt sediment makes river water cloudy and murky, degrading fish and aquatic life habitats, according to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), which is holding the three open houses.

Forrest Peterson, an MPCA spokesman, says the main geographic focus of the report is the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers near Fort Snelling. "The Minnesota River at that point is the largest contributor of sediment to the Mississippi in the state," Peterson says.

Peterson says the report seeks ways to prevent sediments from entering the rivers, rather than trying to clean up what is already there. "Obviously, once it is in there, it is in there," he says.

Peterson says that, guided by recent research, thinking about causes of sedimentation in the major river systems is changing at the MPCA. Less blame is being placed on agricultural lands — though they remain important sources

of sedimentary runoff, Peterson says.

More important, he says, are "near-channel" sources. Those include eroding stream banks, bluffs and ravines. Climate and urban development are increasingly considered key culprits as well, he says.

"We've had greater amounts of intense rainfalls, but also there has been a big change in the hydrology in the system from human development," he says. "Some of that is urban stormwater from impervious surfaces."

Peterson describes the draft report as a set of "interim goals." Those include a 25 percent sediment reduction by 2020 and 50 percent reduction by 2030. To meet total maximum daily load (TMDL) reduction goals outlined by the federal Clean Water Act, sediments would need to be reduced 80 to 90 percent.

The draft study emphasizes citizen involvement in goal-setting, progress tracking progress and adaptation in light of future research and monitoring, Peterson says.

Public comments will be collected at the public meetings, by mail and through electronic channels. They will be integrated into the final draft of the strategic document, Peterson says.

Questions and comments can be submitted in writing to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 520 Lafayette Road N., St. Paul, MN, 55105. Email may be sent to larry.gunder-son@state.mn.us.

Those wanting to communicate by phone may call 651-757-2400 or 1-800-657-3864.

—Kevin Featherly

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