

# Retiring lawmaker recalls legislative accomplishments

By Nicole Wood



After six terms in the House, Rep. Richard Jefferson (DFL-Mpls) is looking forward to his second retirement.

"I retired 12 years ago, and then I got a job at which I spent more time than I did at my original job," he said during a recent interview.

Jefferson's first retirement came after 32 years with the U.S. Bureau of Mines. As the head of research services, he used his chemistry background to oversee research into mining techniques and the use of resources — projects that the private sector would not do or couldn't afford.

The federal government has since closed the Bureau of Mines.

"I like to tell people there was no need to have it after I left," he joked, "but that's not exactly how it happened."

Jefferson has been a key negotiator on several Minneapolis public facilities financing deals, including the 1994 Target Center buyout and this year's proposed Minneapolis Convention Center expansion. Of the 12 House members from the Minneapolis delegation, Jefferson was the only one to vote for a new Twins stadium during the November 1997 Special Session.

"I saw [those initiatives] primarily as job opportunities, as much as anything," he said.

Jefferson said the most important piece of legislation he sponsored was a 1993 measure setting residency requirements for public employees of the city of Minneapolis.

"It had the greatest impact and the most far-reaching effect on the city of Minneapolis of anything I've ever done," he said.

Another bill that remains close to his heart but did not receive as much attention provided for the testing of newborn babies for sickle-cell anemia, a genetic blood disease that primarily strikes those of African descent.

Rep. Phyllis Kahn (DFL-Mpls) said that besides the important role Jefferson plays as the only black member of the Legislature, his capacity for deciphering complicated state



Rep. Richard Jefferson, who has announced his retirement from the House after six terms, looks forward to a little more time both on the golf course and with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

purchasing and pension policies will be missed.

"It's so hard to find legislators who are willing to deal seriously with complex technical issues," she said. "One of his great triumphs was the Target Center bill, which he was able to pass all by itself, not tucked in with something else. That takes an enormous amount of legislative credibility and ability."

Rep. Dee Long (DFL-Mpls) recalls that she once had a legislative assistant who analyzed the makeup of the House in search of "normal" people.

"Jefferson was one of the few normal people," Long said. "He's very solid, very down-to-earth, and a heck of a good golfer."

Besides more time on the links, Jefferson is looking forward to fishing, downhill skiing (which he took up at the age of 60), and spending time with his five children, 14 grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

He has more than 60 cactus plants to attend to, as well. He and his wife, Mary, like to travel to Texas and Arizona during the winter and, through a process of elimination, they have


developed an appreciation for the hearty cactus.

"The first time we went away for three weeks — we came back and all the cactus plants were fine and the other plants were in bad shape," he said. "So, we specialize in cactus because we don't have to make arrangements like we do for the dog."

One of the things Jefferson said he has enjoyed the most as a legislator is helping people who were tied up in the bureaucracy of local government.

"That's the power of this office," he said. "It can be, when used properly, a very important tool for helping people."

But he made it clear that he has no illusions about how long the power to get phone calls returned quickly lasts.

"The power is seated in the position, not in the individual," he said. "Because the day that I leave here, that will no longer exist for me, and the young man who comes in behind me will be able to do those things." 

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