

The two Jons square off for Benson seat nod

By: Nancy Crotti January 22, 2014 0



Jon Applebaum, left, and Jon Tollefson are both seeking the DFL endorsement to run for the 44B state House seat now held by retiring DFLer John Benson. (Staff photos: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

Young DFLers Tollefson and Applebaum vie for House 44B endorsement

When DFL State Rep. John Benson announced in December that he would not seek a fifth term representing District 44B — a suburban legislative tract comprising northern Minnetonka, southern Plymouth and Woodland — two young men who'd been itching to run for office got their chance.

DFLers Jon Applebaum and Jon Tollefson, 28 and 29 respectively, attended Hopkins High School, graduating one year apart. Both live in Minnetonka now. No Republicans have yet filed in the district, which profiles as the more DFL-friendly half of the moderate-to-conservative lakes-area Senate district represented by DFL Sen. Terri Bonoff.

Applebaum received an undergraduate degree in political science from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., in

2007 and went on to law school at the University of Minnesota. He worked at the Minneapolis law firm Winthrop & Weinstine in real estate, general corporate law and litigation for two years before leaving in 2012 to found real estate consulting firm JYA Ventures, LLC, in Minnetonka and St. Paul.

Applebaum said he is consulting with Arcadia Management, a multi-family property management company, on a mixed-use development in St. Paul. He is of counsel to the law firm Tarshish Cody in St. Louis Park and co-owner of Agra Culture, a salad, juice and coffee restaurant that is slated to open locations in the Walkway apartment building in Minneapolis' Uptown neighborhood and in the 50th and France area of Edina.

Applebaum hails from a family of entrepreneurs. His grandfather, Sid Applebaum, was chair of Applebaum's supermarkets, later to become Rainbow Foods. His family now owns Sid's Discount Liquors and Big Top Liquors. Jon Applebaum's mother, Robin Johnson, opened Sweet Retreat Cupcake Boutique at 50th & France in Edina in 2010. Her family founded Johnson Brothers Liquor Co. in St. Paul.

Tollefson, who holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in international affairs from George Washington University, worked as a Foreign Service officer for five years in Africa, Washington, D.C. and Mexico. For the past year, he's worked for the Minnesota High Tech Association, as manager of community relations and entrepreneurship.

Tollefson said he was always attracted to diplomacy and representing the United States abroad, but that the frequency of moves and distance from home made him want to come home.

"Every time I came back to Minnesota, it was such a draw and it was so hard to be here knowing that I was leaving again so soon," he said of his stint in the Foreign Service. "When I was at the end of my tour in Mexico City, I decided, 'This is it. I'm going to do it.'"

Similar stances

The candidates hold similar positions on campaign issues. Tollefson, who said he has raised about \$20,000 for his campaign, ranks education, transportation, and economic development in the science-technology sector as his top three priorities.

He advocates more investment in schools, particularly in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Tollefson said he wants more teachers in the classroom and more attention to school districts with the greatest achievement gap between African American and white students to make sure all have adequate access to "everything from AP classes to vocational training," he said. "We owe that to every student to make sure that they have equal opportunity."

Tollefson backs construction of the \$1.25 billion Southwest Light Rail Transit line and wants rail transit to connect the entire state as well as other cities, such as Chicago, to the Twin Cities.

"It looks like a big number, but the longer we wait, the longer we don't get those returns on the investment, which are far greater than the actual investment," Tollefson said. "When you invest in light rail, that's a permanent investment and real estate developers see that."

He believes STEM can help the Twin Cities, which has a strong medical technology industry, rank alongside Silicon Valley.

"We've historically had a good base in defense technology and robotics, in education technology and in agricultural technology and advanced manufacturing," he said. "That helps us as a major source not only for business development in these areas but for growth."

Applebaum, who declined to release fundraising figures, also counts education as his top issue. He emphasized the importance of investing in early childhood education to prepare all children for kindergarten and close the achievement gap. He supported last session's push for \$150 million in scholarships for at-risk three- and four-year-old children to attend high-quality early care and education programs. The Legislature approved \$46 million for scholarships of up to \$5,000 per child in the current biennium.

"I think it's the most important key in unlocking future opportunity," Applebaum said.

His number two issue is jobs, based on his family's business experience.

"I fully understand the struggles and hard work that it takes to make a business successful and really want to ensure that Minnesota companies are put in the best position to succeed and expand, hire more workers and increase our tax base," Applebaum said. "This means incentivizing small business owners and entrepreneurs to come to Minnesota and start their companies here and be a part of our great state."

He also backs finding a "fiscally responsible" solution to funding SWLRT, which would require federal, state and local money to be built as planned. The line would run 15.8 miles between Eden Prairie and downtown Minneapolis.

"I think it's very important to remain competitive with the rest of the country for Minnesota to have a state-of-the-art transportation system and infrastructure in place," Applebaum said. "I want to get it to work in a way that's most beneficial to everyone."

Extensive backing

Each candidate counts some heavy-hitters as supporters. Applebaum has major Democratic fundraisers Sam and Sylvia Kaplan on his side, as well as Eric Dayton, son of Gov. Mark Dayton and co-owner of the Bachelor Farmer restaurant in Minneapolis. Attorney and government relations specialist Tom Gorman of Maslon, Edelman, Borman & Brand is on board, as is Dean Phillips, chair of Talenti Gelato and former CEO of Minneapolis-based Phillips Distilling Company, a family business since 1912.

Applebaum and Dayton served together on the board of the LEAD Project, which focuses on engaging young professionals in the nonprofit community through philanthropy, volunteer work and leadership roles.

"I'm supporting Jon because he's a good friend and because I think he would make a great state representative," Dayton wrote in an email. "He's running for the right reason, which is a genuine desire to serve his community and his state. He grew up in the district and knows it well. And, as a business owner, I like that Jon would bring a background in business to the role."

Phillips, Applebaum's second cousin and 16 years his senior, recalled many childhood conversations about issues and politics that went beyond Applebaum's age.

"He's an extraordinarily smart, passionate and dedicated young man," Phillips said. "He has a great passion for looking at problems and identifying appropriate solutions, and in a very fundamental way, that's what representation is all about."

DFL state Sen. Scott Dibble of Minneapolis is co-chairing Tollefson's campaign. Former DFL State Rep. Betty Folliard and Benson's former campaign manager, Joyce Anderson, are backing him.

Folliard said she taught Tollefson the fine art of door knocking when she was campaigning for her House seat in District 44A, which covers parts of Plymouth and Minnetonka. (She served from 1997 to 2002.) Her son and stepson went to high school with Tollefson, and she followed Tollefson's State Department career.

"One of the great additions to the Minnesota Legislature would be a person with diplomacy skills," Folliard said. "I say that because there's nothing more important than having the ability to bring people together to make decisions that are best for this state, and that's what we've gotten away from."

Dibble said he admires Tollefson's work on economic development issues for the High Tech Association as well as his leadership in LGBT affairs in the State Department, which Dibble described as "pretty brave." Tollefson had a brief assignment in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, working on global LGBT issues, and served as president of the Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Association.

Tagged with: 44B BETTY FOLLIARD DEAN PHILLIPS ERIC DAYTON JOHN BENSON JON APPLEBAUM JON TOLLEFSON JOYCE ANDERSON
SAM KAPLAN SCOTT DIBBLE SYLVIA KAPLAN

RELATED ARTICLES



Transportation
spending picture
stays muddled

February 12, 2014



State House
candidates build war
chests

February 7, 2014

The Capitol Note:
MNsure enrollment
topped 68,000 before
deadline

January 6, 2014