

Agriculture advocate bids adieu

Otremba stepping down after 13 years to focus on family, friends

By LAUREN RADOMSKI

Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba (DFL-Long Prairie) is proud of her reputation as a people-person. The seven-term legislator says she has among the highest number of constituent contacts of anyone in the House.

“That was my job and I was really good with one-on-ones,” she said.

Otremba says she will miss those conversations with her constituents and colleagues when she leaves office at the end of her term. She’s looking forward, however, to spending more time with her friends and family, particularly her grandchildren.

Otremba was elected to the House in a 1997 special election following the death of her husband, former Rep. Ken Otremba. She remembers a conversation they had shortly before his death in which he asked her “to continue doing what we were doing together.”

When Otremba came to St. Paul, one of her daughters, then in grade school, came too. As Otremba homeschooled her daughter, she sought the help of other legislators who had expertise in various fields.

“She had to go to all these people, whether they were Republicans or Democrats,” Otremba said.

Rural education and health care have been among her top priorities. In her first term, Otremba sponsored a law that created a program enabling rural hospitals to receive funding to provide public health services. A daughter of a farm family, Otremba is passionate about agriculture issues and served as chair of the House Agriculture, Rural Economies and Veterans Affairs Committee.

She’s also been an advocate for children and families, sponsoring bills that would assist low-income households in need of affordable housing and health care. She’s also sponsored several bills related to her pro-life stance on abortion.

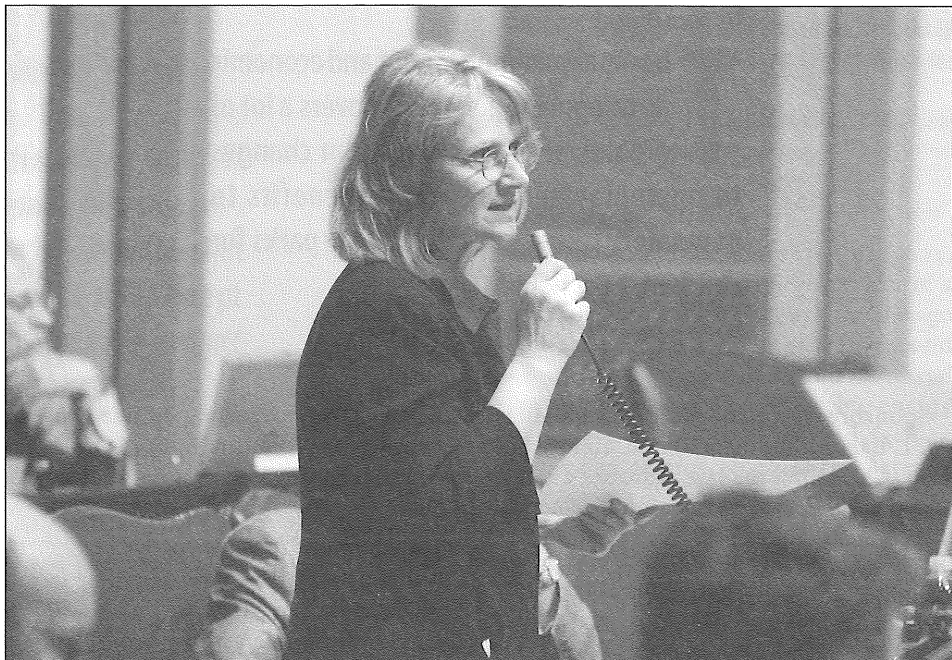


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba, a seven term legislator, says she will miss conversations with her constituents when she leaves office.

Otremba says a lot has changed since she took office, including an increase in the degree of partisanship. “I was there to take care of the people, not to bash them” — and she predicts the tone may grow worse in light of future budget pressures.

It may be more difficult for legislators to work on behalf of Greater Minnesota, Otremba said, as the Twin Cities metropolitan area grows and rural communities lose residents. Amidst all the challenges, she encourages her successor to remember what the job is about.

“It’s really all about people and that’s very important,” she said.

Otremba said she’s looking forward to assisting constituents from Long Prairie over the next several months. She’s also using a favorite hobby to instill an appreciation of farm life in

younger generations. Together with a friend, Otremba has sewn more than 20 books for kids, all of them with cotton pages containing text and farm scenes. It’s a project that’s kept evolving since Otremba made one for her first grandchild about three years ago. 🌿

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba
DFL
District 11B - Long Prairie
Terms: 7 (elected 1997 special election)
Advice to successor: “It’s really all about people.”