

Fulfilling her 'deal'

Kelliher leaving House after a dozen years, maybe not the Capitol

By LAUREN RADOMSKI

House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher (DFL-Mpls) still remembers the looks she got while door knocking in her district in the late-1990s. Kelliher, then 29 and the mother of two young children, was seeking the seat held by retiring Rep. Dee Long, the first female Speaker of the House.

"How in the world are you ever going to fill her shoes?" Kelliher recalls being asked. "And so I would say, 'I'm going to bring my own pair of shoes.' And that's exactly what I've done."

After a dozen years in the House, four of them as speaker, Kelliher is ready to end her legislative career. She says she made a "deal" of sorts with her husband around the start of her first term in 1998: she would re-evaluate what she was doing after 10 years. Her election to the position of speaker prompted her to stay a bit longer than she'd originally anticipated.

"I, more or less, decided after the last election that this would be my last two years," Kelliher said. She says it was a choice she made before deciding to run for governor.

A Mankato-area native and former legislative aide, Kelliher said she ran for office because she was interested in "helping people through the maze of government when they get stuck." Named "Freshman Legislator of the Year," Kelliher initially served on transportation and environmental policy committees. In 2000, she led the effort to override then-Gov. Jesse Ventura's veto of funding for a new Guthrie theater in Minneapolis. After their first attempt failed, Kelliher and Rep. Greg Davids (R-Preston) made a second, successful attempt

later the same day. Kelliher said the experience was "a lesson in coalition-building."

She is also proud of her involvement in overriding Gov. Tim Pawlenty's veto of transportation spending in 2008. The law legislators passed raised the state's gas tax to pay for millions of dollars in road and bridge projects. It came in the wake of the Interstate 35W bridge collapse, what Kelliher calls "the visible sign of disinvestment in our state."

Kelliher also lists the passage of renewable

energy standards and the outdoors/arts constitutional amendment as highlights of her legislative career. Both, she said, will have a generational impact.

Other memorable experiences have been more personal. Kelliher and Rep. Ann Lenczewski (DFL-Bloomington) have had a long-standing tradition of meeting for dinner one night near the end of session.

Another of Kelliher's end-of-session traditions: bringing her children to visit during the final night, sometimes even to last-minute meetings.

When Kelliher isn't at home, she says she's fortunate her family has the help of her 86-year-old mother, Elaine, who has come to stay with them every legislative session since Kelliher was elected.

"She has been the secret weapon in being able to be here and stay here," Kelliher said.

Kelliher says one of the biggest changes she's seen at the Legislature over the past 12 years is in the way constituents communicate with lawmakers. She gets fewer phone calls than she once did, with most people contacting her by e-mail. Others opt for newer vehicles like Facebook and Twitter.

To the person who serves as the next Speaker of the House, Kelliher offers the same advice that was given to her.

"Make friends with everyone: legislators, Democrats, Republicans, staff members, people who come to advocate," she said. "The second thing is to know the budget. If you know the budget, you can do just about anything for your constituents." 🌸



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHEID

House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher lists the passage of renewable energy standards and the outdoors/arts constitutional amendment as highlights of her legislative career.

STEPPING DOWN

House Speaker
Margaret Anderson Kelliher
DFL
District 60A - Minneapolis
Terms: 6 (elected 1998)
Advice to successor: "Make friends with everyone."