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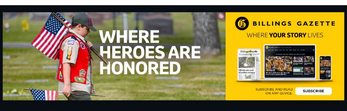

Mike Yakawich appointed to fill

In this file photo, Billings Ward 1 City Council member Mike Yakawich looks at a poem he wrote stamped into a sidewalk on South 32nd Street. The first seven sidewalk poems have been installed on new sections of sidewalk across the South Side.
LARRY MAYER, Billings Gazette

Rob Rogers

Yellowstone County Commissioners have appointed Billings South Side resident Mike Yakawich to represent House District 51 in the Montana Legislature.

Yakawich, a former Billings City Council member, was sworn in Tuesday morning by District Court Judge Ashley Harada to fill the seat left vacant by the death of Frank Fleming in March. He will serve as a Republican.

"I wish to continue to apply what I learned in city government to the state level — lessons like working cooperatively with others and rolling up sleeves to digest complex issues step by step," Yakawich said in a statement Tuesday morning.

Fleming, a Republican, was appointed to the legislative seat by county commissioners in 2018 and then later elected, representing a district covering much of the south end of Yellowstone County.

Yakawich was elected twice to city council, completing his two terms in December. In 2020 and 2021 he also served as deputy mayor. He describes himself as a small business owner, public servant and poet.

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Throughout the pandemic, Yakawich emailed to the community poems he'd written, one of which is now enshrined in the concrete of his neighbor's sidewalk.

The poems was part of an initiative put on by Healthy By Design, a grant-funded neighborhood advocacy group operated through RiverStone Health, to create more walkable neighborhoods. The idea was to encourage urban walkabouts by replacing busted sidewalks with new concrete and stamping them with poems written by South Side residents.

The project combines public art and expression with infrastructure that encourages healthy lifestyles.

Yakawich has also been involved for years with community suicide prevention and mental health advocacy. He's served on Yellowstone County Behavioral Health Local Advisory Board and the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Yellowstone Valley, and he worked on Billings' Mayor's Challenge to reduce suicide among service members, veterans and their families.

Along with his public service, Yakawich created the Global Peace Foundation Montana, over which he serves as director.

"I take seriously the role of public servant," he said. "I enjoy working with people and know this role will have many challenges."

Yakawich
JAMIE WOODCOCK, Gazette Staff

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By Rob Rogers
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