

One last farewell

Ruth Johnson says goodbye for the third and final time

Editor's Note: As the 2006 session winds down, several members have announced their intentions to leave the Minnesota House of Representatives for new adventures. They leave a legacy of service that will remain part of legislative history.

By Nick Busse

In January, Rep. Ruth Johnson (DFL-St. Peter) will retire as a state representative — for the third time. This time, however, she said she'll be leaving for good.

Johnson, who was elected state representative three out of the four times she ran, holds the distinction of being the only current House member to have been elected to three separate, non-consecutive terms: 1997-1998, 2001-2002, and 2005-2006.

Now, she said, she will be passing the torch.

"I felt it was my job to stay with my responsibilities until I found someone that I thought would be a good representative of our area and stand for the values that I shared, that I think are most important to our area," she said.

Johnson said she has found such a person in Terry Morrow, who is currently chair of the St. Peter Board of Education. This year, Morrow will be running for Johnson's seat in her stead.

Johnson, a former college administrator, said she is running about four years behind schedule of her original plan to retire at 55. But when she finally does retire, she will at least retain some fond memories of being a legislator.

Among other things, Johnson cited being the chief sponsor of a \$27.6 million tornado relief bill as one of her biggest achievements.

In the waning days of the 1998 legislative session, a major tornado struck St. Peter and the surrounding areas. Johnson had just days — a few hours, really — to put together a bill to fund the rebuilding of the area.

"That, to me, is a perfect example of government at all levels — federal, state, regional, county, city — working together to help people at the time of the very greatest

difficulty we could ever imagine. And the results speak for themselves," she said.

Johnson said the reconstruction of the area has brought enormous growth, and St. Peter is more beautiful than ever.

"We still miss our trees," she said. "It will take decades for the replacement trees to reach anything like the height of the trees that were lost. But the buildings, the public services and homes were restored beyond anyone's best hope."

The first bill of Johnson's passed by the House made American Sign Language (ASL) a recognized language for which high school and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities students could receive school credits. She said the purpose of the bill was to encourage greater use of ASL. It passed "without any difficulty whatsoever," she said.

Johnson said she is leaving an institution that is more sharply divided along partisan lines than when she was first elected, but that doesn't really worry her.

"This is a democracy, and ultimately the tides of history, as they flow back and forth, will bring us to a place where we will be able to find compromise in the future."

To be an effective legislator, Johnson said one must understand the "basic strengths" of the state that have led Minnesotans to enjoy the highest quality of life in the

nation, and must have an ability to work for compromises.

After she retires, Johnson plans to spend as much time as possible speaking to the public about their role in a democracy.

"Having had this magnificent experience as a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives, I want to take all that I have learned and share it with other citizens. Because I truly believe that in a democracy, it is the people who govern, and I want to help people see how that works, how they can be engaged, and how we can make democracy in



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHEID

Rep. Ruth Johnson is retiring about four years behind her original schedule. She plans to spend much of her time talking to people about democracy.

Minnesota be even stronger."

Johnson said she is often asked to speak to public organizations and groups of young people — to whom she said it is particularly important to "help inspire them, as I was inspired as a young person, to the highest values of citizenship." ❁

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Ruth Johnson
DFL
District 23A — St. Peter
Terms: 3 (non-consecutive, elected 1996)
Advice for successor: "Keep in touch with the citizens, and find as many opportunities as possible to engage citizens in discussion of public policy."