

Tax Court's Carl Jensen may quit, become DFLer, seek Senate seat

By Lori Sturdevant
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Minnesota Senate DFLers, already crowing about the defection of one former Independent-Republican state senator to their camp, are likely to claim another IR defector as a candidate before filings close Tuesday.

The convert: former state Sen. Carl Jensen, 65, now a Minnesota Tax Court judge.

Jensen said Wednesday he's "very, very seriously considering" leaving the court and taking on freshman IR Sen. Fritz Knaak of White Bear Lake in District 53, as a DFLer.

If Jensen does, he'll become the third prominent Independent-Republican to switch parties and run this year. State Sen. Charlie Berg of Chokio, who left the IR Party to become an independent in 1985, took the DFL label earlier this year. So did Dave Johnson, the Hector farmer

and former IR activist who is running to unseat Republican U.S. Rep. Vin Weber in the Second District.

The switch-and-run game is being played in the other direction, as well. Former DFL state Sen. Marion (Mike) Menning was an unsuccessful candidate for the IR gubernatorial endorsement, and is now challenging DFL Sen. Gary DeCramer in the southwestern corner of the state. And Lew Freeman, the IR endorsee for attorney general, was a prominent DFL activist until 1985.

"I'd say it's a fair exchange," Jensen said yesterday. "The Republican Party gets Mike Menning and the DFL gets Carl Jensen."

Jensen knows a good deal about winning legislative elections, having won nine of them between 1950 and 1976. But all of those victories occurred in and around Sleepy Eye, his hometown, and under either the Independent-Republican or, before party designation, the conservative label.

His new DFL ties may not serve him as well in District 53, which includes such bastions of well-heeled, moderate Republicanism as North Oaks, Arden Hills and White Bear Lake. Moreover, in Knaak Jensen would face an aggressive 33-year-old campaigner who distinguished himself as an able spokesman for his party in the last several legislative sessions.

"Carl couldn't be more wrong for the district," Knaak said about Jensen. "I'm the native son here. He's an outsider."

Age would be a factor in a Knaak-Jensen contest, Knaak said. If Jensen were elected, he'd be the oldest of the state's 67 senators. "He's looking for a place to take a nap, and he's not going to do it in my district," Knaak said.

Jensen moved to Arden Hills after leaving the Senate in 1980 to take a six-year appointment to the Minnesota Tax Court. He also gradually moved into the DFL fold — and he thinks he can persuade other moderate Independent-Republicans to join him.

"Right now, the ideology of the DFL Party is almost right down the line with my own," he said. "I've come to the conclusion that government is necessary, and that there are certain services people want it to provide. All I hear is that the Republicans want to cut taxes, without regard to what services they lose."

Jensen also criticized the IR record on equal rights for women and minorities. The IR platform opposes an Equal Rights Amendment for women.

"Maybe because my wife is a career woman, I get to see more of the problems women still face," he said. "The DFL commitment to equal rights for women and minorities is sincere. I'm not sure that's true of the Republican Party."