

Crossing another bridge

Marko to exit the House, but hopes to continue legislative service in the Senate

By DAVID MAEDA

In June 1985, Rep. Sharon Marko (DFL-Cottage Grove) moved to the Twin Cities from Chicago for graduate school. One of the first things she noticed during her first drive into the southeastern part of the metropolitan area was the traffic problem in the Wakota Bridge area where Interstate 494 intersects with Highway 61.

She immediately wondered what designers were thinking in building a four-lane bridge at the only Mississippi River crossing between Hastings and St. Paul. The bridge is part of a major truck route.

What she later discovered was that the Wakota Bridge, named after the two counties that it connects — Dakota and Washington — was completed in 1958. When the freeway was later constructed, engineers incorporated the bridge into the road system rather than tearing it down and building a more adequate crossing.

Weekday traffic figures on the bridge that connects Newport and South St. Paul reached an estimated 80,000 vehicles by the mid-1990s. Making the bottleneck even worse is an antiquated junction connecting I-494 and Highway 61 east of the bridge.

“First responders have to get out of their cars and run up on the bridge to get to the accident,” Marko said.

It was the bridge and issues related to it that started Marko’s public service career.

As she settled into her new home in Newport she began attending city council meetings hoping to bring attention to the importance of addressing the traffic issue.

She learned the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) told the community that all local issues involving the highway needed to be addressed before the project would become a priority for the department. That meant that whatever solution was developed would not be completed until the year 2020.

“That would have been the death knell for the city of Newport,” Marko said.

She won a spot on the city council in 1989, serving for three years and chairing a task force designed to develop community consensus for

a plan to address the traffic issue. She eventually became the deputy mayor where she served for two years.

A few months after the task force completed its plan in 1994, the House member from Marko’s district, former Rep. Pat Beard (DFL-Cottage Grove), announced he would not



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

Rep. Sharon Marko asks a question during a hearing of the House Transportation Policy Committee earlier this session. Marko plans to leave the House and seek a seat in the Minnesota Senate in November. Rep. Bernie Lieder, left, and Rep. Henry Kalis, right, are also members of the committee.

seek re-election. Marko said the timing seemed perfect and she would be able to follow the project to the next level — securing state funding.

Addressing the issue was originally estimated to cost tens of millions of dollars. Construction is set to begin this spring at an estimated \$250 million, with anticipated completion in five to six years.

During the 16 years she spent working on the project, Marko said she never doubted that it would eventually get done. However, she said that focusing on getting the whole project done at one time has been a fight.

“I like to call it a ‘House of Cards’ where if you don’t build the whole thing at once and you pick out bits and pieces then the whole thing falls apart,” she said.

In addition to serving on the House Transportation Policy and Finance committees,

Marko was the lead DFL member of the House Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs Committee.

And now she hopes the next step will include a seat in the Minnesota Senate.

When the redistricting plan was announced, Marko said, she was surprised to see a newly created Senate district that incorporates her entire House district. Again the timing of the new opportunity seemed perfect.

She cited the culture differences between the House and Senate as one reason a Senate run seemed natural. She considers herself a “policy wonk,” and she said the Senate seems more deliberate and less political in its decision-making.

“I think they are able to take a step back in the Senate and give policy a little more thought,” she

said. “They tend to be a little more deliberate and I think that makes for good public policy.”

Serving for four terms meant developing many friendships, and Marko said she will miss working with her colleagues. Those on the other side of the aisle said they appreciated her abilities as a member of the House.

“She was always on top of the issues. I consider her to be very bright and a very capable legisla-

tor,” said Rep. Greg Davids (R-Preston).

Though Marko has gotten the most attention for her work on the Wakota Bridge, that has not been her most gratifying accomplishment.

“When a constituent has called me and I can help with a problem — all this is done quietly — and then I get a letter of thanks. That makes me feel better than anything else.”

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Sharon Marko
DFL

District 57B — Cottage Grove

Terms: 4

Career notes: Marko worked to help secure funding for a new bridge spanning the Mississippi River near Newport to alleviate congestion on the Wakota Bridge.