

'People-protector' theme marks Carruthers' tenure

Rep. Phil Carruthers has annoyed all the right people. Rip-off artists. Drunk drivers. Closed-door public officials. Less than Ward and June Cleaver-like foster parents. And criminals of all types.

He is described as strict but not rigid, deliberate, a hard worker, a detail man, but most of all hard to peg.

"I'm a reasonably quiet person. I'm not a backslapper. . . type," the new DFL majority leader from Brooklyn Center says.

Perhaps Carruthers, 40, may not come across as gregarious but you wouldn't know it from the bills that carry his name. They focus on the underdog, rarely high-powered special interest groups or big business.

He is a prosecutor by trade, which may explain, in part, his admittedly impatient and quite matter-of-fact personality.

"I'm offended by crime," he said. "People need to be responsible for their conduct."

But this bird watcher and father of two isn't always so tough. Last year, he and two other lawmakers managed to increase money for state arts groups by \$4.6 million.

"He is much warmer than most people think him capable of being," said Steve Tallen, a prosecutor who shares an office with Carruthers in Minneapolis.

The two met several years ago in a Minnetonka court room when they were on opposite sides — Tallen was prosecuting and Carruthers was the defense attorney.

Although Carruthers has both a public and a private persona, "he is not a phony. He is pretty straightforward," Tallen said.

"He has always got a lot going on. The last time we had a Christmas party here, he had to come late because he was on Almanac (a public television political talk show)."

Carruthers doesn't plan on changing much now that he is the House majority leader. His new responsibilities — helping set the party legislative agenda and House administration — won't keep him from introducing the people-protector bills for which he is known.

In his eight years in the House, Carruthers

said roughly 60 of his bills and amendments have become law. And there's a pattern to be found in many of them.

Some in recent memory include:

- A law to improve Minnesota's open meeting law and make government more open to the public. While attending the University of Minnesota, he pursued an interest in journalism working for the *Minnesota Daily*, the campus newspaper.
- A law to better protect foster children. It permanently bars people convicted of crimes such as criminal sexual assault, murder, felony punishment of a child, incest or prostitution from obtaining a foster care or child-care license.
- And a law to better protect consumers from fly-by-night roofers. It requires roofers to be licensed by the state and to eventually take a competency exam.

Carruthers has a few more bills he wants to introduce this session. One would modify the state constitution's right to bail. If approved by voters, release-on-bail could be denied to those who present a violent risk to a victim

or society.

Another would require Christian Scientists and others who practice spiritual healing to obtain medical care for their children.

The majority leader, however, must spend time on his party's legislative agenda as well. This session that amounts to focusing on tougher criminal laws, reducing property taxes, providing relief to victims of last spring's floods, and reforming state government.

The DFLers have a lot riding on this session. With the political turmoil in the House last year and elections only a few months away, they need a strong showing.



Majority Leader Phil Carruthers

Carruthers said the DFL won't know for sure if they have regained the public trust until election day. But, he thinks they have, especially with their efforts to tighten House management.

He'll focus on recruiting good DFL candidates, proposing needed legislation and pointing out IR weaknesses.

Despite the Independent-Republican Party bashing that goes with the job, Carruthers is well respected by many IRs, said Rep. Charlie Weaver (IR-Anoka).

Weaver, also a prosecutor, has teamed up with Carruthers to co-sponsor many bills.

"He is an honorable man to work with. He will tell you if he disagrees with you. I respect him as an adversary," Weaver said.

"He is a guy who you can fight with but when it is over you can still have a beer with."

Carruthers can certainly be partisan when he wants to be, Weaver said. And he believes the majority leader position will "force Phil to be more partisan than he is accustomed to."

— K. Darcy Hanzlik

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