

'Mild-mannered' Carruthers strives for consensus

Colleagues and Capitol reporters rarely describe new House Speaker Phil Carruthers in flashy terms. The 43-year-old representative from Brooklyn Center has been called mild-mannered, deliberate, a policy wonk, and a detail man. So what explains his steady rise into the leadership of the Minnesota House of Representatives?

"I like to try to build a consensus," Carruthers said.

Consensus-building may not be flashy, but it has made the new speaker a lot of friends on both sides of the aisle.

"I have the highest respect for Phil both as a legislator and as a person," said Rep. Charlie Weaver (R-Anoka). "He is a worthy ally and opponent. The best part about him is that you can engage him in battle and still go out . . . afterward."

Carruthers has promised to bring a new openness and spirit of cooperation to the speaker's post. "I want to increase participa-

committees to recommend assignments. This made the selection process more open and less personal than before. And in an unusual show of bipartisanship, the new speaker honored all of the Republican minority's committee requests. Official publications now even list a "lead Republican" for each committee.

"The overall level of cooperation is the best since I've been here," said Weaver. But that doesn't mean that Republicans regard Carruthers as a pushover, Weaver said. "We, as a caucus, do not take him lightly. He is even-tempered but not a wimp. He will be every bit as tough as [former Speaker] Irv Anderson, but with a different style."

Carruthers said he also wants to improve the Legislature's communication and outreach to the general public. "That means a lot of press contact and being open and accessible," he said. "It also means appearing on various public affairs broadcasts — cable

Anthony Village. Alex Carruthers first worked for Minneapolis-based Honeywell and later joined the University of Minnesota faculty. Marie Carruthers, Phil's mother, worked at a public library. The couple is now retired and lives in the Highland Park area of St. Paul.

Since receiving his law degree from the University of Minnesota, Carruthers enjoyed a successful career as an attorney, serving as a prosecutor for several western metro suburbs. He is divorced and has two children, Rory, 5 and Alex, 7.

To escape the rigors of Minnesota politics Carruthers turns to nature. "I enjoy all sorts of outdoor activities," he said. "Fishing, bird watching, camping, and playing sports with my sons."

Carruthers was first elected to the Legislature in 1986, participating in that year's DFL takeover of the House. In 1993, he became DFL majority leader.

In his 10 years in the Legislature, Carruthers has championed good-government reforms and people-protecting new laws. He said roughly 70 of his bills and amendments have become law. Measures he has pushed for include: Tougher sanctions against drunken driving, improvements to Minnesota's open meeting law, better protection for foster children, and consumer protection from fly-by-night roofing contractors.

The speaker plans to push for reform on a number of other issues this session including:

- Property Taxes: "We have an opportunity, given the budget surplus, to use transition dollars to phase in some changes to make property taxes more equitable."
- Welfare: Carruthers supports Governor Arne Carlson's proposal for a bipartisan task force to respond to the challenges posed by recent federal welfare reform legislation.
- Education: "We need to provide more accountability in public education and restore the funding that has been cut."
- Higher Education: "... An area that has been slighted in the budget process and that is vital to the strength of our state."

Another issue Carruthers anticipates coming forward, but clearly doesn't relish, is a proposed new stadium for the Minnesota Twins. "I'm sure that the stadium will come up, but I think it is important that it not dominate the session," he said.

— Steve Compton



Minnesota Supreme Court Associate Justice Sandra Gardebring administered the oath of office to new House Speaker Phil Carruthers Jan. 7.

tion by House members and get more members involved in decisions," he said.

The speaker offered a preview of this new style of leadership in the way he made committee appointments for the session. Past speakers often doled out committee assignments behind closed doors as political favors or punishments. In contrast, Carruthers appointed a 12-member DFL committee on

television, radio, and Almanac (a weekly public television news magazine program)."

The new speaker remembers listening to President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address when he was 7 years old and living with his parents in Canada. "Kennedy's call to public service inspired me," he said.

The following year his physicist father moved the family to Minnesota, settling in St.