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Members leave House for new experiences

Editor's Note: As the 1992 session draws to a close, several members have chosen to leave the Minnesota House of Representatives to follow different career paths. Each lawmaker has fond memories of his or her time spent in the House, but all feel that this is the right time for change. Several will be running for the state Senate or Congress; one will become a district court judge. Others will be encouraging reform from outside the government structure, and a few will be exploring new avenues — one step at a time.



Terry Dempsey

Leaving the Legislature after nearly 14 years to become a district court judge is going to require some adjustments — almost all of them good, said Rep. Terry Dempsey (IR-New Ulm).

He acknowledges he'll miss many of the acquaintances and the working relationships he's developed during his tenure in the Minnesota House, the last two years as minority leader. But one thing he won't miss, he said, will be the hours.

"It's back to an 8-to-5 job," Dempsey said of his new position as district court judge in Mankato and St. James. "It means I'll be going home for dinner and not living in a hotel in St. Paul four or

five nights a week. No more of the 'truck driver' syndrome, living between two places.

"I hope my wife [Janet] can handle the culture shock of having me around all the time."

Dempsey was appointed to the post March 13 by Gov. Arne Carlson. He said his tentative plan is to take over the Fifth District judgeship, which covers 14 counties in the southwestern portion of the state, about two weeks after the Legislature adjourns.

The desire to be a judge hasn't been something he's carried since he graduated from the University of California Law School in 1963. Instead, he said, it's been more of a natural progression since becoming active in politics.

Still, there will be some changes. As a legislator, Dempsey said he was "free to input my own individual philosophies into what I did. As a judge at the trial level, I'm going to be constrained somewhat in what I'm going to do by the law."

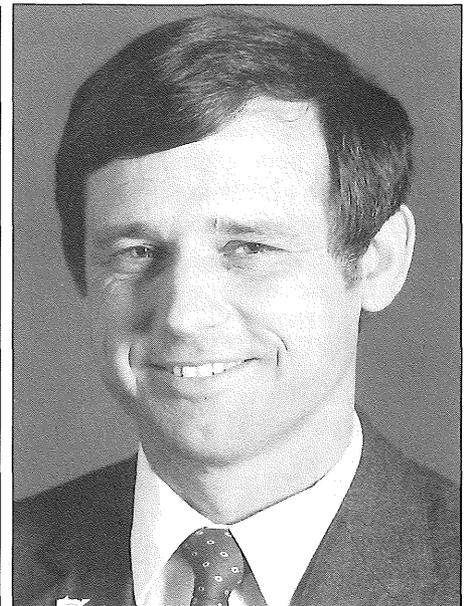
Although Dempsey belongs to the government-that-governs-least-governs-best school of thought at the Legislature, he said he won't let his personal biases color his court opinions. In other words, don't expect Dempsey to start wielding a heavy gavel.

"That sort of action is more appropriate for an appellate court," he said. "You can kind of say that the supreme court designs the car, while the trial court does the repairs."

He said he's looking forward to hearing the wide range of cases — criminal, civil, probate, juvenile, and conciliation court — that will come before him. And while some may consider some of those areas mundane, Dempsey said it's important to remember that every case is important to the people involved.

"For most people, they're only in a court room once or twice during their lives," Dempsey said. "So to them, it's the biggest case ever heard."

—Dave Price



Steve Dille

Dassel legislator Steve Dille is a busy man — he works as a legislator, veterinarian, and farm manager.

After six years, Dille is leaving the House to run for the Senate seat being vacated by Sen. John Bernhagen (IR-Hutchinson). Dille said he is approaching the change with enthusiasm, but does so with a sense of loss.

The Senate appeals to Dille, he said, because it's a "body on average much more conservative than the House" and because the "level of partisan politics is less." He is also looking forward to the longer terms in the Senate.

Although Dille said he has been frustrated with the "level of partisan bickering in the House," he added that things have improved this year. He credits current Majority Leader Alan Welle and Minority Leader Terry Dempsey with the improvement.

As a manager of a 700-acre crop and livestock farm in Meeker County, and as a veterinarian, Dille literally has a hands-on feel for many of the issues that affect rural Minnesotans.

And not surprisingly, he has authored many bills that affect his work, ranging from a measure he helped pass that has been hailed as a model for veterinary drug safety and others that helped eradicate animal disease.

Dille is also proud of his work on farm

safety legislation and the Wetlands Conservation Act of 1991. He served as a sponsor of all four farm safety laws that passed during his time in the House. And as a co-sponsor of the wetlands law, he worked to make sure that the concerns of farmers were addressed while also improving the environment.

Dille hasn't hesitated to criticize the size and structure of state government, including the Legislature. His recommendations have included closing the University of Minnesota Law School, reducing the size of the Legislature and/or its staff, freezing government salaries, and decreasing the number of legal holidays for the public sector.

Before running for the House, Dille served as a township supervisor and later as a county commissioner. He said that an odd aspect of moving up the political ladder is that "in a way you have less power" when you move to a larger body. He says his influence over a vote declined from 33 percent as one of three township supervisors, to 20 percent as one of five county commissioners, to less than 1 percent as one of 134 House members.

Dille said he hopes to reduce that trend if he's elected to the Senate. As one of 67 senators, his vote would represent 1.5 percent of those cast.

—Mary Ann Schoenberger



Alice Johnson

Rep. Alice Johnson was a veteran of the House even before she started her first term; she worked there as a secretary for 14 years.

Now, after serving for six years as the representative from Spring Lake Park, Johnson may be leaving the state House to look for a bigger one — the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

She is mounting a campaign against Rep. Gerry Sikorski for the 6th District Congressional seat that takes in much of the northern Twin Cities suburb area.

But should Sikorski receive the DFL party endorsement at the May 9 congressional district convention, Johnson said she'll drop her quest and run for her current seat instead.

Running against an incumbent is a tall task, but uphill battles are nothing new to Johnson. Her first run for the Legislature against an incumbent was almost over before it began. Back in 1986, the House Rules and Legislative Administration Committee tried to establish a rule preventing legislative employees from running for office without taking a leave of absence.

But Johnson, who was her family's main breadwinner at that time, lobbied hard and prevented the rule from being adopted. And then she went on to win the election by a mere 132 votes.

Johnson says that her major accomplishment in the House was bringing "a focus on the importance of dealing with young children." She sponsored a 1991 law that created a Legislative Commission on Children, Youth, and Families, and was elected its chair.

Although the governor vetoed funding for the commission, Johnson held meetings anyway, including a two-day conference on children's issues, and compiled a report on the subject.

As for the Legislature, Johnson said her main frustration has been with the overall structure of the House, which she says leads to "segmentation" of issues.

In fact, as one of her last requirements to get a bachelor's degree in Organizational Management and Communication from Concordia College, Johnson is writing a paper on how the segmentation of issues affects children's issues.

Johnson said she would miss the friendships, excitement, and fun of working on worthwhile projects at the House. But she expects to do more of the same thing if elected to Congress.

—Mary Ann Schoenberger



Ken Nelson

Citing a desire to pursue creative reform of education and government from outside the Legislature, Rep. Ken Nelson (DFL-Mpls) said he will retire from his House seat after the 1992 session.

"I want to create a new future," said Nelson.

Nelson's retirement will end 20 years of service in the House. He has served on a variety of committees but has left his mark in the education area. He has been chair of the Education Finance Division since 1983 and has served on the Education Committee since 1973.

As one of his final acts last month, Nelson pulled out a camera and took pictures of the division members, staff, and the audience. Division members, in turn, praised Nelson as a leader in educational policy. "Ken has led us in caring for kids in the K-12 system second to none," said Rep. Jerry Bauerly (DFL-Sauk Rapids).

Nelson said that in the last 10 years, he has seen significant reform in the quality of education in Minnesota, sending the message that "public education is here to serve the students, and not just those who are employed in it.

"We, in Minnesota, are fortunate that we have a Legislature which is always trying to improve the quality of education," he said.

Nelson believes that the establishment of the Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation in 1983 and the development of performance-based education are