

Obituaries

Longtime DFL legislator and state appellate judge Fred Norton dies at age 72

He spent 20 years in House of Representatives serving part of St. Paul, and helped increase his party's power

By Terry Collins
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Colleagues probably will remember Fred Norton as a reserved, soft-spoken DFL legislator who served for 20 years. He was a man who, despite serving in a tumultuous Minnesota House during the late 1960s and '70s, developed a reputation for good judgment and fairness to both political parties.

Norton, who later was a judge on the Minnesota Court of Appeals for 10 years, died Saturday of bone cancer at his home in Marine on St. Croix. He was 72.

"He was a man who had a wonderful sense of integrity," said Marvel Norton, his wife of 20 years. "He was a first-class gentleman and sweetheart."

Norton spent a decade on the state attorney general's staff, then was elected to the House in 1966 in District 65A, which covers the multiethnic W. 7th Street, Crocus Hill, Ramsey Hill, Summit-University and Frogtown neighborhoods in St. Paul.

Judy McLaughlin, Norton's former longtime assistant, said he was "an old-fashioned guy who thought his constituents came first."

Norton became a guiding force as the DFL achieved majority status in the House. From 1973 to 1980, he was chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, which provided state money for new and expand-



Fred Norton led the House Appropriations Committee from 1973 to 1980.

ing programs.

As the role of state government increased, the DFL-led government passed many environmental and labor laws, as well as increases in education spending and consumer protection.

"Those were great years. Wendy and I still reminisce how great those early to mid-'70s years were," Norton told the Star Tribune in 1997, reflecting on his relationship with former Gov. Wendell Anderson, a DFLer.

With the DFL having a one-vote majority in the House in 1980, Norton was elected speaker, beating out Irv Anderson, a fellow DFLer. Norton won an unprecedented bipartisan vote, receiving nearly twice as many votes from Independent Republicans than from his own party.

"He was very calm and inclusive," former House Speaker Phil Carruthers, DFL-Brooklyn Center, said of Norton in 1997. "He reached out to a diverse caucus."

Norton's acceptance by both parties cost him in 1981, when he lost the speaker's post by two votes. However, he became the first person in state history to be elected speaker in nonconsecutive terms when he won in 1987.

Later that year, he was appointed to the appellate court by DFL Gov. Rudy Perpich, five years after voters approved the creation of an intermediate branch between district courts and the Supreme Court.

In 1997, he retired from the bench at age 69 to spend more time with his family. He and his wife spent winters in Florida and traveled to four other continents.

Around that time, his cancer was diagnosed, McLaughlin said. The disease began taking a more aggressive form earlier this month, she said.

Services will be held at 10 a.m. Thursday at Christ Lutheran Church, 150 5th St., Marine on St. Croix.

In addition to his wife, survivors include daughters Cynthia Norton Tocho of Sunfish Lake and Katharine Norton of Alexandria, Va., and sons Jeffrey Norton of St. Paul, Kelly Jonason of San Luis Obispo, Calif., and Bill Jonason of Rochester.

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