

Trip to Ireland tops legislator's retirement agenda

By Jim Thielman



The clover leaf pressed into a picture frame on Rep. Mark Mahon's desk was picked by his son at the Mahon homestead in Ireland. Now that Mahon is retiring after six years in the House, a trip to Ireland is high on his agenda — an agenda that's been fairly full for nearly 50 years.

Mahon spent four years in the Air Force, another 35 years at Case International Harvester, 17 years as a local union officer, and 17 in city government. Add to that six years as a state representative.

"You add all those up and I should be 100 years old," Mahon (DFL-Bloomington) said.

Well, maybe 75. Of course, some of those experiences were concurrent, but to stuff all that experience into Mahon's 67 years seemingly would require a shoehorn.

Mahon plans to stay active in a public role he hasn't yet defined, but he does not deny feeling a twinge of melancholy about leaving state government.

"I think anybody we send out of here who says they don't miss it is not being true to themselves. This has been a real rewarding experience. I made a lot of good friends," Mahon said. "I know what people have often thought of politicians, but along with my days at Case, I can't say that I ever worked with a group of more dedicated people."

His margin of victory has increased in each of his three elections, and some urged him to chase a fourth term, but Mahon said, "Sooner or later you have to let go, and it just seemed like it was the right time."

Mahon considered waiting until the end of the session to announce his retirement, but decided that was unfair to voters and candidates. At least three Republicans have announced candidacy for his District 40A seat, and word is as many Democrats will be part of the mix.

Another consideration for Mahon is his wife, Florence, who is recovering from surgery to remove a benign brain tumor. She coordinated all his political campaigns. While the recovery seems smooth, the incident suggests it might be time to focus more on his family, Mahon said.

Mahon serves on the House Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs, Financial Institutions and Insurance, and Transportation and Transit committees. He's vice chair of the Transportation and Transit Finance Division.

It was during a transportation finance meet-



After a long career of public service, Rep. Mark Mahon is leaving the House after this term, but the Bloomington resident plans to stay active in public affairs.

ing this session that Mahon introduced a bill pertaining to a new category of collector license plates for cars from the mid-70s that left the hearing room resonating with laughter. Legislators were inclined to think the plates would end up on cars more rusty than collectible, and the bill failed to get a hearing the previous session.

"I never thought it would get a hearing this year, either" Mahon said later.

The grilling of Mahon, and his responses, took a comic turn. At least three legislators were in tears before discussion concluded, setting up the payoff line from Rep. Bernie Lieder (DFL-Crookston), who chairs the division and who co-sponsored the bill.

"Representative Mahon, is this your re-election bill?" Lieder asked.

When the final round of laughter ebbed, Mahon admitted it was perhaps the first piece of legislation ever laughed to death. Rep. Al Juhnke (DFL-Willmar) was among the culprits.

"Mark came to the Legislature with a lot of experience," Juhnke said. "I think he realized politics is a funny game, and if you take yourself too seriously, you'll drive yourself nuts. He was a good sport about carrying that bill, and I've never seen a committee recess to dry their eyes. That was a lot of fun, and I think that's how we'll all remember him."

While self-deprecating, Mahon has the

knack for trimming to the essence of complicated transportation issues. He's dealt so long with civic issues that his demeanor suggests the competent, workmanlike approach of the local, small-town barber pulling up the window shade and lighting the barber pole for another day's work.

He's balanced that with a knack for long-range planning.

Mahon has championed light rail transit in the metropolitan area for years. He said in committee hearings this year that 20 years ago was the best time to do it.

"This is the second-best time," Mahon said. "If we don't do it with the budget surplus we have now, it will be another 20 years. Frankly, I think if you get a segment of light rail in and operating somewhere, everyone else will be lining up and asking 'when is it going to be our turn?'"

Mahon is also proud of his work during his first term to pass a bill that helped Bloomington get bonding for highway improvements around the Mall of America. The project has contributed to the mall's raging success.

Because Mahon thinks everyone should be involved in public service, he says he has no plans to "go and hide. I'm 67. Not young; not that old. But I've spent 23 years in elective office, and it's hard to remember when I wasn't running for something." 