

safety legislation and the Wetlands Conservation Act of 1991. He served as a sponsor of all four farm safety laws that passed during his time in the House. And as a co-sponsor of the wetlands law, he worked to make sure that the concerns of farmers were addressed while also improving the environment.

Dille hasn't hesitated to criticize the size and structure of state government, including the Legislature. His recommendations have included closing the University of Minnesota Law School, reducing the size of the Legislature and/or its staff, freezing government salaries, and decreasing the number of legal holidays for the public sector.

Before running for the House, Dille served as a township supervisor and later as a county commissioner. He said that an odd aspect of moving up the political ladder is that "in a way you have less power" when you move to a larger body. He says his influence over a vote declined from 33 percent as one of three township supervisors, to 20 percent as one of five county commissioners, to less than 1 percent as one of 134 House members.

Dille said he hopes to reduce that trend if he's elected to the Senate. As one of 67 senators, his vote would represent 1.5 percent of those cast.

—Mary Ann Schoenberger



Alice Johnson

Rep. Alice Johnson was a veteran of the House even before she started her first term; she worked there as a secretary for 14 years.

Now, after serving for six years as the representative from Spring Lake Park, Johnson may be leaving the state House to look for a bigger one — the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

She is mounting a campaign against Rep. Gerry Sikorski for the 6th District Congressional seat that takes in much of the northern Twin Cities suburb area.

But should Sikorski receive the DFL party endorsement at the May 9 congressional district convention, Johnson said she'll drop her quest and run for her current seat instead.

Running against an incumbent is a tall task, but uphill battles are nothing new to Johnson. Her first run for the Legislature against an incumbent was almost over before it began. Back in 1986, the House Rules and Legislative Administration Committee tried to establish a rule preventing legislative employees from running for office without taking a leave of absence.

But Johnson, who was her family's main breadwinner at that time, lobbied hard and prevented the rule from being adopted. And then she went on to win the election by a mere 132 votes.

Johnson says that her major accomplishment in the House was bringing "a focus on the importance of dealing with young children." She sponsored a 1991 law that created a Legislative Commission on Children, Youth, and Families, and was elected its chair.

Although the governor vetoed funding for the commission, Johnson held meetings anyway, including a two-day conference on children's issues, and compiled a report on the subject.

As for the Legislature, Johnson said her main frustration has been with the overall structure of the House, which she says leads to "segmentation" of issues.

In fact, as one of her last requirements to get a bachelor's degree in Organizational Management and Communication from Concordia College, Johnson is writing a paper on how the segmentation of issues affects children's issues.

Johnson said she would miss the friendships, excitement, and fun of working on worthwhile projects at the House. But she expects to do more of the same thing if elected to Congress.

—Mary Ann Schoenberger



Ken Nelson

Citing a desire to pursue creative reform of education and government from outside the Legislature, Rep. Ken Nelson (DFL-Mpls) said he will retire from his House seat after the 1992 session.

"I want to create a new future," said Nelson.

Nelson's retirement will end 20 years of service in the House. He has served on a variety of committees but has left his mark in the education area. He has been chair of the Education Finance Division since 1983 and has served on the Education Committee since 1973.

As one of his final acts last month, Nelson pulled out a camera and took pictures of the division members, staff, and the audience. Division members, in turn, praised Nelson as a leader in educational policy. "Ken has led us in caring for kids in the K-12 system second to none," said Rep. Jerry Bauerly (DFL-Sauk Rapids).

Nelson said that in the last 10 years, he has seen significant reform in the quality of education in Minnesota, sending the message that "public education is here to serve the students, and not just those who are employed in it.

"We, in Minnesota, are fortunate that we have a Legislature which is always trying to improve the quality of education," he said.

Nelson believes that the establishment of the Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation in 1983 and the development of performance-based education are

positive signs that the state is strengthening its commitment to education.

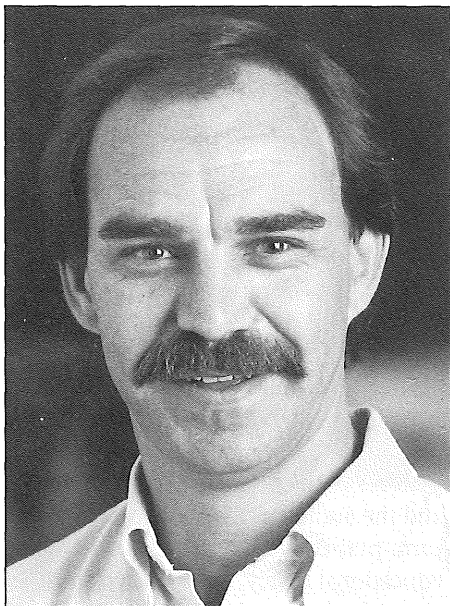
Twenty years of House service is not without its disappointments, however. Nelson said that the resistance of some teachers' unions to effective change has been a frustrating stumbling block.

"We ought to have more quality than what we have, and the resistance of some within the system itself to follow through on substantive and creative change has forced us to create alternatives," he said.

Nelson also expressed frustration with the legislative process itself, stating that "we are not always governed by quality, but too much by partisan politics."

"I remain strong with conviction that our public systems and services are not serving our citizens as well as they should be," he said, adding that he hopes he can make government more responsive by acting outside the government structure itself.

—Steve Knutson



Paul Ogren

The conference committee was in its third day and Rep. Paul Ogren (DFL-Aitkin) was chairing a taxes meeting for possibly the last time.

Sen. Doug Johnson (DFL-Cook), who has seen many House tax chairs come and go said, "I would remind conferees that the chair is a lame duck."

The room erupted in laughter.

While the temptation for some representatives might be to relax during their final year, Ogren has remained at the forefront of some of this session's

most controversial issues.

He has been the driving force behind HealthRight, the proposal that could change the face of health care in Minnesota and the nation by ensuring access to health care. And he has once again co-chaired the taxes conference committee, which is always one of the most important jobs at the Legislature.

But he is quick to give credit where it is due.

"The Minnesota Nurses Association has pushed health care reform legislation in a wholly selfless fashion since 1987," said Ogren.

Whatever their political persuasion, members from both sides of the aisle say they'll miss Ogren's hard-charging presence.

Never shy about letting his views be known, Ogren is usually found in the middle of the action. While he may relish the individual battles, he is not impressed with the process. He said 12 years in the Legislature has made him very cynical.

"I have found that the voice of the people is a distant whisper in the halls of government," he said.

He doesn't intend to become an entrenched figure in government, telling members at a recent hearing that he will once again enjoy "railing at the system from the outside."

But have the halls of government seen the last of Paul Ogren? Don't bet on it.

During a recent committee meeting — where his HealthRight bill endured a difficult grilling — Ogren said, "I would have to be crazy" to seek higher office.

He is, however, frequently mentioned as a candidate for higher office.

—Bob DeBoer



Linda Runbeck

Linda Runbeck, the House Independent-Republican from Circle Pines, believes the lagging economy could in fact be used to enliven Minnesota's democratic process.

The belt-tightening and consequent scrutiny of government spending, said Runbeck, should inspire taxpayers to learn what government programs do.

"Without that knowledge," Runbeck recently wrote her constituents in a newspaper column, "we become lazy armchair quarterbacks calling out cheap shots from the sidelines."

"My hot button is citizen access," Runbeck said, when asked about her priorities as a representative for District 52A, most of which lies in Anoka County north of Minneapolis.

She believes citizens should "get back into the process." Among her proposals for the 1991 session was a bill permitting citizens to form "budget review panels" in city and county government to work "in open dialogue" with local government officials.

Runbeck is serving her fourth year in the House this session. She will be giving up her House seat to campaign for the Senate seat now held by Sen. Fritz Knaak (IR-White Bear Lake), who is retiring from the Senate.

Runbeck, a former Circle Pines city councilwoman, helped other candidates run for the House seat six times before she decided to run for the office herself. She won the House seat in a special election in 1989.