

NEWS OBITUARIES

Robert Jensen guided Lakeville's growth

● During the suburb's boom years, he served as mayor, council member, county commissioner and legislator.

By ERIC ROPER
eric.ropers@startribune.com

There was no stopping the urban sprawl that transformed the rural Dakota County landscape into the bustling suburb of Lakeville. But people like Robert "Bob" Jensen made it work.

Jensen, whose career in local government and at the Legislature helped shape the modern Minnesota suburb, died Nov. 27 of colon cancer at a hospice in Burnsville. He was 83.

A farmer nearly his entire adult life, Jensen joined local government in Lakeville in 1960, when the area was still largely rural separated into a township of just over 2,000 people and a village of less than 1,000. The suburban population boom was quickly heading south, and the two entities would have to merge to keep up with the growth.

"You've got 36 square miles," recalled Ed Mako, who served with Jensen on

the Lakeville City Council. "And you're going to be having thousands of people, so do your best to get ready for them."

The transition wasn't simple. The village had one type-written page of ordinances, Mako recalled, and the township's records had been destroyed in a fire.

Jensen hadn't graduated from high school, but he became one of Lakeville's first mayors in 1970 and helped develop long-term plans for the city's parks and development projects, which would prove essential as the city rapidly expanded from 7,500 in 1970 to nearly 25,000 in 1990. Those parks would remain Jensen's pride and joy.

"He understood the value of quality of life and a true community doesn't stop with just police and fire," said Steve

Michaud, Lakeville's current parks and recreation director, who was hired by Jensen. "It includes good public works and good water systems and good parks systems and good recreation programs."

Jensen, a DFLer, was later elected to the Minnesota House, where he served on and off for eight years in the late 1970s and 1980s. He counted among his proudest accomplishments the construction of the Cedar Avenue bridge in 1980 to sustain the growing flow of traffic into the southern suburbs.

But another suburban evolution, the shift to more conservative politics, would end Jensen's career at the Legislature in 1988. Lakeville sent a Republican to the State Capitol, and Jensen's district would never again be in DFL hands.

He later served as a Dakota County commissioner for two years.

Jensen's daughter Sarah Matasosky said his persistent optimism made him adept at problem-solving. "He would always look at something as

'How do I fix it?' not 'It's a problem,'" she said.

She said Jensen often shook his head at the lack of civility in modern politics, a sharp contrast from the bipartisan cocktail hours of the past. "They were friends; they actually did things together," his daughter said.

Outside of farming and politics, Jensen spent hours laboring in his wood shop, making hockey sticks and other things for his kids and grandchildren. He also loved to fish.

Besides Matasosky, Jensen is survived by his wife of 63 years, Bernice; four sons, Ken, Jerry, Willy and Tom; five other daughters, Jane Smith, Doris Wilson, Beverly Rydeen, Mary Morgan and Kate Herness; two brothers, Jim and Vernon; a sister, Camilla Lilly, 19 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. Services will be held at 11 a.m. Monday at the Church of St. Joseph in Rosemount.

Eric Roper • 612-673-1732
Twitter: @StribRoper



Robert Jensen