

Ready to relax

After 28 years of fighting for St. Paul, Osthoff says it's the right time to step aside

By DAVID MAEDA

Next to the walking trail around Lake Como in St. Paul sits a bench surrounded by newly planted trees dedicated in memory of Sandra Osthoff.

In many ways the memorial to his late wife is an appropriate symbol for Rep. Tom Osthoff's (DFL-St. Paul) career as a 28-year House member.

Osthoff is known for his work on environmental issues, currently serving as the DFL lead on the House Environment and Natural Resources Finance Committee after chairing the same committee in 1997-98. He was an advocate of the creation of the state lottery, with funds dedicated to the environmental trust fund.

He shared his environmental concerns with his wife, Sandra. Osthoff said she loved Como Park, serving on committees to clean up the lake.

highest minority populations in the state, and it is a great opportunity for someone to step up and add balance to the Legislature.

As a child, Osthoff shared a newspaper route in the Capitol area with his four brothers. He remembers watching lawmakers and staff scurry around from the balconies above the chambers.

Now he says one of the things he will miss and remember most fondly are the colleagues and staff he worked with.

"There's some really marvelous people here. You get to meet all different creeds, nationalities, religions, sexual orientation. If you lived in your own little neighborhood the chances of that are nil," he said. "I couldn't go out in the private industry and hire better people. They're incredibly gifted."

When Osthoff decided to run for a House seat in 1974, education issues topped his list

of concerns. He sponsored a law providing a tax deduction for tuition, transportation, and textbooks at private schools. The law was challenged all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld its constitutionality.

Of his accomplishments over the years he is most proud of sponsoring legislation for property tax relief and the Minnesota renter's credit.

He also sponsored changes to the state's elections and public official ethics laws, having also worked as the manager of Ramsey County's property tax department, responsible for overseeing the county's election administration.

"I don't do the glitzy things. I'm trying to do the things that help the most people." Osthoff said.

Known for his sometimes confrontational debate style, he would agree with those who

have said he has mellowed over the years.

"Everybody used to be frightened of me because I would snap and growl and bite once in a while," he said. "I have grown intellectually and emotionally, I'm still evolving. ... If they want to call that mellowing, that's fine with me."

Rep. Ron Abrams (R-Minnetonka) said Osthoff will be very much missed by members from both sides of the aisle.

"Tom is one of the finest members of the Minnesota Legislature that I ever served with," Abrams said. "He never forgot his Rice Street roots and at the same time understood his job had an impact statewide."

Rep. Alice Hausman (DFL-St. Paul), who shares a Senate district with Osthoff, praised his efforts on behalf of the city, specifically projects dealing with infrastructure, Como Park, and the Science Museum of Minnesota.

"Tom is devoted to St. Paul and to his neighborhood. What he does with that commitment in his legislative career is to concentrate on projects that would help his city," she said.

House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) said he will miss working with Osthoff.

"Without question he is the strongest advocate for his community, meaning St. Paul, that I know," Sviggum said. "He understands the process and he gets things done. In the Legislature there are voices in the wilderness. There are ineffective legislators, and there are effective legislators. He is one of the effective ones."

Osthoff said that he'll miss being in the House, but he leaves the Capitol with a smile on his face.

"I'm really proud to be a member of this Legislature. I consider it to be a very high honor. It's a privilege accorded to you ... bestowed on you by the voters and the people of your district. I don't know what's more honorable than to have somebody have confidence that you can do the job for them. How can you not feel humbled when that happens to you?"

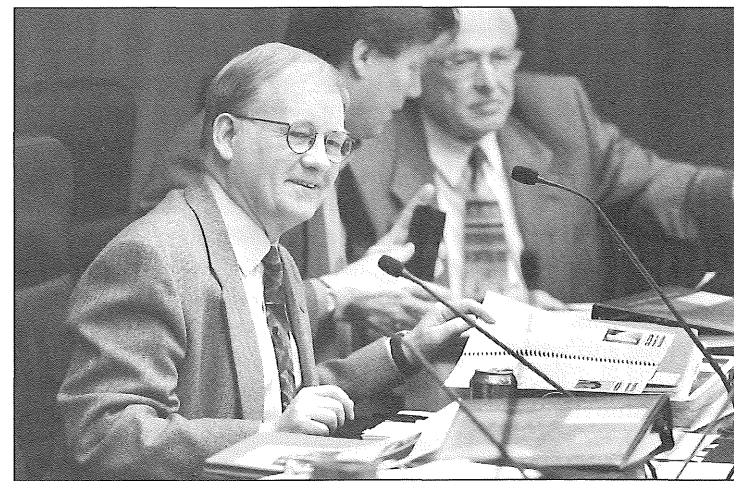


PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

Rep. Tom Osthoff, who spent 28 years in the House advocating for St. Paul projects, will step down after his current term.

When new redistricting maps were released this spring, the district's boundaries greatly changed, reflecting the growing diversity in the city. Being at the retirement age of 65, Osthoff said he knew it was the right time to step aside.

"I just want to relax and enjoy whatever God gives me for the rest of my life on this good earth. And that includes my son, my daughter-in-law, and my two grandchildren," he said.

He said the new district contains one of the

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Tom Osthoff
DFL

District 66A — St. Paul

Terms: 14

Career notes: Osthoff is known for his advocacy of several projects in the Como Park neighborhood, including funding for improvements to the Como Park Zoo and Conservatory. He also sponsored a number of environment-related bills.