

GROUP WORK

In the Legislature, committees are where the action is

Region heavy on transport, ag panels

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South-central Minnesota will be well-represented in the 2011 legislative session when budget cuts and policy changes are being made in transportation and agriculture — less so when it comes to the environment, state agencies and taxes.

Committee assignments are now in place for both the House and Senate, and the region has representation in most jurisdictions.

That matters when legislation is being debated and budget bills are being finalized, said Sen. Kathy Sheran, DFL-Mankato.

“People are negotiating what comes, what stays, what goes,” Sheran said.

“It’s better to be there than to be out in the hallway.”

For Sheran, the most important negotiations she wanted to be involved in were in health and human services and higher education.

“Because of my health care background and because of the regional health care facilities in our area, that was really an important one that I wanted to be on,” the registered nurse said of the Health and Human Services Committee.

Because health care spending represents one of the largest and fastest growing parts of the state budget, the committee will be a focal point in the effort to erase a \$6.2 billion state budget shortfall. Being on the committee means Sheran will have a chance to

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COMMITTEES: Sheran, Morrow on higher ed panels

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be on the House-Senate conference committee that will negotiate a final HHS budget bill with Gov. Mark Dayton.

“I want to be at that table,” Sheran said.

Sheran will be joined by Sen. Julie Rosen, a Fairmont Republican whose district includes all of rural Blue Earth County, on the HHS committee. Rep. Rod Hamilton, R-Mountain Lake, is on the House HHS budget committee.

Sheran is the only regional lawmaker on the Senate Higher Education Committee, and that was also a key panel for Sheran — considering the five colleges and universities in her Senate district. Two of those — Gustavus Adolphus College and South Central College — are also in the House District of Rep. Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Peter, who is the only area lawmaker on the House higher ed committee.

Morrow is also the only area lawmaker on the House Transportation Committee, but the region will have three in the Senate

Transportation Committee — Sheran, Republican Sen.

Mike Parry of Waseca, and newly- elected Republican Sen. Al DeKruif of Elysian.

Heavily agricultural south- central Minnesota has strong numbers on agriculture committees, as well, including Hamilton's role as chairman of the House ag panel. Hamilton will preside over a committee that includes Morrow; Rep. Paul Torkelson, R-St. James; and Rep. Kory Kath, an Owatonna teacher whose district includes Waseca.

When it comes to bonding projects, Rosen and a fellow Fairmont Republican — Rep. Bob Gunther — are the only area lawmakers on the Senate and House capital investment committees.

That will matter more in 2012 when a large bonding bill is expected to finance construction projects across the state, including likely requests from Minnesota State University, the City of Mankato and other area institutions.

Area cities will also be keeping a close eye on tax committees, where debates will be held about how much to cut Local Government Aid — a major revenue source for most municipalities in outstate Minnesota. Rosen is the only south- central Minnesota lawmaker on either tax committee.

Sen. Gary Dahms, R-Redwood Falls, will be the sole lawmaker from the region on panels dealing with funding for the environment. Dahms replaces retiring Sen. Dennis Frederickson, a New Ulm Republican who was one of the leading environmentalists in the Senate.

The House and Senate panels overseeing a variety of state agency budgets is without south- central Minnesota representatives, although Parry heads a panel assigned to look at state government reforms.

For K-12 schools, DeKruif and Rep. Kathy Brynaert, DFL-Mankato, will be the area representatives on the panels constructing education budgets.

Having a familiar face on key committees is important, said Rep. Tony Cornish, a Good Thunder Republican who will be chairman of the House Public Safety and Crime Prevention Committee.

"It's a huge difference if you have the ear of one of the committee members," Cornish said. "... It's tougher if you don't have a member on the committee from the area."

And while media attention often focuses on floor debates before the full House or Senate prior to final passage of bills, most of the real decision-making is done in smaller rooms earlier in the session.

"All of the work is done in the committees," Cornish said. " What happens on the floor is theatrics."