



State Representative

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NEWS COLUMN

A LONGER SPECIAL SESSION COULD HAVE JEOPARDIZED FLOOD RELIEF

*By State Representative Steve Drazkowski
Special for the Red Wing Republican Eagle*

“You’ve hit the ground swimming.”

Days after being sworn into office, an emailer sent this comment after seeing me out and about in flooded areas of Wabasha and Winona counties, talking to storm victims and finding out how I could help them in the Legislature.

Swimming or walking, it was easy to find common themes among the suffering – none of them good. Homeowners and business owners lacking flood insurance because they don’t live in a flood plain. Communities draining reserve funds to help residents clean up and recover. Families traveling alternate routes because roads and streets have been washed away.

Regardless of the reason, the plea from the flood victim was always the same: “Send help now.”

On September 11, lawmakers did exactly that.

The \$157 million package that was dedicated to disaster relief during our one-day special session will provide relief to home and business owners impacted by the flood; replace and rehabilitate damaged bridges and highways; remove debris; repair and replace storm sewers and wastewater plants; and provide student enrollment impact aid and school cleanup assistance to affected school districts.

It also extends the property tax filing deadline for businesses impacted by the flood, and even provides grants to livestock producers who lost feed or forage due to the catastrophic rainfall.

Only one person in the entire legislature voted against the package. And yet had politics triumphed over common sense, that package likely would not have been delivered.

Before calling the special session, Governor Pawlenty made a deal with majority leaders in the House and Senate to only address a disaster relief package. Yet as the night wore on, these same leaders discussed amending a comprehensive tax proposal or adding transportation measures to the disaster relief bill. However, after several hours of internal discussion the DFL presented a clean flood recovery bill – no gimmicks.

This was the correct call. Had we broadened the agreement, we'd have lost our focus and our effectiveness as a body. It likely would have put the bill in jeopardy and delayed the relief our neighbors so desperately need.

While I agree that tax issues and rural transportation needs deserve a serious legislative discussion, this was not the time to have it. There was simply too much at stake.

In my first weeks as a lawmaker, two very important morals have been reinforced – both in the district and at the Capitol.

Don't pretend you have all the answers. Listen to those affected, gather as much information as possible, and then take action. As my predecessor often said, there's a reason we have two ears to listen and one mouth to speak.

Second, make your word your bond. In the political arena, if you break a deal you will lose all credibility, and it may take years before you are trusted again – if ever.

In the case of our disaster-relief proposal, our legislative leaders heeded these two sound pieces of advice. The potential to break the deal dangled in front of them, yet they wisely chose not to take the bait. And because of their restraint, southeastern Minnesota and its devastated flood victims can begin to recover and rebuild.

State Representative Steve Drazkowski (R-Wabasha) represents Minnesota House District 28B, and is a co-author of the disaster relief proposal.