



FILE PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

Big plans, short session

Vikings, bonding, government reform top the agenda in 2012

By NICK BUSSE

Lawmakers kicked off a legislative session Jan. 24 that features some lofty goals: a new stadium for the Minnesota Vikings, a capital investment bill, sweeping government reforms and thousands of new jobs for Minnesotans.

But with legislative leaders pledging an early adjournment, time is short. The partisan differences that turned last year's session into a bitter struggle are still firmly in place, and even where there is consensus on issues, lawmakers disagree on solutions.

In short, all bets are off in 2012.

House Speaker Kurt Zellers (R-Maple Grove) says the House has only budgeted for

a very short session, and he sees no reason for legislators to stay in St. Paul past April 30.

"It's not just a matter of fiscal prudence," Zellers said. "If there isn't work to be done down here, we don't need to waste the taxpayers' time."

Unlike last year's budget crisis, the top items on this year's agenda, strictly speaking,

aren't required to be addressed by the Legislature. And with the redrawing of legislative districts throwing the fall elections for a loop, many would prefer to get out of St. Paul as quickly as possible.

Still, leaders are hoping for a productive next few months. House Minority Leader Paul Thissen (DFL-Mpls) says the state's projected \$876 million budget surplus — its first surplus in nearly five years — might help lawmakers to focus on building consensus this year instead of tearing down each other's ideas.

"I think the fact that, at least for right now, this year ... we're not going to have to cut any more to balance the budget will make things easier," Thissen said.

Zellers, too, thinks that a repeat of last year's drawn-out partisan gridlock is unlikely.

"I would say to the taxpayers, the voters of Minnesota that are concerned about that, we're going to do our darndest not to have that happen again this year," Zellers said.

First Reading continued on page 4

Competing jobs agendas

If there is an overarching theme emerging for this session, it's jobs.

Both Zellers and Thissen say their respective caucuses' No. 1 priority is to help the state's approximately 175,000 unemployed workers find employment. And both have expressed a willingness to work

investment package as part of last summer's budget agreement, and many Republicans don't think a second bill is necessary.

"We think that the need has to define the size of the bonding bill," he said, indicating that his caucus might support a smaller proposal.

It's not just the size of the DFL bonding plan that bothers Republicans; Zellers said they view public works projects as merely a stopgap measure for employment. Long-term growth, Republicans believe, comes from private investment.

"Those workers undeniably go to work," Zellers said. "But what we maintain in our caucus, and I personally believe, that if you want long-term, sustainable growth, you do it in the private sector, not the public sector."

The Republicans' version of a jobs plan is focused on improving the state's business climate. On Jan. 19, Republican leaders formally announced their "Reform 2.0" agenda — an expansion of their government reform initiatives from last year. Its goal is to reduce the impact of government on Minnesotans, streamline burdensome regulations and generally make the state a more attractive place for businesses.

"If you free up the entrepreneurs, the hard-working women and men of our great state, they'll build an economy that is sustainable, and we'll lead the recovery instead of waiting for it to come here," Zellers said.

"Reform 2.0" includes dozens of individual proposals, many of them hatched during face-to-face meetings with business owners. Zellers said he's hoping that at least some of those ideas are well received by the governor and the DFLers.

"We are going to work with the governor; we've proven we can work with him on a

number of reform initiatives," Zellers said.

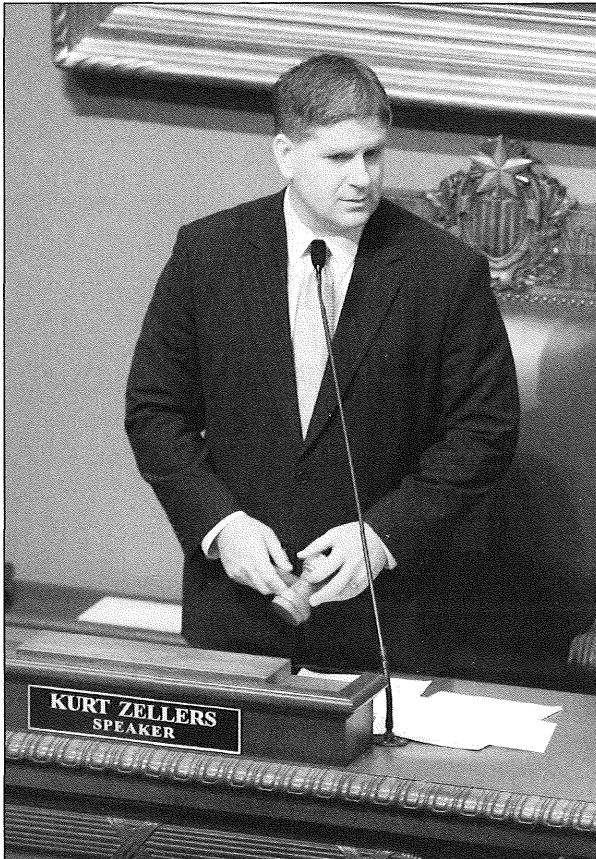
Thissen says DFLers can support reform bills as long as they're not thinly veiled attempts to cut valuable programs and services.

"I think you'll see Democrats embracing good ideas about how to make government work better — as long as it's about that," he said.

A year for compromise?

The other big issue hanging over lawmakers this year, according to proponents, is also a potential job creator: funding for a new Vikings stadium.

Dayton is an adamant supporter of a new stadium, arguing it will employ thousands of construction workers, and both Zellers and Thissen say they think a plan to build a new stadium should come up for a vote on the



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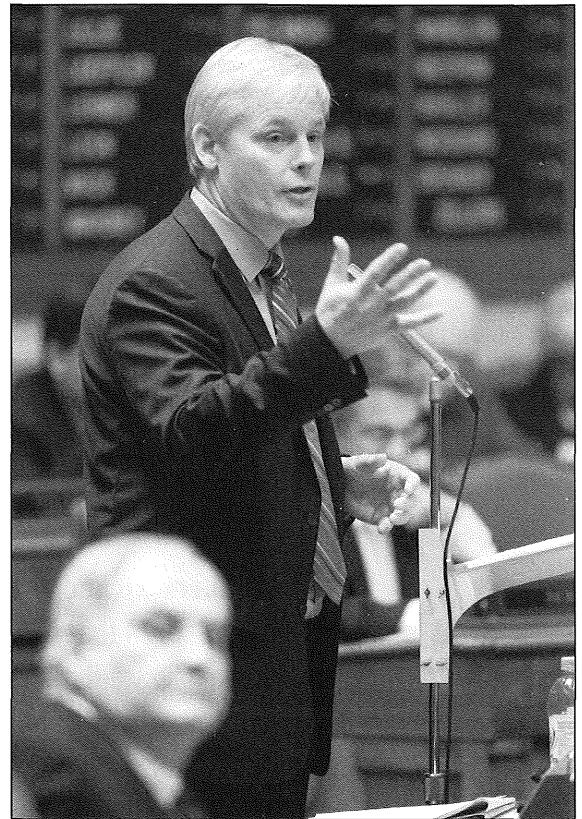
— Speaker Kurt Zellers

across party lines.

On Jan. 11, Gov. Mark Dayton and DFL legislative leaders unveiled their jobs plan, which includes a \$775 million capital investment bill, a "new jobs tax credit" to help companies hire unemployed workers and veterans, a sales tax on Internet purchases and incentives for workers to retrain.

"What we came up with, I think, is a very modest but very targeted package aimed at getting people back to work," Thissen said.

So far, Republicans have expressed skepticism regarding the plan — especially its large bonding component. Zellers points out that lawmakers passed a \$498 million capital



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House floor this year. Everyone agrees the clock is ticking.

The problem, right now, seems to be the absence of a clear proposal for lawmakers to even consider.

“This has to be a good deal on location, it has to be a really good deal on financing ... it also has to be good infrastructure,” Zellers said. “Nothing precludes it from happening, but I think a lot of those things need to gel together really quickly.”

Thissen said he’s not sure how a vote would pan out on a stadium bill. He said there will likely be some DFLers who would support it and others who reject it.

“Whether it goes up or down, I don’t have the answer to that right now. But it’s something that people are clearly interested in. There are good arguments on both sides of the issue,” Thissen said.

Issues like the Vikings stadium, bonding and certain government reform initiatives might find some bipartisan support this year, but the goodwill between the two parties could be fragile.

One issue likely to divide the House along party lines this year is legislation regarding a proposed constitutional amendment requiring voters to show a photo identification. Last year, a bill to require photo ID passed the House and Senate largely along party lines, only to be vetoed by Dayton. A bill for a constitutional amendment would allow Republicans to circumvent the governor and put the issue directly to the voters.

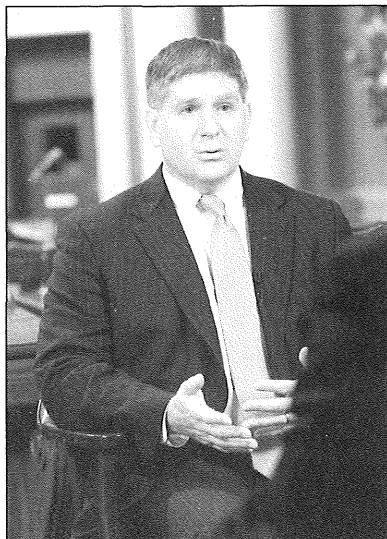
The issue is deeply unpopular with DFLers, but Zellers said it’s been thoroughly vetted and is overwhelmingly supported by Minnesotans.

“That’s something that the voters should really decide,” Zellers said.

Other potential constitutional amendments include a proposal that tax increases be approved by a supermajority of lawmakers and that membership in unions become voluntary. Zellers did not comment on those proposals, but Thissen said he thinks any push for constitutional amendments is a bad idea.

“None of these constitutional amendments that have been proposed are going to put anybody back to work. None of them are going to improve our economy in any way, so it doesn’t make any sense from my perspective to spend any time on them at all,” Thissen said.

Zellers and Thissen preview the 2012 session



House Speaker Kurt Zellers



House Minority Leader Paul Thissen

On creating jobs:

Zellers: “If you free up the entrepreneurs, the hard-working women and men of our great state, they’ll build an economy that is sustainable, and we’ll lead the recovery instead of waiting for it to come here. Passing a bonding bill is kind of like a stop-gap to wait until the rest of the economy picks up.”

Thissen: “One of the things we hear everybody talking about is this focus on jobs. You know, last year there was that same kind of mantra and we got a little off track. We passed constitutional amendments and other stuff that didn’t really focus in on our economy. This year... I hope we do stick to that laser focus on jobs.”

On a new Vikings stadium:

Zellers: “It has to be a good deal for taxpayers all-around. And if that comes to fruition this session — you know, nothing precludes it from happening, but I think a lot of those things need to gel together and really quickly, early in session so that we can get through the details of it.”

Thissen: “There’s going to be Democrats who support a stadium, there’s going to be Democrats who oppose a stadium. It’s going to be something that we need to give a full and robust debate to, and I think we probably should ultimately move it to a vote.”

On a bonding bill:

Zellers: “Zero is probably not enough and \$1 billion is way too much... We think that need has to define the size of the bonding bill.”

Thissen: “What we want to do is give incentives, to work with those particularly troubling areas of our economic and employment situation... The bonding bill is part of that.”

On constitutional amendments:

Zellers: “I think photo ID — we’ve vetted that fairly thoroughly through I can’t even remember how many committees That’s something that the voters should really decide, and it has vast, vast support among Minnesotans.”

Thissen: “None of these constitutional amendments that have been proposed are going to put anybody back to work, none of them are going to improve our economy in any way, so it doesn’t make any sense from my perspective to spend any time on them at all.”

On a government reform:

Zellers: “A lot of it is going to be reform for the sake of reform this year — maybe not reform for the sake of having a \$5 billion budget hole to fill How can we actually get more dollars to people who need it, to the programs that need it, to the roads that need it, vs. just putting it into the bureaucracy?”

Thissen: “I think you’ll see Democrats embracing good ideas about how to make government work better — as long as it’s about that, as long as it’s about making sure we’re delivering services as effectively and efficiently to the people of Minnesota as possible.”

On compromise vs. principles:

Zellers: “If the governor doesn’t agree with us and vetoes the bills, I’ll do my darndest and try to be a good salesman and help him see the benefit in it. But at the end of the day, if he doesn’t choose to sign those bills, that’s OK too. We’ll keep asking. If you don’t ask, you don’t get.”

Thissen: “You can do both things; you can stand up for your principles but also reach solutions that work for Minnesotans — as long as your principles are about what’s good for your constituents and for Minnesota.”

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