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Obituaries

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Former state representative Peter X. Fugina, 84, dies

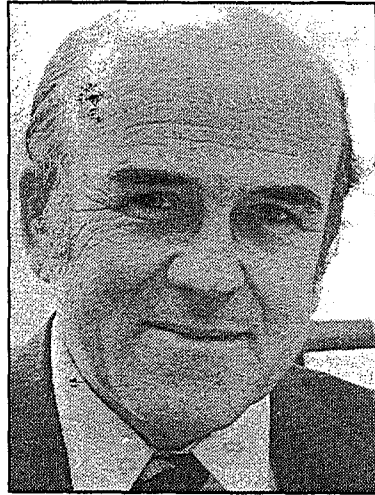
By David Chanen
Staff Writer

Peter X. Fugina, 84, former state representative from Virginia, Minn., and administrative assistant to former U.S. Rep. John Blatnik, died of complications from Parkinson's disease Monday at Lakeview Memorial Hospital in Stillwater.

He was a leading legislator on higher education issues and sponsored virtually every bill related to improving and developing financial aid programs during his tenure. He sponsored the bill that created the Higher Education Coordinating Board.

His efforts resulted in Minnesota having one of the best financial aid programs in the nation," said Phil Lewenstein, the board's director of communications and legislation.

Fugina was appointed to the Coordinating Board by Gov. Rudy Perpich in 1988 and served until he resigned because of his health last year. David



Peter X. Fugina (1975 photo) was a leader in higher-education issues.

Powers, the board's executive director, said, "Peter was the senior statesman who reminded us how important it was for students to have access

to higher education, no matter where they lived or their social or economic background." Fugina served in the House from 1954 to 1966 and from 1970 to 1978, and was chairman of the Higher Education Committee.

Sen. Doug Johnson, DFL-Cook, said, "Fugina was the strongest leader in education that I ever served with." Johnson was a geometry student of Fugina's at Cook High School. He said he was a wonderful teacher who could really relate to students. "He first got me interested in serving in government because of his teachings. He would make the classes so interesting and tell of his experiences in the Legislature."

Johnson, who was 27 when he was elected to office, said Fugina helped him learn about the issues and the legislative process. He said Fugina was part of the effort to diversify the economy of the Iron Range and assisted the taconite industry.

State Rep. Tom Rukavina, DFL-Vir-

ginia, said Fugina always had the best interests of the Iron Range people in mind. He remembered putting up campaign signs for him when he was in college. "He kept everybody in line and made sure the taconite industry didn't run roughshod over people," Rukavina said. "He was a working person's legislator and the kind of person you'd want as a friend and neighbor."

Fugina was born in Biwabik, Minn., and graduated from high school in Aurora, Minn. He earned a degree in chemistry from Hamline University in St. Paul and taught at Ely Community College and in the St. Louis County school system for several years. He was in the Navy during World War II and worked in Washington, D.C., for several years for his college friend, John Blatnik.

Fugina's son, Britt, of Houlton, Wis., said Fugina was Blatnik's chief assistant. "Back then, a congressman's staff was much smaller, so he played a larger role in affairs," he said.

"Blatnik motivated my father to get into politics." About 15 years ago, Britt said, a younger legislator came up to him and said his father was one the last of the true liberals. "The DFL Party had a more liberal bent when he was active," he said. "Politics were his love."

Fugina continued to teach and became a guidance counselor in the 1960s. He was a member of several fraternal organizations. He lived in a Stillwater nursing home the past eight months.

Besides his son, he is survived by three sisters, Margaret Hansen and Mary Schwartz, both of Milwaukee, and Catherine Hanka, of Aurora, Minn., and a brother, John, of Milwaukee. Services will be held at noon today at the Fort Snelling Memorial Chapel, Hwy. 5 and Post Rd. Visitation will be held there an hour before the service. Arrangements are by the Simonet Funeral Home, Oak Park Heights.