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House 2B: Sailer looks forward to third term

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State Rep. Brita Sailer, fresh off re-election to a third term, now wants to translate what she heard on the campaign trail into public policy that helps people.

“I hope we’ll come out of this with a sense of purpose,” Sailer, DFL-Park Rapids, said late Wednesday night from her State Capitol office. “We just want to put bygones behind us and move ahead. We really have some opportunities here to move our state forward and start addressing some big challenges.”

In final, unofficial returns from Tuesday’s election, Sailer kept her House 2B seat for a third term with 54.1 percent of the vote while former state Rep. Doug Lindgren, R-Bagley, ended with 45.8 percent of the vote. Sailer polled 10,773 votes while Lindgren got 9,117 votes.

It was the third time Sailer beat Lindgren for the 2B post. The Democrat ousted Lindgren from the post in 2004, and then reaffirmed that action by winning a second term in 2006, when Sailer posted 53 percent to Lindgren’s 45 percent with about 3,000 fewer votes cast than this year.

Solving the economy is on top of voters’ minds, Sailer said, but solving our energy needs “is also a big piece.”

“Because of everything that has happened nationally, the economy is the first thing that I think all of us are going to be looking at,” Sailer said. “Certainly, the dynamics have changed with a new president. I’m really looking forward to a different relationship with Washington.”

Lindgren, who ran a campaign of fiscal responsibility, that state spending is out of line, says he can’t understand why people in this economy would vote for Democrats who urge more state spending.

“The money’s there — it’s just spend, spend, spend,” Lindgren said in a telephone interview Thursday evening. “I don’t know. ... That just floors me. I cannot understand that and I cannot understand that the amendment went through.”

He spoke of the constitutional amendment which voters approved Tuesday that will increase the state’s sales tax three-eighths of 1 percent for clean water, wildlife habitat and arts programs in a dedicated fund.

“What is Minnesota looking at?” the Republican asks. “They just don’t care about taxes. I think that’s really my problem that I’m in a state where people don’t care about paying taxes. They’ll pay until they bleed, and they just don’t care.”

Lindgren also spoke about an anomaly unique to House 2B — the vote on the Red Lake Reservation, a sovereign American Indian nation and one of only two closed reservations in the country. The reservations votes solidly Democratic.

Sailer took 95.8 percent of the vote on the reservation to Lindgren’s 4.2 percent — 2,114 votes to 92. In fact, Sailer was the highest vote-getter among Democrats — presidential candidate Barack Obama got 2,082 votes and U.S. Senate candidate Al Franken got 1,983 votes.

And Lindgren ranked third among Republicans, behind U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman’s 146 votes and presidential candidate John McCain’s 123 votes on the reservation.

“Saddam Hussein got the same kind of percentages in Iraq,” Lindgren said. “When you’re pulling 96, 97 percent there’s something wrong on the voting. The biggest thing is that there is no oversight where the money goes.”

A campaign issue arose where Lindgren questioned oversight on millions of dollars the Red Lake School District receives in

capital bonding from the state, claiming there is none. School officials, however, refute that, saying the state Education Department maintains strict oversight over school building projects that use state money as they would with non-reservation schools.

“I have no problems with Red Lake voting — I think that they have a right. But the problem is that the money that goes up to the school, there is no oversight once it goes on the reservation,” Lindgren said.

“All I’m saying is if you’re going to be getting money from the state, the state should have the right to know where the money goes,” he said.

School officials, again, say they have the same reporting requirements as do all Minnesota school districts in accounting for state funds.

Sailer recognizes the Red Lake tilt, but says she believes her votes were more balanced off the reservation this election. “One would expect that would happen, now that you’ve been around longer and more people have had a chance to get to know you as a legislator and have a record.”

Still, if Red Lake’s votes were discounted, Lindgren would have won the 2B race 9,025 votes to 8,659.

“Actually, the part about the whole campaign that is so pleasurable is going out and meeting people,” Sailer said. “Granted, it takes a lot of time, but I really do enjoy visiting with people. It’s twofold; it is an enjoyable thing but also so very, very helpful.”

The House Democrats gained two seats but fell three short having a supermajority — enough votes to override Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty’s vetoes.

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Sailer said, adding that she also doesn’t believe that Democrats would have ridden “roughshod” had they gained the supermajority.

Health care, energy and schools will top the agenda next session, after work on the next two-year budget, she said.

Sailer has specialized in energy measures, and says she’s looking forward to work on that next session. “To see that we’re actually taking our energy outlook seriously and we are going to be making some actual positive strides forward” pleases her, she said.

Lindgren, while saying it’s too soon to decide, said he may try again a fourth time in 2010.

“When the people of the district vote me out, I will stop,” he said. “The people from Red Lake keep saying that they want to be a sovereign nation ... and they don’t want to be a part of Minnesota, and they don’t allow us any oversight of what’s going on, they’re saying they’re not a part of Minnesota, not a part of this district.

“Well, I guess I’m going to have to think on it,” Lindgren said. “I love politics, I really do. ... If people want me to run, I’ll run.”