

Capitol Report

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Metro East

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Thursday, April 26, 2012

The Influencer

Former MMB head Hanson carves out a new niche as a corporate lobbyist



BY KEVIN FEATHERLY

Special to Capitol Report

Lobbyists around the Capitol used to call them “waterboarding sessions.” The man getting rhetorically drenched was Tom Hanson, Gov. Tim Pawlenty’s commissioner at Minnesota Management & Budget, the state’s finance agency.

The guy primarily doing the drenching was Sen. Larry Pogemiller, then co-chairman of the Legislative Commission on Policy and Fiscal Planning. Pogemiller felt the Pawlenty administration was stonewalling the commission, which provides fiscal analysis to the Legislature. Hanson, seated across from him, was furnishing the atoning pound of flesh.

“Your choice is going to be either to offer us something or come up here and have people drag it out of you,” Pogemiller growled during a typical session on April 19, 2009. Hanson replied with customary patience. “Mr. Chairman and members: I think we will have solutions. The first step, and an easy step, would be to carry forward the governor’s allotments to 2013...” And so on.

“All the lobbyists laughed,” says Charlie Weaver, Pawlenty’s former chief of staff who was once Hanson’s direct supervisor. “Pogemiller would pound the crap out of him in those hearings, and Tom would sit over there, smile and say, ‘Thank you, Senator.’”

“You have to have a little bit of a

Hanson Lobbyist clients include Mayo Clinic, Amazon.com, Walker Art Center

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sense of humor about all of this,” Hanson says. “I never took any of it personally. And I learned that long ago.”

A stocky, bald, easygoing fellow with a twisting grin, Hanson, 48, comes across as someone who does not rattle easily. Approachability has served him well in a long career in and around the Capitol, observers say. But what has really made him a valuable cog in the Capitol machinery, they say, is Hanson’s sense of personal integrity.

“Tom was always honest and would always let us know what he thought,” says Sen. Richard Cohen, a liberal St. Paul Democrat and past chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. Cohen rarely agreed with Hanson’s positions. “But at the end of the day, we were able to work things out — not to either’s satisfaction,” Cohen says. “He was knowledgeable, honest and very straightforward to work with.”

Steve Sviggum, who hired Hanson to head up his legislative outreach when Sviggum was House speaker in the late 1990s, is far more effusive. “Tom — by his nature, by his personality — is such an open, trustworthy and loyal guy that he simply is not capable of misleading someone,” Sviggum says. “It is not in his genes.”

A keen strategist

Hanson grew up in Mahnomen, the scion of stalwart, old-school Republicans. His father, James, was chief operating officer at the local bank that was owned by his uncle. The young Tom Hanson never seriously considered following his father into the family business because his cousins effectively were heirs to that throne. “My dad

encouraged me and my brother and sister to go off and do something else,” Hanson says.

So he did politics. He remembers giving a speech supporting GOP presidential candidate George H.W. Bush — and against Ronald Reagan — as a high school junior in 1980. While studying political science at Concordia College, Hanson was active in the College Republicans.

Hanson’s first job after graduation was as press secretary for GOP U.S. Rep. Arlan Stangeland. He lost that job when DFLer Collin Peterson unseated Stangeland. So he turned to law, studying for his J.D. at George Mason University in Virginia.

While in school, he clerked for a family law practice and a trade association. But his political associations made it almost inevitable that he would wind up back in government. When his wife, Kris, took a job in Minnesota in 1992 helping create Sen. David Durenberger’s legislative and health care reforms, the couple returned to Minnesota. Hanson earned his last few law school credits at William Mitchell College of Law.

In 1994, he was hired as a full-time human services researcher with the Minnesota House GOP caucus. Before long he was promoted to head up the caucus’ media and constituent services. When Republicans won a House majority in 1998 and Sviggum was named House speaker, Hanson was hired as Sviggum’s legislative director.

Sviggum says Hanson proved a keen strategist.

“He was important on the floor when it came to the moving of legislation, meaning the timing and the preparation of negotiations with the Senate or the

governor’s office,” Sviggum says. “Tom was a very vital part of that strategy setting, probably with only one or two other people and myself.”

“I worship the guy,” Hanson says of his former boss, who he calls the “ultimate barroom brawler” on the House floor. “He was a really tough, outspoken minority leader,” Hanson says. “As speaker, he was not afraid to make decisions and take the caucus where he thought it should go.” Hanson worked four years for Sviggum.

Running the table

In 2002, Pawlenty was elected governor and hired away Sviggum’s protégé. Not yet 40, Hanson became a key player in Pawlenty’s administration, first as legislative affairs director, then as deputy chief of staff, finally as MMB commissioner.

Weaver says that Hanson’s impact was felt immediately. “In that first term, the most important thing for this governor was to have a clear legislative agenda that he could pass. Tom really led that effort.”

Weaver also says that Hanson helped Pawlenty run the table legislatively in 2003, despite Democratic control of the Senate. “We got almost everything,” Weaver says. “It ranged from pro-life language that passed. Gun stuff was big, we passed that. There were a lot of fiscal and social issues that had been kind of pent up for a number of years. Most important, we solved the budget deficit without a tax increase.”

Hanson’s deft outreach to Senate Democrats, including Majority Leader John Hottinger, were key to Pawlenty’s success, Weaver says. “Tom was widely respected by

The Hanson File

Name: Tom Hanson

Age: 48

Job: Lobbyist for law firm Winthrop and Weinstein; former MMB commissioner

Grew up in: Mahnomen, Minn.

Lives in: Maple Grove

Education: Mahnomen High School; B.A., history, Concordia College; J.D., George Mason School of Law

Family: Wife of 22 years, Kris, a homemaker. One son, Sam.

Hobbies: Family, friends, following the Vikings, Gophers and Twins. History buff. “I just finished the Oxford History of the United States, a series of books, the best of which is Daniel Walker Howe’s ‘What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848.’”

Hanson

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Democrats. That was important,” he says. “You needed someone there who was viewed with integrity.”

Hanson recalls the Pawlenty years warmly. The governor, though personally more reserved than Sviggum, was even more effective, Hanson says.

“He can strategize and think multiple moves ahead. He masks his emotions, where Sviggum wears them on his sleeve. But neither of them takes things personally in the legislative process,” Hanson says. “Pawlenty was and is still the smartest guy in the room.”

After Pawlenty won a second term in 2006, Hanson wanted a change. “He and I sat down, and I said, ‘I don’t know if I can spend another four years doing the same thing,’” Hanson recalls. “He said, ‘Well, why don’t you be a commissioner?’”

He served four years as MMB’s chief, advocating for Pawlenty’s fiscal positions. When he stepped down from the job at the end of 2010, Pawlenty credited Hanson with helping Minnesota retain its AAA bond rating in two of the three major rating agencies. Hanson had helped merge the Departments of Finance and Employee Relations, creating MMB. And he helped spur efforts to replace the state’s outmoded accounting and procurement IT system, Pawlenty said at the time.

But things were not always friction-free. Hanson inadvertently crossed wires with Pawlenty’s deputy Chief of Staff Brian McClung in 2010 when Hanson stated in the press that nearly a

third of Pawlenty’s proposed budget fix was reliant on \$387 million in federal stimulus money.

In the same Star Tribune article, McClung said the money wasn’t “stimulus money” at all but was carved out of a separate pot within a larger stimulus bill. The crossed-up messaging was embarrassing to Pawlenty, who was preparing to run for president as a sharp federal stimulus spending critic.

“Brian called and said, ‘You and I should not be debating in the paper,’” Hanson recalls. “I laughed and said that

“You have to have a little bit of a sense of humor about all of this.”

—Tom Hanson

I’m sure [Pawlenty] disliked what I said even more.’ Brian said, ‘Yes.’”

Hanson stopped publicly discussing the subject. “From that point on, I usually referred it to somebody down in the agency,” he says. “I never did again. So I was careful.”

The advocate

Shortly before Pawlenty stepped down as governor after the election of Mark Dayton, Hanson announced he had accepted a new job as a full-time lobbyist for Minneapolis law firm Winthrop and Weinstine.

Not surprisingly, the firm is happy to have a former finance commissioner

lobbying for its clients. “The last two years, the tax and budget issues before the Legislature have been extremely important,” says John Knapp, chair of the firm’s legislative and regulatory practice group. “So it has been extremely valuable to us and to our clients to get somebody with his background in the state budget.”

Hanson has reeled in several new clients since taking the job, Knapp says, including the Associations of Minnesota Public Education Radio Stations, UCare MN and the Walker

Art Center. Hanson clients also include Amazon.com, the Mayo Clinic, Hewlett-Packard Co. and a half dozen others.

Hanson says his new job is not really so different from his previous work, whether in the House, in Pawlenty’s office or at MMB. He has, he says,

always been someone’s advocate.

He loves the lobbying life, he says. “There is a people side. There is kind of the statutory side, the process side and the helping side. And you mix that all together. How do you lay a foundation from idea to completion to get what you want, in the way you want it? Who do you talk to? When do you talk to them, how do you talk to them? How many times do you talk to them?”

Hanson says, “It’s a Rubik’s Cube.”

For anyone who wonders where his career arc will take him next, Hanson has a ready answer: nowhere. “I’m going to die with my boots on here,” he says.