

State Sen. Janet Johnson dies of a brain tumor at 59

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North Branch environmentalist led transportation committee

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State Sen. Janet Johnson, a third-term DFLer from North Branch who was known for her advocacy of the environment and mass transit, died Saturday of a malignant brain tumor at Regions Hospital in St. Paul. She was 59.

Her husband, Dennis, said the tumor had grown since her surgery July 27. The tumor was diagnosed July 8 and she had been undergoing chemotherapy at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

She was elected to the Senate in 1990 after serving three terms on the North Branch school board. Her Senate district north of the Twin Cities includes Cambridge, Isanti, Braham, Wyoming and Pine City.

Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe, DFL-Erskine, said he talked to Johnson about her illness two weeks ago. "She knew the severity of everything, but she was determined (to overcome it). I guess I'm surprised, sad and surprised," he said.

"Minnesota's natural resources and the environment have lost a real dedicated friend. She took her role as a good steward of our natural resources to heart," he said. "She was real serious about it in both her private life and the positions she took in public policy."

Senate Minority Leader Dick Day, R-Owatonna, said Johnson, chairwoman of the Transportation Budget Subcommittee, treated committee members fairly and with respect.

"She was always good to Republicans," he said referring to minority members on the subcommittee.

Johnson was active in politics and public policy before she ran for the Senate. She served as Chisago County DFL chairwoman for seven years, was on the North Branch school board for seven years and on the Minnesota Environmental Education Board for 15 years.



Sen. Janet Johnson "came through every day in her public service," one friend said.

In 1986 she challenged DFL Rep. Loren Jennings of Harris in the primary but lost. Four years later she ran for an open Senate seat and won handily. She was reelected in 1992 after the legislative district lines were redrawn, and won again in 1996.

Her husband said she decided to run for public office because she felt strongly about education and environmental issues, and thought the best way to advocate both was to be a part of the lawmaking process. She and her husband owned and ran Natural Spaces, a housing company specializing in environmentally efficient homes.

As chairwoman of the Transportation Budget Subcommittee she pushed to get more funding for mass transit. She was among the senators who favored funding light-rail transit in the Hiawatha Avenue corridor that will connect downtown Minneapolis, the airport and the Mall of America.

Janet Johnson was born in New York City's Bronx and moved to Minnesota in the 1960s.

Assistant Senate Majority Leader Ember Reichgott Junge, DFL-New Hope, said: "We all have lost a dear friend. Janet was a caring, compassionate person, and that came through every day in her public service, in the way she helped her constituents and fought for the issues that meant so much to her."

In addition to her husband, Dennis, she is survived by two daughters, Jessica Lipsky Roe of Golden Valley and Jennifer King of Eden Prairie; a son, Erik of North Branch; two sisters, Connie Reilly of North Branch and Anne Grassi of Airmount, N.J., and three grandchildren.

A public service will be held at 2 p.m. Saturday at the North Branch High School auditorium. Private funeral services will be held Tuesday.