

Exiting under a cloud

Rostberg says his business pursuits and other interests prompted his decision to leave, not the criminal charge pending against him

BY JON FURE

After serving three terms in the House, Rep. Jim Rostberg (R-Isanti) will not seek re-election.

He said his decision to leave is not related to a criminal sexual conduct charge pending against him. He has maintained his innocence in the case.

Rather, the 43-year-old Isanti man said he is leaving largely because he and his wife, Kathy, plan to start a family business.

Rostberg said he will have fond memories of the six years he has spent as a lawmaker, but that he wants to dedicate more time to life in the private sector.

"It was never my intent to become a career politician," Rostberg said.

When he first ran for office, he felt that he had some good ideas that could benefit the state, Rostberg said.

At the end of his legislative career, he lists as one of his proudest accomplishments a bill related to property taxes that he originally sponsored in 1996. The proposal was passed into law in 1997 with the help of Rep. Ron Abrams (R-Minnetonka), now the chair of the House Taxes Committee and long a Republican leader on tax issues.

The law allows business owners to negotiate a property tax abatement to help them expand their business. The idea came from a constituent of Rostberg's who wanted to expand his business and increase staff, but the expected higher property taxes made the plan infeasible.

Under the law, a city, county, or school district governing board can reduce the tax on the property that is expanded for up to 10

years, provided that it would accomplish a specified public purpose, such as economic development and job creation.

Rostberg said the law makes sense because a business doesn't realize an immediate profit in that situation. It allows the business to expand and get established before paying the higher property tax. Such an abatement is negotiated through public hearings, he said, so that people in a community can speak for or against such a proposal.

He noted that the measure was significant to him because he helped the bill become law even though his party was in the minority.

"I've never had a problem working with members of either caucus," he said. "They're all professional, and they do a good job representing their districts. If I don't see eye-to-eye with someone on an issue, that's not something I take personally."

This year, Rostberg's life and political career took a turn nobody could have expected. He was arrested March 2 in the Capitol and charged in Isanti County the next day.

Rostberg is facing one count of second-degree criminal sexual conduct in Isanti County, but he has

repeatedly said that is not the reason for his decision to not seek re-election. He said he had already been contemplating leaving the Legislature at the end of this term.

According to the criminal complaint, Rostberg is accused of engaging in criminal sexual contact with a girl under 16.

Rostberg was originally charged with three counts, but two were dropped after prosecutors determined there was not enough evi-

dence to support them. He now faces a single criminal count for allegedly fondling the girl.

A House Ethics Committee probe into the allegations was delayed earlier this session until criminal proceedings are complete. That is unlikely to occur before the 2000 Legislature adjourns.

Addressing his colleagues on the House floor, Rostberg said he is innocent but that he could not comment further on the criminal case.

Looking back on his career, Rostberg said the ability to negotiate and the willingness to hear views from all sides are among the most important qualities for being a successful lawmaker.

"You need to be reasonable, able to negotiate, and willing to negotiate," he said. "You have to have an open door, and to allow input from all sides, and there's usually many sides. And you have to be able to accept criticism, as well as accolades. If you can't do that, you won't be successful here."

Rostberg currently is the vice chair of the House Governmental Operations and Veterans Affairs Policy Committee, and he also serves on the Agriculture Policy, Agriculture and Rural Development Finance, and Environment and Natural Resources Policy committees.

When the Legislature is not in session, Rostberg works as a veterans service officer and emergency management director for Isanti County.

A 1999 law that Rostberg sponsored with bipartisan support set up a training program for 13 local fire and rescue departments along the upper Mississippi River in central Minnesota, so that those departments can effectively respond to oil spills in the river. Quick responses are necessary in cleaning up those spills, he said, and the program could be expanded to other parts of the state.



STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Jim Rostberg
Republican
District 18A - Isanti
Terms: 3

Career notes: Rostberg has worked on veterans issues and environmental matters. In his final term, he was named vice chair of the House Governmental Operations and Veterans Affairs Policy Committee.