

FRIDAY, JANUARY 12, 2013

Don Moe Legislator

Principles trumped politics over his long legislative tenure

By CHRISTOPHER SNOWBECK • csnowbeck@startribune.com



In 20 years at the State Capitol, Don Moe became an expert on pensions for public employees, a policy arena that some might consider a sleepy backwater.

In fact, Moe's push for reform and better oversight was so controversial that it's widely regarded as a key reason another DFLer garnered support from unions and others to success-

fully unseat Moe from the state Senate in 1990.

Moe chaired the government operations committee in the Senate, and the criminal justice committee in the House. He also chaired a committee charged with guiding renovations for the State Capitol — a building that he visited with some frequency in his retirement, providing informal tours for friends and family.

And Moe helped bring into politics his younger brother Roger, the long-serving Senate majority leader who unsuccessfully ran for governor in 2002. Don Moe, 75, died at home in St. Paul on Dec. 30, following an eight-year struggle with multiple myeloma.

"He understood the dual mission of a legislator, which is not only to write fair and just and correct laws, but also to perform serious oversight," Roger Moe said. "And he was a master at both. ... This is not just a younger brother's love speaking."

Donald Melvin Moe was born in Crookston, Minn., and grew up on a family farm in Polk County. Electricity didn't arrive until he was 8, and he attended a one-room schoolhouse through the fifth grade.

Moe served in the U.S. Army from 1964 to 1966, and was stationed in West Germany. Following his discharge, Moe set out on a 10,000-mile driving and camping trip around the Mediterranean Sea.

After graduating in 1968 from the University of Minne-

sota, Moe got interested in politics and wound up running in 1970 for a House seat representing a portion of St. Paul. He persuaded his younger brother to run for the Senate that year, too, and both were elected.

While in office, Don Moe pushed for reform at state prisons following reports of inmate mistreatment. He also helped create the first standards training board for peace officers.

In both efforts, Moe called for changes even though the positions weren't necessarily popular, said former Rep. Bob Vanasek, DFL-New Prague, who served in the House from 1973 to 1992, including five years as House speaker. Moe's regard for principle over politics came through in his work on public pensions, as well.

A Star Tribune editorial in 1990 that endorsed Moe in that year's DFL primary asserted: "In his 20 years as a legislator, state Sen. Don Moe has proven to be a hero. He has made his mark as a good-government reformer; he's earned his stripes defending the integrity of the state's multibillion-dollar pension plans."

Moe lost that race. He also was unsuccessful in a subsequent bid to become state auditor, with a Star Tribune editorial in 1998 stating "many municipal police and fire pension associations ... helped oust Moe from a St. Paul Senate seat in 1990, and worked hard to keep him from winning his first bid for state auditor in 1994." The editorial, which backed Moe in another quest for the auditor job, added: "Fortunately, Moe is as stubborn as he is principled."

After leaving the Legislature, Moe restored one of Minnesota's oldest houses in the Ramsey Hill neighborhood of St. Paul. His wife, Colleen Halpine, said that Moe did almost all of the work without the help of contractors.

Built in 1857, the house is within walking distance of the Capitol, where Moe's love for the building and respect for government were on display with every tour he guided.

"He emphasized that this building represents the best that we are in Minnesota," Halpine said. "I think he really thought that government could help raise all of us together."

"Don was always as a legislator very highly principled, and he tended to give political considerations secondary importance." — Sen. Dick Cohen