

The problem-solver

Stepping down, and off to propose more solutions

Editor's Note: As the 2006 session winds down, several members have announced their intentions to leave the Minnesota House of Representatives for new adventures. They leave a legacy of service that will remain part of legislative history.

By **PATTY JANOVEC**

Serving as a legislator should never be someone's job; it should be a service you provide, said Rep. Jerry Dempsey (R-Red Wing). That's precisely why he is leaving his seat after seven terms, just as he promised his constituents when they elected him.

Although the initial agreement was 10 to 12 years in 1992, he had to stay 14 years because, "I think I had an obligation to help see to it that we were not overspending," he said. In his previous terms, taxes were raised to meet the state's spending, and this term appears to be resulting in no taxes being raised, he said.

A self-proclaimed problem-solver, he is leaving the House to solve issues facing local schools instead.

"I have a yearning and good background to work with people to solve problems," said Dempsey, and thinks a good place to start is in the public schools by helping teachers and students work through positive solutions.

By occupation, he is a school administrator and doesn't shy away from explaining his previous successes. At one time, in his school district, there was a proposal to raise school lunch fees because students didn't like to eat a more cost-effective choice, what Dempsey called "goulash."

So, a goulash pizza, in a circular shape, was served up — a little more palatable for students, he said. "It sounds simple, but my point is that you have to solve the problem."

Another suggestion involves recognizing all students with a saying that "Everybody is somebody." Dempsey believes that there should be programs in schools that recognize all students.

Entering the House with a problem-solving background helped Dempsey get comfortable quickly.

One major problem he helped create a solution for in the Legislature was "learning to live within the boundaries of our budgets."

The Legislature itself is not a real good problem-solver because solutions usually involve funding those things around the problem, he said. "We don't know how things are going to react when we implement them. ... We need to solve the problem so it doesn't come back."

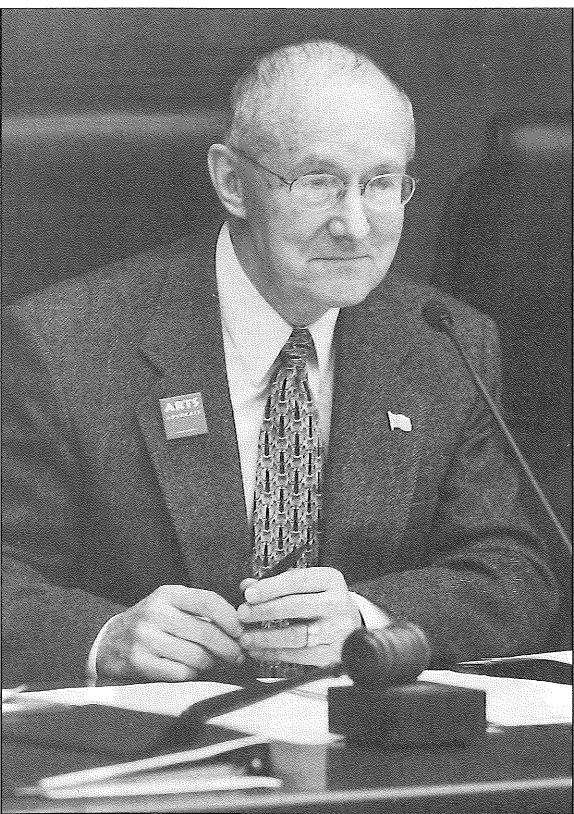


PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

Rep. Jerry Dempsey, seen here chairing the House Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs Committee during the 2001-2002 session, is retiring after seven terms.

Had Dempsey been chair of a committee for more than two years (House Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs Committee in 2001-2002), he feels he could have been more influential. He said he's been passionate about K-12 education, yet didn't get the opportunity to serve on an accompanying committee.

He is most proud of helping to bridge the communication and political divide regarding the Prairie Island Nuclear Power Plant near Red Wing when he was first elected in 1992. The issue revolved around keeping jobs in the community, and storing nuclear waste. "Today it is a vitally important aspect in society and the state of Minnesota," he said.

His advice for his incoming seat holder is twofold: "You represent the best interests of the citizen, not the special interest," said Dempsey. "We have a lot of special-interest people that are here, but a piece of advice is not to take special-interest money to fund their campaign and do a lot of door knocking," he said. While he admits this may be a very difficult suggestion to implement, he said, "If you believe you represent the people of Minnesota ... then you have to pursue the common good." Dempsey funded the majority of his own campaigns without political action committee money.

Asked if he had any hobbies he will pursue when he is not staying busy solving problems, Dempsey said he is an avid collector of mustache cups, and enjoys the antique hunts that take him across the country. His collection contains more than 300 of the cups that can be identified by a bar inside the rim to keep a person's mustache out of a drink. His collection includes mugs for those left-handed, right-handed and matching husband (for the mustache) and a wife cup (without the bar), said Dempsey.

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Jerry Dempsey
Republican
District 28A – Red Wing
Terms: 7
Advice to person to fill his seat: "Solve problems. And, raising taxes is not solving a problem."