

Lawmaker's consistent theme: control state spending



There are a few things that Rep. Walter Perlt (DFL-Woodbury) is not.

He is not a partisan squabbler. He is not a smooth talker.

He is not slick.

"I don't consider myself much of a politician," Perlt said during a recent interview. "I stay away from the politics. That's probably why I've got as many good friends around here as I do."

The retiring lawmaker won those friends at the Capitol with a no-nonsense approach to the issues and a straightforward manner in dealing with his peers and others.

"Whether you're talking to a lobbyist, to a constituent, or to another member, you've got to say what you mean," Perlt said.

And he insists that such forthrightness comes from personality — not calculated persona.

"It's just how I am," he said. "Sometimes it helps you and sometimes it doesn't."

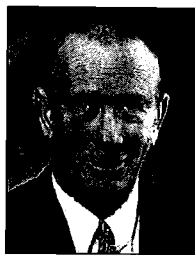
The second-term lawmaker recently announced he will not seek re-election this fall. His departure comes in large part as the result of health problems.

Arthritis at times limits Perlt's ability to get around. Because flare-ups of the malady make it difficult to get up and down stairs, he is now considering selling his Woodbury home and possibly moving out of the district he represents.

Perlt, 68, said two bills top his list of legislative accomplishments. One helped to bolster government accountability, and the other extended new protection to consumers.

Perlt was an integral part of a three-year effort to pass legislation to reduce state spending on private contractors and consultants and was a co-sponsor of a successful 1995 measure to that end.

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Rep. Walter Perlt

Noted achievements: Perlt co-sponsored a 1995 law that mandated a 5 percent cut in the state's use of private contractors and consultants. The measure followed a vetoed 1993 bill that would have required a 10 percent cut in such spending. Perlt also backed 1993 legislation that mandated telephone caller identification systems be made available to metropolitan-area consumers. The bill also mandated that other services such as selective call acceptance and rejection be made available to all consumers in the metro area.

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Perlt said the law represents a solid effort to deal with abuses and growth in state contracting, which increased by 83 percent between 1983 and 1993.

"The important thing is the [1995] bill passed and it's working," Perlt said. "We never tooted our horns about it, but really it was a pretty good piece of legislation."

Perlt also backed 1993 legislation that mandated telephone caller identification systems be made available to metropolitan-area consumers.

The law started as a more modest proposal to provide caller identification to taxi cab companies in order to protect cab drivers.

The bill grew in scope during the legislative process to require that caller identification and other services such as selective call acceptance and rejection be made available to all consumers in the metro area.

"That was a pretty important bill," Perlt said. "It's something people find useful."

If there is an overall theme to his time in the Legislature it is his consistent effort to control state spending, according to Perlt.

"More people have to move in that direction," he said. "People are concerned about the cost of government these days, and we need to find ways to reduce government spending without cutting necessary programs."

Perlt is upbeat about his future, although

he acknowledges he would not be stepping down if not for health problems.

He hopes to move to a spot on the St. Croix River, where he could "go fishing everyday." And he looks forward to spending winters with his wife, Dodie — away from the Minnesota cold.

Perlt was an unlikely candidate for the Legislature before mounting his first run in 1992. He had retired from his job as chief of enforcement for liquor control after 38 years in the Department of Public Safety.

"I never had any idea I'd be working again, much less running for office," Perlt said.

He got into politics only at the urging of DFLers in his district, but proceeded to run an energetic, scrappy campaign in 1992 and a similarly successful re-election bid in 1994.

"You hear people complaining and grumbling all the time, but the thing that surprised me is that the system works," Perlt said. "It works in large part thanks to some really dedicated people — in particular, the great staff."

As Perlt prepares to leave the House, he is happy to recall lessons learned and "good friends" made along the way.

"I'm going to miss it a lot," he said. "No one has enjoyed it more than I have. It's been a blast."

— Nick Healy