

Hilty: 'It's time'

Pragmatic legislator best known as renewable energy advocate

By SUE HEGARTY

As a freshman legislator, Rep. Bill Hilty (DFL-Finlayson) looked up to his mentor, former Rep. Henry Kalis (DFL-Wells). When Kalis announced he was leaving, Hilty was really disappointed and asked him why.

Kalis replied, "You just know when it's time."

After 16 years of serving his constituents, Hilty has decided "it's time."

He'll return home to the 120-acre property and machine shop where he and his wife operated a small business manufacturing children's bedroom furniture. The business has since closed but the building is still there, and would make a suitable man-cave for tinkering.

"It has 16 years of deferred maintenance," he said.

He's also looking forward to spending more time with the grandchildren, including a 9-month-old granddaughter who lives nearby.

Hilty originally settled in Minnesota to attend the University of Minnesota, where he intended to earn a Ph.D in American Studies. There he read American psychologist and philosopher William James' work about the philosophy of pragmatism. James influenced how Hilty approached his work in the House.

"I've always tried to be pragmatic and focus on results, and not so much on the theater part of politics," he said.

He recalled how Rep. Mary Murphy (DFL-Hermantown) handed him a bill to create the Agate and Geological Center at Moose Lake State Park and said to him, "This is yours now."

"We did manage eventually to cause that to happen," he said.

Opened in 2003, the center contains a multi-purpose classroom, nature store gift shop, restrooms and an exhibition hall that showcases Minnesota's gemstone, the Lake Superior Agate.

But Hilty is probably best known for his leadership on policies that seek to reduce

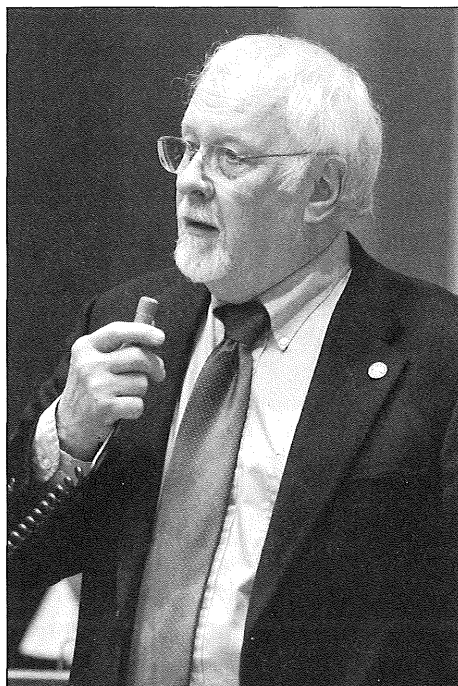


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

After 16 years of serving his constituents, Rep. Bill Hilty is leaving the House. He plans to spend more time with his grandchildren.

greenhouse gas and carbon monoxide emissions and to promote more efficient uses of energy. He's proud to have helped pass the renewable energy standards, and then became the sponsor of the Next Generation Energy Act. He's a strong advocate for increased production of wind energy and counts on fellow DFL proponents to continue his work.

He has high regard for those who can juggle a family, career and the so-called part-time job of a legislator. His advice to his successor is to "find out how much the job pays and make sure you can afford to do this," he said. "I'm somewhat serious about that."

"I was at a point in my life and business career that it was possible to do this, but really, 10 years earlier there was no way possible for me to serve in the Legislature. That has to be true for innumerable people," he said.

When former Rep. Becky Lourey (DFL-Kerrick) left her House seat to run for

the Senate, Hilty, who had been Lourey's campaign manager, was urged to replace her in the House. It was a period when there was national pressure to deregulate the electric utilities.

"I did not want that to happen," he said.

During Hilty's eight terms in office, the DFL has been both the minority and majority party. There are very obvious differences, particularly as a minority legislator.

"It's very frustrating to have things that you think should happen and you have no prospect of accomplishing," current term included, he said. Even more frustrating are attempts to undo many of the provisions he helped put into place, he added.

Besides energy policy, he's been very interested in election issues and said Minnesota is a national leader in election laws.

"Now that is poised to go down the drain and that's kind of discouraging," he said, referring to a proposed constitutional amendment to require voters to present photo identification before being allowed to vote.

Another thing that has changed during his time in office is the decorum, he said. "When I started here there was a lot more attention to respect for the process."

More recently, he believes finance bills have not been fully vetted in committee hearings and have passed out of committee before the issues were resolved.

"There was a greater sense of common purpose that I don't think we have anymore," he said.

Perhaps one of the greatest philosophical mysteries yet to solve is how the Legislature can return to those bygone days when there was less polarization.

"When you have conflicting goals and values it's very difficult to bridge those gaps," he said. If the next freshmen class wants some philosophical advice, they can find him Up North bouncing his granddaughter on his knee. 🌿