

No ordinary term

House's lone independent garnered attention by leaving the Republican Caucus, while continuing to fight on emotional issues

BY CHRIS VETTER

Rep. Doug Reuter (Ind.-Owatonna) has always given his work — any work — his full attention and effort.

"I'm all the way into it. All or nothing," he said. An entrepreneur and inventor of the board game Sequence, Reuter, 51, has been intrigued by politics since he served in the Navy during the Vietnam era, and that feeling only increased when he later was a member of the student senate in college.

That interest in politics — his views on limiting government intrusion and protecting small businesses — has culminated in a four-year stint at the House.

"My philosophical approach is capitalism and promoting the entrepreneurial spirit," he said.

His colleagues in the House will remember him for those things. Rep. Greg Davids

(R-Preston), chair of the House Commerce Committee, of which Reuter is a member, said he has served small business during his tenure.

"I think he's been a stalwart for small business issues and free markets," Davids said. "He's a great free-markets legislator."

What some describe as his "independent spirit" prompted Reuter to leave the Republican Caucus in the House last summer and announce that he would not run for re-election. He is now the only independent member of the House.

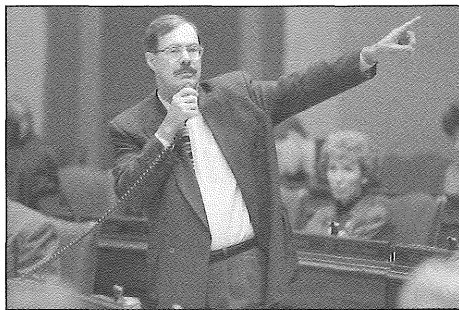
After making the change, Reuter was assigned to an office in the Capitol, while all other House members have their offices in the State Office Building. The only staff assigned to the newly independent lawmaker was a part-time aide.

Reuter later filed a lawsuit against House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) to obtain the same working conditions and level of staff other members get. That suit remains unresolved, although Reuter did get his way on the location of his office.

Now back in the State Office Building, Reuter's office features a variety of editions of the Sequence board game, which he created in the mid-1970s and has been in production since 1981.

Reuter was first elected to the House in 1996. He had lived in Owatonna for only about a year before he won the seat. Previously, he had run for the Legislature in 1994 as a resident of Eden Prairie.

While he acknowledges his conflict with the Republican Caucus in the House contributed to his decision to not seek re-election, Reuter



Rep. Doug Reuter

also said he believes strongly that a legislator should be able to recognize when it's time to leave the Legislature.

"If I was going to be in my last term and was no longer worried about re-election, I might as well leave the caucus and be free to

vote my conscience," Reuter said. The Owatonna legislator is still a member of the Republican Party; he recently served as a state delegate to a party convention.

"The Republican Party did not abandon my views and beliefs," he said. "The Republican Caucus didn't stand any longer for the things I stood for."

Reuter said the Republican Caucus gave up too much in order to cut taxes last year.

On the first day of this session, Reuter tried to amend the House rules so House prayers would not be required to be nondenominational. He later sought to throw out high school writing test results because of a question he believed to be offensive.

Reuter and former Rep. Charlie Weaver, now commissioner of public safety, sponsored a bill in 1997 that would have blocked Internet pornography in classrooms. Reuter points to that as a good example of how lawmakers can be effective by working together and not wor-

rying about who gets credit for legislation.

But he is most proud of his 1999 actions that forced the state to re-examine its agreement to buy 6,500 800-megahertz police radios from Motorola. Reuter contends the agreement was reached without an open and fair bidding process.

"We now will have competitive bids and we will have more than one provider," he said. "We turned around the whole system."


Reuter plans to retire in Austin, Texas, where he is building a home. When the session adjourns, he will keep in contact with constituents via e-mail, telephone, and several visits to his district until his term expires.

He said he likes the fact that his new state doesn't have an income tax. Reuter and his wife, Nancy, have family in Texas and also prefer the climate there. His 14-year-old son will join them in the move; his two older daughters will be attending college.

Reuter said he has no regrets during his four years, though he said he wishes his move out of the Republican Caucus could have gone smoother and he hadn't had to sue the speaker to get equal funding for staff.

While Reuter will not personally benefit if he wins the lawsuit, he does believe it could change the way legislators caucus in the future. For instance, if he wins, a dozen legislators could form a "conservative caucus" and obtain funding for their own staff, Reuter contends.

Reuter is still unsure what job he will pursue next. But he said it will likely be in human resources consulting or lobbying — a job he performed before being elected as a legislator.

"I don't see myself going to work for a company 9 to 5, Monday through Friday," he said. "I will also be working diligently to turn Sequence into an interactive Internet game and getting it marketed." 

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Doug Reuter
Independent
District 28A – Owatonna
Terms: 2

Career notes: A sometimes outspoken member who has worked to increase accountability in government and to support small businesses, Reuter left the Republican Caucus in 1999 to become the only independent member of the House.