

# In the middle, a man apart

After 24 years in the House, Ozment prepares to step down

By Nick Busse

**I**t doesn't matter whether it's your first year in the Legislature or your last — your obligations and your oath of office remain the same, according to Rep. Dennis Ozment (R-Rosemount), so until the final gavel drops on the 2008 legislative session, he's not preoccupied with what will happen next.

"I'm not retiring, so to speak, I'm just not running for re-election. I don't know what that means because I haven't really stopped to consider options until I get through this session," Ozment said.

Ozment, currently the longest-serving Republican in either body, will conclude his 24th and final year in office when the Legislature adjourns. The reason he's leaving?

"It's just time," he said.

"I just know that it's time for me to move on — while everything is good. I still have my health; I still got options out there. Twenty-four years is enough."

As a lawmaker, Ozment will leave office with a wide range of legislative accomplishments under his belt. Among them, he has been a fierce advocate for the environment — in particular, for cleaning up the state's waters. He was the chief sponsor of the state's Clean Water Legacy Act, and served at various points in his career as chairman of the House's environment policy and finance committees.

Among his greatest achievements, however, Ozment is perhaps best known for his ability to work across party lines. Throughout his career, he has preferred to craft legislation by listening to all sides of a debate and reserving judgment until he's heard all the facts, thereby making friends instead of adversaries. The consequences of this can be seen in the way many of his colleagues react to him; whether speaking softly in committee or delivering fiery oratory on the House floor, people tend to listen when he talks.

"I think that the biggest component that you need in order to be really successful at the Legislature is people need to trust you. And as frustrated as people may get with me from time to time, depending on their points of view, they can pretty well trust where I'm coming from. I don't change from one day to the next," Ozment said.

Ozment concedes that his style occasionally puts him at odds with members of his own party, some of whom don't always appreciate his moderate approach to legislating.

"When I was first here, I felt that I was more of the mainstream of my caucus. And as time has gone on, I think that I've become more and more isolated in the middle," Ozment said.

Ozment spent 27 years as a Minneapolis firefighter and fire captain — an occupation in which teamwork is an indispensable value. In the Legislature, where teamwork is often fleeting, Ozment said he's nevertheless tried to emphasize its importance to his fellow legislators. Whatever party is in charge, he said the majority often needs the minority's support to get anything accomplished, and vice versa. He thinks lawmakers shouldn't fear controversy.

"If we were all on the same page and all in the same groove, it would be either a very bland system or we'd be in a dictatorship, where everybody is forced to march in one direction. So the diverse ideas and sense of direction is, I think, very healthy," he said.

Ozment and his wife, Gayle, have two grown children and five grandchildren. Although they have no immediate plans for after session, Ozment said they will likely do some traveling, and spend time at their lakeside cabin near Annandale.

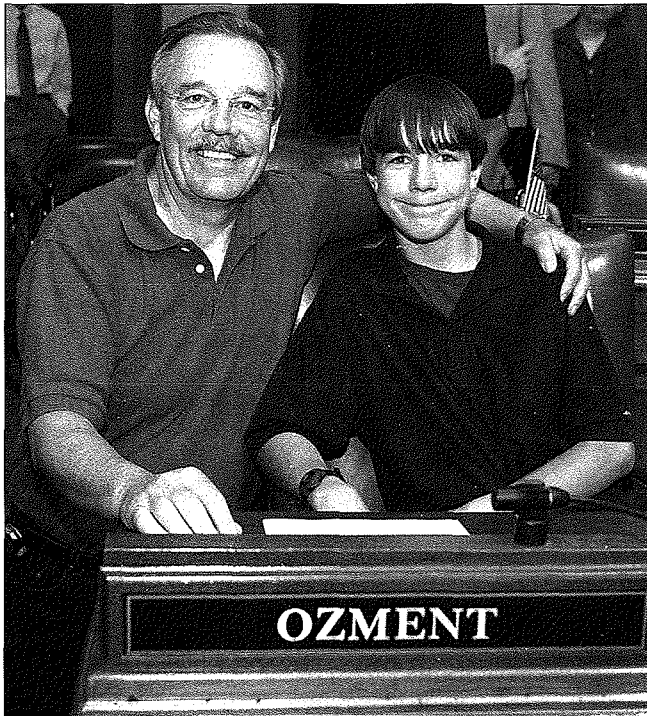


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Dennis Ozment has his grandson, Jason Eckre, try the chair at his House Chamber desk during a visit to the Capitol.

## STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Dennis Ozment  
Republican  
District 37B — Rosemount  
Terms: 12 (elected 1984)

Advice for successor: "Remember that it really is teamwork. There's no such thing as a powerful politician. The next election will show you who has the power. The power is in the people, and (members) shouldn't forget that."