



Minnesota Speaker Kurt Daudt

Continuing a quick rise to leadership, Daudt takes on top post; goals include tackling achievement gap, attracting high-wage jobs

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

When Kurt Daudt arrived in St. Paul as a freshman legislator, so many things seemed totally new.

But many things seemed familiar, too. He'd already spent more than a decade serving in local government in his district, about an hour north of the Twin Cities. He says that experience was a big factor in his election as assistant majority leader — in his first term.

And Daudt soon received another promotion, this time to minority leader in just his second term, the first Minnesota lawmaker to do so in more than 100 years. But he didn't stop there: Daudt is now speaker of the Minnesota House, after Republicans won majority of the chamber in November. At age 41, he's the first speaker since the 1930s to assume the role of speaker in his third term.

Daudt says that some of his colleagues were likely surprised by his quick rise to leadership, especially given his young age. (In fact, one of Daudt's fellow lawmakers had been his teacher in high school.)

But he works to make sure his age and relatively short tenure aren't an obstacle to doing his job well.

"I joke with people that one of the bad things [about being speaker this quickly] is that I don't have the institutional knowledge of the legislature; but the good side is that I don't have the institutional knowledge of this place," he says. "I am not bound by history or stuck on having to do something because we have always done it that way."

Throughout his career in public service, Daudt says he's relied on the work ethic that he developed growing up on a family sheep farm. After attending the University of North Dakota in hopes of becoming an airline pilot, Daudt returned home to take over his grandparents' farm.

Daudt has drawn, too, upon on his experience as a local elected official at the township and county levels, where he dealt with everything from rural roads to administering human-services programs.

"When I came into state government, I quickly remembered that sensation that you can't know everything about everything," he says. "You have to learn really quickly who you can trust and who you can't, and how to process information in a way you can make a decision about it."

In his first term, Daudt's interests drew him to welfare reform. He sponsored a bill to prevent electronic benefit cards from being used at casinos or to purchase alcohol or tobacco. In the beginning, Daudt says, the bill was quite controversial; but he is proud of the bipartisan compromise that was reached.

As speaker, Daudt will miss having committee assignments that offer him the chance to work on specific policy issues — but he does look forward to tackling a number of "big picture" issues as leader of his chamber. Last month, CSG Midwest interviewed Daudt about his goals and priorities for this session. Here are some excerpts from the interview.

Q: You've said that as speaker, you hope to shift how your chamber looks at policymaking. What is your approach?

Bio-sketch: Speaker Daudt

- ✓ elected to Minnesota House in 2010
- ✓ previously served 12 years in township and county governments
- ✓ served as minority leader last biennium; first lawmaker in more than 100 years to hold position during only second term in office
- ✓ first third-term legislator to serve as speaker since 1930s
- ✓ represents district where he was raised (about an hour north of Twin Cities)

A: It has long been a frustration of mine how the legislative process works. ... Legislators show up on the first week of session and they introduce solutions in bill format, then they spend five months trying to convince you that's the solution to the problem. But no one really starts with the problem organically (what causes the problem? how did we get here?) then looks at all the possible solutions to decide the best way to navigate out of that problem.

Often, we become reactive instead of proactive; we respond to what special interest groups think we should do instead of doing what's right for Minnesotans. ... I want to try and encourage and inspire people to circle themselves around the problems Minnesotans care about and try to find the best way to solve them.

Q: You're now the leader not just of your caucus but of the entire chamber. How will you approach your new job description?

A: As long as we all focus on solving problems, I think that takes the pressure and intensity off whether that Republican is right and that Democrat is wrong or vice versa. I hope we can come to the table together to solve those problems really honestly. It's not easy to do because there is so much pressure from outside groups, and they donate a lot of money to campaigns, which makes it particularly difficult.

I am not going to have all of the answers. I am someone who is very collaborative. I want to get all of the smartest people in the room, regardless of what party or geographic area they're from, or whether they are a man or a woman. I don't care about any of that. I want the people who are passionate about these issues working on them.

We all make immense sacrifices to do what we do: low pay, long hours and time away from home ... time away from your job and making less money because you're doing this. I want to make sure this is worth it for people. It's worth it when you feel you are making a difference and working on things you really care about. ...

I know I'm a little optimistic in my hope to change

how the legislature functions, but you know what? If you don't try you're certainly not going to be successful.

Q: Addressing Minnesota's achievement gap is one of your top priorities. Can you talk about why you're so passionate about the issue?

A: We have a great education system and great educators and schools, but for some reason we have the highest, or the second highest (it varies from year to year) achievement gap in the country. What that means is that our lower-income and minority students are not getting the same education as our white and middle- and higher-income students are getting. To me, that is absolutely a disgrace.

I have become pretty passionate about this issue and it's one that I want to tackle over the next two years. The key is finding really good bipartisan solutions, and that is one of the great things about this issue. It has to be bipartisan because number one, we have divided government in Minnesota right now. Number two, the problem is biggest in Democratic districts — primarily the Minneapolis and St. Paul areas — so we really need to have buy-in from those members.

Q: In November, Minnesota Management and Budget forecast that the state will have a \$1 billion surplus next year. How does that affect your plans for the coming session?

A: It is good news, but there are mixed messages in that news. ... About three-quarters comes from expenditures being lower than expected; only about a quarter comes from revenues being higher than expected.

And for the first time in 10 forecasts, or five years, they downgraded the revenues for the next biennium — by about \$400 million. We hope that that's not a downturn in the economy, because we've had very steady economic growth coming out of the recession. Gas prices have plummeted even more since that November forecast, and we think that will have a very good stimulating effect on the economy, as well as leaving more money in family budgets to spend, resulting in higher sales-tax revenue.

Q: How will you measure 'success' in the coming biennium?

A: My hope is that we can get a good budget passed and work to help the economy grow. ... But I look at things beyond a two-year cycle [even though] our default is to look at things in two years. We owe it to ourselves and to Minnesotans to think longer term: where do we want to be 20 years from now, and does this [policy] help us move in that direction?

I know it's hard to do that in a state where the majority in the House has flipped back and forth [in each of the past four] election cycles. You tend to see things go different directions every two years, and I hope to get away from that by encouraging folks to bring forward solutions that can get broad bipartisan support. ✦