

Capitol Report

politicsinmn.com

Vol. 85 No. 7

The policy behind the politics

Thursday, June 16, 2011

Rising GOP tide lifted some lobbyists' boats

Under the new majorities, a number of Republican lobbyists have enjoyed higher stature in 2011

BY CHARLEY SHAW
Staff Writer

Members of the Capitol lobbying corps could have been excused for thinking they were in the wrong building at the start of the 2011 legislative session. A new administration and 60 new legislators took office in St. Paul, and a new complement of Republican leaders and chairs took the place of DFLers in both legislative chambers. The Capitol building itself was just about the only thing that resembled the state of affairs from the prior year.

"Basically, it was a total restructure of governance in Minnesota," said Gary Carlson, director of intergovernmental relations for the League of Minnesota Cities. "When you think about the new faces in the legislative process and a new governor, there was a big challenge for any lobbyist to recalibrate the players and figure out how to function in the new regime."

With Republicans in control of the Legislature, lobbyists with connections to the GOP became all the more valuable to clients seeking influence at the Capitol.



Tom Hanson, a former commissioner of Minnesota Management and Budget, is one of several Republican lobbyists who wielded their valuable connections at the Legislature during the session. (Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

And given the state's \$5 billion budget deficit, Republicans fluent in the language of the state budget gained instant stature.

Because of the 2010 political upheaval and the 2012-13 budget mess, a couple of newly minted lobbyists from the ranks of the Pawlenty administration became top lobbying prospects. John Knapp, a Republican and a veteran lobbyist with the Winthrop & Weinstine law firm, singled out two neophytes who had been

involved in budget negotiations on behalf of the Pawlenty administration as recently as last year.

Knapp said, "I'd point out two people in particular that I think had good sessions and who, because of the whole budget session and their familiarity with it, were in demand: Ward Einess, the former Revenue commissioner, and Tom Hanson, who was commissioner of Management and Budget. They were in demand both by members, particularly

GOP Legislative takeover prompted a number of high-profile partnerships among Republican players

Republican members, in the House and Senate and among clients.”

Knapp’s firm snagged Hanson away from MMB near the end of Pawlenty’s tenure. In addition to Hanson’s centrality to the budgetary politics of Pawlenty’s second term, his resume included several years working for the House Republican caucus when they held the majority. Einess, who once toiled as a GOP staffer on the Senate Taxes Committee, formed Ward Einess Strategies and soon built up a stable of blue chip clients that includes Best Buy and Delta Air Lines.

Other lobbyists with GOP ties developed added cachet under the new Republican legislative order:

Joel Carlson: The former Republican legislator doesn’t cultivate a high profile. But he was regarded as an effective advocate for a profession that’s often caught in Republicans’ cross hairs: trial lawyers. Carlson’s peers speak highly of the relations he has established with key Republican

committee chairs such as Reps. Torrey Westrom and Steve Smith. His influence as a lobbyist for the Minnesota Association for Justice was envied by business groups when Republicans tried unsuccessfully to pass tort reform legislation at the end of the session.

Kevin Goodno: Goodno played an important role in the first Pawlenty administration as commissioner of the Department of Human Services. He also showed impeccable chops on general budget problems when he served as co-chairman of the Budget Trends Study Group. Now running the government relations practice at the law firm of Fredrikson & Byron, Goodno is a Republican with deep knowledge of the funding issues associated with public health care programs, which have been a perennial sticking point between Republicans and DFLers. The firm, which had attracted health care clients going back to the launch of its government relations practice in 2006, added a couple more health-related clients right off the bat in January.

Todd Hill: Among lobbyists, Hill is known for being as close to new House

Speaker Kurt Zellers as anybody in the lobbying world. Hill ventured out on his own this session under the moniker Hill Capitol Strategies. He had previously been one of the founders of the Cook Hill Girard lobbying firm. As the firm grew, potential conflicts arose between clients such as health care and tobacco that led the principals to split.

Brian McDaniel: McDaniel is regarded as something of a sage among the new Republican majorities for his experience as chief of staff to the last Republican House speaker, Steve Sviggum. He was also committee administrator for Rep. Greg Davids’ Commerce Committee.

“There was a big challenge for any lobbyist to recalibrate the players and figure out how to function in the new regime.”

—Gary Carlson, League of Minnesota Cities

McDaniel’s sense of perspective extends beyond the Legislature; he has also worked for the state Department of Employment and Economic Development and for the Minnesota Business Partnership. For the last couple of sessions, he has lobbied for Lockridge Grindal Nauen.

Tom Prichard: The Minnesota Family Council president was a central player in the ultimately successful effort to pass the initiative putting a gay marriage ban on the 2012 ballot. Despite widespread GOP support for the measure, Prichard didn’t have an easy task. From the beginning of the session, GOP legislative leaders stressed that their priorities were the budget and job creation. The general understanding was that social issues didn’t fit within the majorities’ agenda. Prichard spent much of the session toiling in relative obscurity. Then, in what was by far the strongest arm-twisting of the session, Prichard and legislative allies such as House Majority Leader Matt Dean fought through a storm of protest to send the amendment to the ballot.

In addition to boosting the fortunes of

individual lobbyists, the GOP legislative takeover prompted a number of high-profile partnerships among Republican players. Chief among them were the alliance of Republican legislative campaign strategists Ben Golnik and Gregg Peppin, who combined forces in December to offer legislative advocacy. Golnik brought a Senate specialty, having helped to coordinate the Senate GOP’s 2010 takeover. Peppin ran House campaigns when Sviggum was speaker and has advised legions of legislative campaigns through the firm P2B Strategies.

Around the same time, former Pawlenty communications director Brian

McClung entered into a partnership with the Goff & Howard lobbying and public relations firm. McClung has complemented Goff’s already deep bench of Republicans, which includes former GOP Chairman Chris Georgacas

and consultant Mike Zipko.

DFLers also sought joint ventures with Republican lobbying talent. Veteran lobbyist Jim Erickson founded Solomon Strategies Group and brought on board Quinn Cheney, who most recently served as legislative liaison in Pawlenty’s Agriculture Department, as well as Carrie Ruud, a former GOP state senator.

Kristen Amundson, a DFLer who runs Amundson Strategies, hired Republican Lori Grivna, who had most recently been a senior policy adviser to Pawlenty and assistant commissioner at the state Department of Education. Cristine Almeida, who was chief of staff to former DFL Senate Majority Leader Dean Johnson, hired Colin Marsh, the brother of Zellers’ legislative director, Ian Marsh.

The cross-pollination was a response to the new political realities at the Capitol. Tom Lehman, a longtime health care lobbyist, noted that such balancing acts were not a new phenomenon.

“There needs to be an ability to speak to both sides,” he said. “And despite all the changes that have happened, that’s not a change.”