

Minnesotans deserve leaders with courage

Written by Bobby Joe Champion
Thursday, 02 July 2009 16:31

My first term as your State Representative ended on May 18. My colleagues who have served in the Legislature longer and most political observers called this the most difficult session they've seen. A "perfect storm" that included the worst recession in recent history, an escalating housing crisis and state unemployment levels at near-record highs complicated the task of addressing an unprecedented \$6.4 billion budget shortfall.

Despite differences between the DFL Legislature and the Governor, we made progress on important issues. Bills to reform government, preserve our natural resources, maintain transportation infrastructure and protect students and schools were signed into law. But on the most important issues – closing the budget deficit, protecting jobs and taking care of Minnesotans in a fair and responsible way – we could not reach a consensus.

Throughout the session, Democrats, Republicans and Gov. Tim Pawlenty were divided about the best way to balance the budget. We did agree on two key points: 1) that the sheer size of the budget shortfall meant we'd have to cut spending, and 2) that while some spending cuts were in order, cuts alone would be too damaging to Minnesota's quality of life, meaning new revenue was a necessary part of the solution.

The primary disagreement surrounded what kind of new revenue is the most responsible and fair. The Governor wanted to borrow \$1 billion in one-time money, and pay it back over 20 years at an additional cost of \$600 to \$800 million. That kind of "borrow and spend" practice has been a disaster for our federal government, and I believe it would be irresponsible for Minnesota. Nearly every member of the Minnesota House agreed, rejecting that plan by a vote of 130 to 2.

Still, efforts at compromise continued. Some of those compromises required members of my party to let go of some positions important to us. We did so in an effort to find common ground in the best interest of our state.

Several of these compromise budgets were sent to the Governor, all of them premised on a fiscally responsible and progressive "pay-as you go" approach. The last of those budgets proposed a modest income tax increase for high-income earners, a tax on liquor and fees on credit card companies that gouge their customers with excessive interest rates. The income tax would have impacted fewer than 2% of Minnesotans - those making over \$300,000 per year would have just \$9 per month or 30 cents a day – and would have automatically ended after four years, in the meantime protecting students, hospitals and the elderly.

But as the session wore on and we legislators kept paring back our tax proposals, the Governor just wouldn't budge. In the last days of the session, he walked away from the table completely, saying he'd rather go it alone than continue to work with us. He signed all of our budget bills, subject to a few line-item vetoes, but twice vetoed the tax bill that would have paid for them. His most callous act was to veto General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC), which provides health care for Minnesota's poorest and sickest citizens, most of them people with mental illness or chemical dependency. It strikes at the very heart of our moral responsibility to care for those most in need with compassion and consideration.

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Aided by House Republicans (who chose to stand with the governor instead of with their constituents) the Governor alone will now decide the fate of our state by using his powers of unallotment to cut an additional \$2.7 billion from the state budget, on top of \$2 billion in cuts passed already this session. These additional cuts will cost more jobs, eliminate more care and services for poor, disabled and elderly Minnesotans, and send tuition and property taxes skyrocketing.

Minnesotans will now experience the impact of a budget balanced by one person and see first-hand what happens when representative democracy is replaced by a politically ambitious Governor no longer accountable for his actions to the people he represents.

Democrats in the Legislature showed a willingness to work outside our ideological box, making deeper yet smarter budget cuts than initially proposed by the Governor and moderating our stance on revenue to try to meet in the middle. It's unfortunate he and his GOP allies could not – or would not - do the same.

But as Winston Churchill said at the height of World War: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." We'll all need to muster our courage because there is so much left to be done. My commitment to you is to keep fighting on your behalf to minimize the fallout of the Governor's budget cuts on our community; and to keep working for an economic recovery that provides opportunity for all. I ask for your partnership in that effort, because we're stronger when we stand together than when we stand alone.