Longtime legislator prided himself on friendships

South St. Paul DFLer also was a lifelong friend of hockey.

By J. PATRICK COOLICAN
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Sen. Jim Metzen, who served in the Legislature for more than four decades, died Monday after battling lung cancer. He was 72.

Metzen, DFL-South St. Paul, was widely praised for his ability to work with colleagues on both sides of the aisle, bridging business and labor and other competing interests to advance policies for his district and the state.

"'Metz' never made a member of the minority party feel like you were in the minority," said Sen. David Senjem, R-Rochester, using his nickname for the friend who warmly welcomed him to the Senate despite different party labels and vast differences in seniority. "You always mattered."

Senate Majority Leader Tom Bakk, DFL-Cook, agreed:

"If you were a good person, then you were well-respected by Jim," Bakk said.

Senjem said the two shared a breakfast table at the Downtowner, a popular St. Paul restaurant near the State Capitol, with a rotating, bipartisan cast of characters.

Rep. Rick Hansen, DFL-

State Sen. Jim Metzen dies of lung cancer at 72

South St. Paul, who met Metzen in 1988, said he would always remember his senator at crisp fall booya festivals, smiling and joking with everyone because they all knew and loved him, whether they called him "senator" or "Jimmy."

"In life and in politics, Jim knew the importance of true friendship," said former GOP Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who also grew up in South St. Paul. "He was a pragmatist and a problem solver and was always good to his word. He was 'old school' in the best sense of the term. He will be dearly missed."

Metzen, who announced earlier in 2016 that this year's legislative session would be his last, was more than just a beloved colleague — his humor and charity helped him achieve a long record of legislative accomplishments.

"Endless," said Hansen, of Metzen's work in the district.

He was instrumental in the development of Kaposia Landing, a former demolition landfill known as Port Crosby that was transformed into public recreation space. He also delivered trails and economic development projects and helped save the Rock Island Swing Bridge that was slated for destruction, among many other local projects.

Metzen also will be forever identified with the development of youth hockey. The James Metzen Mighty Ducks Ice Arena Grant Program was renamed in his honor.

Hockey was a lifetime passion for Metzen. He played goalie in high school for the South St. Paul Packers in their heyday, and he steered funding through the Mighty Ducks program to rinks beginning in the late 1990s.

Metzen, a retired banker, disclosed last year that he was receiving treatment for lung cancer. His legislative tenure spanned 42 years; he was elected to the Senate in 1986 after first serving six straight terms in the House. Metzen was chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee at the time of his death and was a former Senate president.

"When my term is completed, it is my hope that my constituents believe I represented them well and those that came in contact with me at the Capitol believe I was fair," Metzen's retirement announcement read. "No matter if you were a Democrat or Republican, I tried to form friendships and alliances with people."

Metzen is survived by his wife, Sandie, and two adult sons. A public memorial service is tentatively scheduled for Monday evening at South St. Paul High School.

Staff writer Paul Walsh contributed to this report.

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Jim Metzen served 42 years in the state House and Senate.

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