

IR leader criticizes Norton appointment

By ^{X-4} Dane Smith
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An Independent-Republican Party leader has charged that DFL Gov. Rudy Perpich's appointment of House Speaker Fred Norton to the Minnesota Court of Appeals was an attempt to solve an "embarrassing leadership problem in the House."

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Norton, appointed in a surprise announcement earlier this week, was not a popular leader and his DFL majority was wracked by "DFL bickering in public," IR Party Chairwoman Marge Gruenes said in a statement released Friday.

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"It is little wonder that Democrats would jump on an opportunity to get rid of a weak leader with at least the appearance of grace," said Gruenes, of St. Cloud. "Unfortunately, the public deserves better than having to put up with the Democrats using the courts to solve their leadership problems," Gruenes said.

Perpich said when he appointed Norton that the 20-year House member was the best-qualified candidate for a new opening on the court. The Legislature had just approved an opening in response to requests from the court for more judges to handle a growing caseload.

Appeals Court Chief Judge Peter Popovich, also a former DFL legislator, said Norton had applied twice before and was a top candidate. But he was not appointed earlier partly because his departure would have disrupted the House's schedule and weakened what at that time was a DFL minority in the House. Norton had been screened and was among 30 of 155 candidates that were considered qualified, Popovich said.

But Gruenes charged that the Norton appointment continues "a clear pattern of political cronyism" in judicial appointments. She said state and lo-

cal bar association officials have been critical of Perpich for scrapping a judicial merit system used by former Gov. Al Quie, an Independent-Republican.

Perpich has taken "a proprietary approach" to state government and "seems to think government is his personal property to do with as he pleases," Gruenes said.

However, Perpich aides say the screening process has always applied to district court and other lower court judges, not to the appeals court and the Supreme Court.

Gruenes, who will be stepping down as chairwoman later this month, said Norton's insistence that the appointment was not prearranged "stretches credibility."