

Former state senator John Keefe, 68, dies

By Jim Parsons
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Although he held office for 26 years as a legislator and Hennepin County commissioner, John Keefe wasn't known for his fiery oratory or grandstanding in front of the television cameras.

But his calm demeanor deserted him several years ago when his colleagues on the County Board were pooh-poohing his proposal to let senior citizens pay a portion of their property taxes by doing volunteer work for the county.

Keefe lit into his fellow board members. He reminded them that those senior citizens were the ones who struggled to survive the Great Depression, then fought and sacrificed to win World War II, and then paid for the highways, bridges and schools that are essential to a thriving metropolitan area.

Many of those seniors, Keefe added, had to pinch pennies to get by and were getting hit hard by rising taxes. They deserved a tiny break from their elected officials.

Keefe's idea was approved.

Keefe, who was equally passionate about playing tennis and staying in shape, died Tuesday morning after apparently having a heart attack while working out on a treadmill at his condo in North Key Largo, Fla. He was 68.

His wife, Rosemary, said that paramedics were able to revive him, but that he apparently had another, fatal attack on the way to the hospital.

Keefe had a history of heart problems dating back to 1982, when he was a state senator. He underwent a bypass operation during the legislative session and decided not to run again after representing parts of Hopkins, Edina and Minnetonka in the House and Senate for 16 years.

Gary Flakne, a fellow Republican, recalled going to the hospital to see Keefe. "He had wires and tubes all over him so, naturally, I expected he would be talking about the operation. But the first thing John said was, 'The weather's nice, I've got to get out of here and go play some tennis.'"

He recovered so quickly that he decided two years later, in 1984, to run for the County Board. He took on another Republican, incumbent Dick Kremer. Keefe accused Kremer of being too cozy with the DFLers on the board, but he was badly outspent in the campaign and didn't expect to win.

Keefe benefited from the large number of abortion foes coming into the Republican Party, but the race was so close that it wasn't decided until the next morning. Keefe was asleep when he got a call from Commissioner Randy Johnson. "You won by



John Keefe retired from the Hennepin County Board in 1994.

about 300 votes," Johnson said.

Keefe let that sink in and then, at 5:30 in the morning, responded with his characteristic dry wit: "Well, do you think I ought to ask for a recount?"

Eight years later, Keefe ran for reelection and was challenged by a fellow Republican. This time Keefe, who had had a falling out with Johnson, was accused of being too cozy with the board's DFLers.

Keefe survived that challenge, and in 1994 decided to retire from the board without ever losing an election. He missed his retirement party, however. He was in the hospital having his third bypass operation.

"John brought a fine sense of humor to the board," said Johnson, who is now board chairman. "He served during a time when the board was in turmoil, but he saw things through until the beginning of an era of good feelings. Through all that, he was a champion of the taxpayer."

During the turmoil, some of Keefe's colleagues questioned his dedication to the job, pointing out that he missed many votes and that he sometimes seemed preoccupied with his private legal practice.

Keefe, a graduate of Minneapolis Washburn High School and the University of Minnesota, had been practicing law since graduating from the William College of Law in St. Paul in the 1950s. He insisted that his part-time practice didn't detract from his work as a commissioner.

He served as a municipal judge in Hopkins before being elected to the Legislature, and was on the park board that covered Minnetonka and Hopkins at that time.

In addition to his wife, he is survived by sons John Jr., of Minnetonka, and Steven, of Hopkins; daughters Lynn Noll of Elk River, and Lisa Reynolds, of Golden Valley, and seven grandchildren and step-grandchildren.

Services are pending. They will be held in the Twin Cities.

— Staff writers Steve Brandt and Mark Brunswick contributed to this report.

Reprinted by permission of the Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN).