

Green, clean and retired, Gene Merriam stays busy

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Star Tribune

March 25, 2014 - 12:59 PM

His peers called him “Clean Gene,” and during two decades as a DFL senator, he was so respected for his fairness, honesty and hard work that even Republicans made overtures to recruit him to run for governor.

Colleagues say Gene Merriam, who retired recently as president of the nonprofit Freshwater Society, had a statewide impact on Minnesota waters and environment as a senator and as Department of Natural Resources commissioner. He also helped refocus Freshwater Society research and public policy work on sustainable groundwater use and reducing agricultural runoff.

Back in the early 1980s, Republican candidate recruiter and then Consumer Services Commissioner Kris Sanda sometimes differed on environmental bills with Sen. Merriam. But she respected him enough to make an odd request.

“I took Gene out to lunch at the Embassy Suites and tried to convince him to run for governor. He looked at me sweetly and said, “Which party?”” recalled Sanda, 76. “I said, ‘I prefer Republican, but I’d support you as a Democrat.’”

Asked last week if he ever seriously considered running for governor, Merriam quipped: “Not very long.”

Merriam, of Coon Rapids, was a key player in major watershed, waste management and recycling laws while a state senator for 22 years. He left the Senate in 1996 to become vice president and chief financial officer of ECM Publishers, a community newspapers business, owned by former Gov. Elmer L. Andersen.

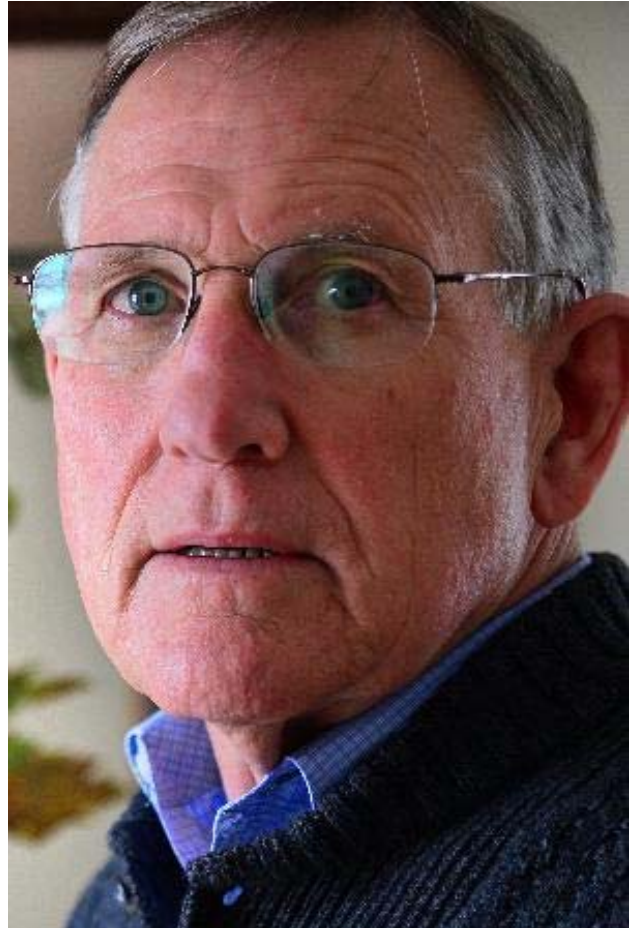
Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty thought enough of the DFLer to appoint him DNR commissioner from 2003 to 2007. Next Merriam led the Freshwater Society for six years until he retired in December.

Although he lacks a consistent day job, Merriam, 69, continues his public service as a member of state councils on clean water and sustainable forestry. The certified public accountant also serves on a handful of corporate, environmental and nonprofit boards. And last week, Merriam spent two days baby-sitting his two youngest grandchildren in Falcon Heights.

Sanda, who also served as public service commissioner in the 1990s, said she approached “Clean Gene” about being a candidate because “he listened to people and almost always came up with a solution. He met people in the middle. He is intelligent and a man of his word ... He won’t say one thing and do another.”

“He was one of the great environmental champions of his era in the Legislature,” said Whitney Clark, head of the nonprofit Friends of the Mississippi River, who lobbied for some of Merriam’s bills. He said Merriam had a reputation for reading everything, including financial data.

“He was not afraid to dive deep and ask hard questions. It was hard to get stuff by him,” Clark said. “He had impeccable integrity.”



Gene Merriam

Richard Sennott, Star Tribune

Steve Woods, who served on the state's Environmental Quality Board with then-Commissioner Merriam, succeeded him as head of the Freshwater Society.

"He is a good-government guy not distracted by party labels," said Woods, whose previous position was assistant director of the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. "He was looking after what makes for good government policy."

Merriam, a hunter, fisherman and bird watcher, grew up with 10 siblings in Crystal and worked as a grocery stock boy to pay his tuition at Benilde-St. Margaret High School in St. Louis Park. After graduating in 1962, he joined the Marines for two years. Then he earned a business degree from the University of Minnesota in 1967, got married and had three children.

After college he landed a job with the Arthur Andersen accounting firm. In 1973, he won his first elected post as a Coon Rapids City Council member.

Looking back, Merriam wishes he knew then what he has learned since about runoff and groundwater use. He regrets not considering the Mississippi River as a source and not using better watershed management when he approved new city wells, streets and stormwater systems in then fast-growing Coon Rapids.

"I'm paying penance in my golden years for things I did before," he said with a wry smile. "Nobody told me about runoff and pollution and that it's better to keep water on the land and slow runoff."

After two years on the council, Merriam won a special election for a state Senate seat. In his spare time, he began refereeing high school football games, which he continued until 2012.

"Refereeing has a lot of similarities to holding political office," Merriam said, sitting in his high-ceiling, many-windowed townhouse overlooking a pond last week. "You make a lot of tough decisions and no matter what you decide, half the people are mad at you."

Merriam chaired the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee for six years, followed by 10 years as head of the influential Finance Committee until he left the Senate in 1996. He said he was proud of his work on the Waste Management Act, enacted in 1980, which encouraged more recycling and less landfill use, the Metropolitan Surface Water Management Act of 1982 and the Sustainable Forest Resources Act of 1995.

Guarding public dollars

At the DNR helm, Merriam said he urged staff members to be transparent in their work and how they spent state funds. "We needed to pay attention to how we used money and why," he said.

The new commissioner had a panoramic view from his office at DNR headquarters in St. Paul.

"I'm up on the sixth floor and I see everything in the parking lot. I see all these cars. I'm wondering, 'How many do we have?'"

He called in the DNR fleet manager, who told him all the cars were needed to quickly serve his customers. Merriam asked who the customers were.

DNR employees, the manager said.

Merriam replied that DNR customers are state taxpayers. He reminded the manager that state executive-branch agencies could request cars from the central motor pool, rather than buy enough to have them constantly available on demand.

"We reduced the number of cars in the inventory," Merriam said.