

Mr. Smith comes to Madison



Legislation and Madison are two words that I had pledged would never be a part of my vocabulary. That of course was back in high school when learning about local and state government didn't seem very exciting. Working with the law and the enforcement thereof, was more my style. One of my "previous life" occupations happened to be using the laws written in Madison. The difference however, was that I had to enforce the laws written, not help in their creation.

Approximately 5 years ago I became involved with a group called Dog Federation of Wisconsin. It was a perfect fit as I was involved with dogs and DFWO was working to combat legislation affecting my pets at the federal/state and local levels. With all of the issues I had been seeing and experiencing myself, I could see a need to become actively involved.

Representative Jeff Smith was first elected to the Assembly in 2006. I was elected President of the DFWO in 2007 to fill the spot halfway through a term due to presidential burnout. For some reason people don't last in this position for very long. I was more than a little nervous at having to be in the spotlight in my first "elected" office. I had huge shoes to fill.

If anyone remembers "Mr. Smith goes to Washington", this Mr. Smith doesn't mirror Jimmy Stewart exactly, but there are similarities. In the Stewart version, he was appointed by the Governor to represent his state at the federal level. In our version he was elected by his district which includes Eau Claire County, Dunn County, Pepin County and Pierce County. The district is a combination of urban and rural environments. He is the owner of a window cleaning business. In the Stewart version, the similarity is that a man from a small town is thrust into the political arena. He takes that duty seriously and conscientiously. He believes in doing what is right and sound unlike those around him. Similarly to the Stewart version, Wisconsin's Mr. Smith wants to delve into the situations truthfully and carefully. He wants to know everything and how it works.

Representative Smith was re-elected to his district # 93 in November of 2008 for a second term.

Back on April 16th, 2009 I had the pleasure of meeting with Rep. Jeff Smith in person. I wasn't meeting with him for typical constituent issues as he wasn't even my legislator. This was the first time a legislator had asked for the opinion of our group members, prior to introducing a piece of legislation. The usual procedure for DFOW was to play defense to stop legislation after its introduction because the legislation was usually severely or fatally flawed. I had been asked by Rep. Smith to come and talk to him because of my involvement with DFOW. This was the first time I had been asked to come and speak with a legislator on behalf of the organization I was representing. I was a little in awe and a little worried.

We were joined in this meeting by Charlie Saxler, (Senator Krietlow's legislative aide) and Andrea Wahl (Representative Smith's aide). These two legislators are the original authors of this year's commercial breeder's legislation.

I was asked to come and talk about DFOW and our concerns over breeder regulation. I was a little worried that I would be able to cover all of the information I needed to in the short period of time that had originally been allocated. I know that legislators are very busy individuals and are very time conscious. Most of the people who know me know that I have a lot to say on the subject. It is hard to condense everything down into a small section of time. I'm always afraid I will leave out important points which need to be said to convey the appropriate message.

I had arrived with Gary Goyke, DFOW's lobbyist, for this very important meeting. Entering the outer office of Representative Smith's office was like moving back a little in time. The current capitol building was finished in 1917. Even though it has the traditional and elegant architecture of times past, there were definite signs of modern and current culture in his offices right down to the goldfish on the legislative aides' desk. Ok, so maybe they are normal people and I shouldn't be too nervous.

Representative Smith met us and ushered us into his inner office, where we sat at a round conference table. I love round tables, no one is the leader or more important than anyone else. I thought it was a good choice in décor.

It was a comprehensive meeting and my mouth went dry several times. Even though it was a small intimate group of people, my nervous system never seemed to take a rest. DFOW was able to raise several issues of concern. Things that are of concern by some on the surface may have multifaceted issues. These concerns must be addressed prior to resolution of the concern that brought it all about in the first place. Concerns such as things that happen at local levels of government are part of the multifaceted issues. These types of things need resolution prior to implementing any type of broad wide-reaching legislation. It's like putting a band-aid on a compound fracture. Representative Smith understood our concerns and offered to work with DFOW on resolving some of those issues. That made me realize that he was starting to understand what we have been trying to convey all along. He indicated during our meeting that he and his wife own a hobby farm with a mixture of animal species. They own 45 chickens, 3 dogs (which included a Newfoundland), 2 llamas, 3 horses, and goats.

It was amazing how fast that time went. Before I knew it, we had exceeded our allotted time and Representative Smith hadn't tried to rush us out of his office. I hope after that one meeting he realized that there is much more that wasn't conveyed, but I think we gave him enough to digest for one day. Not more than 2 months later, we had the opportunity to give him more to absorb.

He graciously accepted an invitation to our legislative briefing held on May 13th 2009. While this was a larger function, though not quite as large as a public hearing, it was never the less a more formal type function. I wish I could emulate Representative Smith's ease at speaking in public. I was busy two weeks before hand getting my speech ready. Public speaking is either an art form or a gift, neither of which I have been blessed with, so I must work harder at it. While representing DFOW, I always try to be professional and serious. Would you respect or take someone seriously with dog slobber on their shirt?

While DFOW's concerns are serious and concerning to us, it is those concerns we must convey to those that aren't as close to the situation as we are. Perhaps we are too serious, but we will learn with time how to smooth the edges of how to massage the serious aspects with the comfortable aspects. I have been told that these things do get better with practice. I hope Representative Smith realizes that the old standard of visualizing someone in their underwear while speaking, just doesn't work for me.

I had to chuckle to myself after reviewing our video on Wisconsin-eye on how stiff I looked during our briefing. I also noticed that as I continued on, I did actually start to relax - it started around the time I had dry mouth and had trouble speaking. The chuckle which is "more like the real me" made me think "ok, now that I got that out of my system", lets get past serious and get real. The thought of taking a sip from the red drink bottle next to my hand gave me a mental visual. I thought of taking a sip and dribbling down the front of my white blouse while sitting directly in front of Representative Smith. Can you imagine what he would have thought of this serious individual then?

As Representative Smith could attest, we can disagree on many things and we can agree on others. He probably heard more than his share on that day in particular. We know that learning about a complicated and multifaceted industry is a major learning curve for an experienced legislator; we give him credit for jumping in to tackle this endeavor, having only been in the legislature for 3 years. We appreciate that he has gone out of his way to hear our side of things, good or bad. In fact, we need to thank Mr. Smith for the fact that he did not introduce a lemon law in this bill. That very fact shows that he was listening and/or understood that the lemon law was not good policy.

We all have this mental image of what and who legislators are. Believe it or not they go home to families at night the same as we do. Some of them are good at speaking and some are not. After assimilating this they aren't that much different from us, they just have a different job to do.

Joy Brand
DFOW President