

belong to, you make decisions and things get done. In St. Paul, the process was certainly something that floored me.”

Uphus said the experience has been humbling, especially as a member of the legislative minority.

“My advice to any new people? Try to get along as best you possibly can. Antagonizing others will get you nowhere,” said Uphus. “No one ever does anything alone. It takes many people to accomplish even a small thing. This is so all-important — you don’t cross people. The power players are important people, and you respect them.”

Uphus got a brief taste of Independent-Republican rule in 1985-86, when he served as vice chair of the Agriculture Committee. Rural Minnesota was still in the midst of the farm crisis.

“I remember people driving their tractors here to town, in January, and they didn’t have enough money to get them hauled back home again. They parked right in front of the Capitol.”

Capitol Security demanded the tractors be removed. Uphus dipped into his own pocket to pay truckers from his district to haul the tractors home.

Uphus also fought hard for legislation that would bring farmers, lenders, and mediators to the same table to work out foreclosure alternatives. The lenders didn’t want the mandatory mediation.

“But today those people come to me and say, ‘It’s working.’ Those are the types of things where I feel we made a difference.”

On term limits, Uphus said lawmakers should leave office, even if for just one term, “and live amongst the people, to see if they [as legislators] still have a hold on that world. . . . I think we ought to get back there and see what the real world is doing.”

This summer will be the first since 1982 that Uphus hasn’t spent campaigning. Instead, he may be in the former Soviet Union. He’s been asked to assist in the establishment of cooperatives there. He plans to take it a step at a time. “And when things are tough, you take it a half-step at a time,” he said.

“You know it’s gone by so darn fast, the last 10 years. You’re here [at the Capitol] for six months, and every other year you campaign for three or four months, and things click past you. . . . This is why I think that some of these professional

legislators ought to take some time to smell the roses and wake up. There’s really nothing wrong with it.”

—John Tschida



Robert Vanasek

After two decades of public service, Rep. Bob Vanasek of New Prague has decided it’s time for a change. He doesn’t use the word “retire,” and he won’t rule out future plans for elective office. But what is certain is that his 10th House term will be his last.

When the DFLer announced last June that he would not seek re-election, he was speaker of the House, a position that is generally considered the second most powerful in state government.

So why step down when the step is so large?

“It was important for me that the decision to leave public office be my own decision, and not be affected by external factors,” he said. “I did not want to grow stale in office. I didn’t want people to say, ‘He’s been here too long.’ That all too often happens with elected officials.”

Vanasek was first elected in 1972, a year that ushered in 47 other freshmen representatives. He jumped at the opportunity when the redistricting map of that year created an open seat in his area.

He received more than 61 percent of the vote in his first election and has been returned to the Legislature by comfortable margins ever since.

But in June of last year, the Minnesota High Technology Council came calling and Vanasek took a job as president of

the organization whose objective is to create, attract, and retain technology firms in the state by ensuring that Minnesota has strong mathematics, science, and engineering programs.

The private sector will bring a “healthy new perspective,” said Vanasek, adding that the council “has an agenda I am primarily interested in — improving education in Minnesota at all levels.”

To focus on one area of public policy is a luxury the speaker doesn’t have, said Vanasek. While he enjoyed his four-plus years presiding over the House, he doesn’t miss it as much as he thought he would.

“Too often when you’re speaker you end up spending most of your time managing everybody else’s agenda,” he said.

Has he accomplished everything on his legislative checklist?

“No. My agenda at the Legislature is far from complete,” he said.

Vanasek sponsored a bill this session to streamline the state’s environmental regulation and delivery system. It received a chilly reception in the Senate and has stalled there, but Vanasek said he still believes Minnesota’s government structure needs to be re-examined.

“That bill was an attempt on my part to recognize that you cannot have government as usual at a time of fiscal austerity,” he said. “By leaving everything alone and just coming in within the budgets, the only thing we’re going to ensure is that the quality of services is going to diminish.”

When asked to cite his greatest accomplishment, it was not a policy decision that came to mind.

“After serving in the Legislature 20 years I don’t think I ever lost touch with my district — I feel I’m leaving office with a good reputation. . . . and good relationships with colleagues both Democrat and Republican.”

Such a reputation leads some to suggest higher office for Vanasek, possibly the governorship in 1994. What’s next?

“I’ve learned and come to follow the notion that one should not make long-range plans in politics,” he said. “Instead, one should be ready for opportunities as they arise.”

—John Tschida