

# From state to county, Senjem takes on new role

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ROCHESTER — Dave Senjem still gets nervous when speaking in front of a crowd as he did Friday during a Veterans Day program here.

Yet the retiring Republican Minnesota state senator is taking his next career move in stride. Senjem, 79, was elected Tuesday to the Olmsted County Board, continuing more than 30 years in public service that started on the Rochester City Council.

"Coming into a County Board position with the life experiences I've had in the Legislature, it can be nothing but helpful," Senjem said. "I don't think my

transition will be as difficult, certainly, than if I was brand new."

Senjem is one of four legislators who planned to retire this year to run for county board seats. DFL Rep. Rena Moran and Sen. Karla Bigham won seats in Ramsey and Washington counties, respectively, while GOP Rep. Keith Franke lost his bid to join the Washington County Board.



Senjem

To hear him tell it, Senjem started public service as a man scared to say his own name at local Jaycees meetings. Yet the longtime Rochester senator and former Senate major-

ity leader seemed destined to run for office. His great-grandfather, John Hanson, served in the Minnesota House in the 1880s and his father, Howard Senjem, was mayor of Hayfield, a Dodge County city about 30 miles southwest of Rochester.

Senjem ran for Rochester City Council in 1991 — he still remembers going to a credit union to get \$50 shortly before candidate filings were closed.

"My knees knocked all the way down to City Hall to put the \$50 down, but after that it was game on," he said earlier this year.

Senjem served for more than a decade before running for state office in 2002. A senator for the past 20 years, he is

known for his work on bonding, energy and mental health, as well as his willingness to work across party lines.

Senjem decided to retire last fall as Minnesota went through redistricting. He acknowledged this year that his redrawn district gave him pause, but he said he ultimately decided it was time to move on.

A former environmental affairs worker for Mayo Clinic, Senjem said that as a commissioner he plans to continue working on sustainable energy and mental health issues, including pushing the Legislature for more mental health crisis centers across the state.

The transition from the Capitol in St. Paul to a county board-

room isn't always easy, however. "In many ways, you move from theory to practice," said Olmsted County Commissioner Sheila Kiscaden, who served as a state senator for 14 years. "You move from public policy where you're talking about what you think will happen to trying to make things happen."

She said lawmakers view county officials as always asking for more money, while county officials say lawmakers don't always grasp how hard policy changes can be to implement.

Lawmakers often hear from constituents, which is rare for county commissioners. Lawmaker work is high profile, while the public isn't always aware of county services. And while law-

makers have staff, commissioners do the legwork themselves.

"You don't have office space; you don't have desks," Kiscaden said. "You answer your own email."

But there are rewards. "You can really deal with policy and not partisanship," she said.

Senjem's transition now begins, including the difficult task of office cleaning. He admits to being a bit of a hoarder when it comes to paperwork and files.

"It's memories," he said. "Every time you toss one away, you're kind of throwing a little memory chip out. It's hard."

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