

Conservative voice

Osskopp to step down after eight years because redistricting separates him from longtime constituents

BY SARAH MCKENZIE

Rep. Mike Osskopp (R-Lake City) was stirred to public office by youth at his church.

As a youth pastor he encouraged the younger members of his congregation to take an active role in politics. When they told him to heed his own advice, Osskopp said he couldn't resist.

He was elected to the House in 1994.

After four terms, Osskopp has decided against running for re-election as a result of the redistricting process. He currently represents portions of Goodhue and Wabasha counties along the Mississippi River in southeastern Minnesota.

Under the state's new political map, he would be required to run in a redrawn District 29B, one that pairs him with another incumbent, Rep. Jerry Dempsey (R-Red Wing), and excludes his constituents in Goodhue and Wabasha counties.

"Those are the people who got me here," Osskopp said. "It's my passion to defend and help those people."

Osskopp is an outspoken leader of a conservative group of House lawmakers known as the "DOG" pound, which stands for Down On Government. The group earned the label in 1995 by Charlie Weaver, then a member of the House and current commissioner of Public Safety.

The group advocates for trimming state spending and other "common sense" ideas, Osskopp said. The DOG pound awards bones to members who stand up for those principles.

Rep. John Tuma (R-Northfield), who sits next to Osskopp on the House floor, called Osskopp a powerful speaker and someone he consults for legislative advice.

"He gives good speeches and knows the game of rhetoric," Tuma said. "His arguments are built on a sound philosophy."

During his eight years in office, Osskopp has been a proponent of measures bolstering the state's farmers, including the biodiesel requirement that recently became law.

He has served on the House Agriculture and Rural Development Finance and Policy committees and the Governmental Operations and Veterans Affairs Policy Committee.

As chair of the House gaming subcommittee, Osskopp championed 1999 legislation allowing card club gambling at Canterbury Park.

Osskopp, however, has been critical of recent proposals calling for state-operated casinos.

"It's a sucker's bet," Osskopp wrote in a February commentary piece. "All of the major casino options — state-owned and run, privately licensed and jointly run between the state and

Indian tribes — are iffy and unaffordable, and none would provide the desired results but would cost state taxpayers millions."

In addition to his political life, Osskopp, a radio broadcaster with a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's degree in theology, has stayed active on the airwaves.

He works on the radio show, "Mike and Maggie," with his wife. A Rochester radio station airs the program, which is a blend of

political talk and comedy.

Osskopp said his broadcasting background has helped him "talk about things in a concise and authoritative way" while in office.

"You need to be able to think and talk on the fly," he said. "That's been my strength."

Maggie Osskopp, an independent who voted for Jesse Ventura, said she doesn't always agree with her husband's views but has been proud of his service. She's also toying with the idea of running for public office someday.

"He is not power hungry and doesn't want to stay there at any cost," she said, adding he understands his constituents' "quest for freedom."

"They want to be rural people and they want to have their own river identity," she said.

Osskopp said he isn't ruling out the possibility of running for office again. But for now he'll focus on the radio show and play more golf.

He will also be able to spend more time with his four children and five grandchildren.

Osskopp said he'll probably be best remembered for his "mouth" and being a passionate and often partisan defender of his principles.

"I hope that every member of this body would consider me a friend," he said. "I've learned that all 134 members of the House are wonderful people. They're all trying to do what's best for Minnesota."

A lawmaker from the other side of the aisle, Rep. Tom Rukavina (DFL-Virginia) said Osskopp's sense of humor and support of working people would mark his time at the Capitol.

Though Osskopp makes him "angry at times," he said he expects that from a Republican.

"While he is a super conservative on some issues, he has a heart," Rukavina said. "His sense of humor is infectious, his wit is incomparable, and his heart, when it comes to working people, is as big as the state of Minnesota."



STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Mike Osskopp
Republican
District 29B — Lake City
Terms: 4

Career Notes: Osskopp advocated for smaller government, farmers, and working people while in office. As chairman of the House gaming subcommittee, he also sponsored a number of gambling-related bills, including one in 1999 that created a card club at Canterbury Park.



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHEID

Rep. Mike Osskopp will step down from his House seat this year, after serving four terms in the Legislature. He would have to face incumbent Rep. Jerry Dempsey in November to retain his seat due to redistricting.