

# Sam Solon, 29-year tate senator, dies at 70

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By Robert Whereatt  
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State Sen. Sam Solon, 70, a soft-spoken DFLer from Duluth and the second-most senior member of the Senate, died Friday afternoon of liver cancer.

Solon, known by most constituents informally as "Sam," served one two-year term in the House before entering the Senate in 1973. He won eight subsequent elections and earned a reputation as a legislator who could get state dollars for his working-class city.



State Sen.  
Sam Solon

## SOLON continues on A14:

— Only Sen. Roger Moe has more seniority.

The only senator with more seniority was Majority Leader Roger Moe, DFL-Erskine, who began his tenure in 1971.

"All of Minnesota has lost a very good friend in the Honorable Sam Solon," Moe said in a statement Friday.

Rep. Mary Murphy, DFL-Hermantown, a longtime friend, said Solon "touched hundreds and thousands of lives in all the years he did public service, whether it was through his teaching or his legislative career.

"He was loved by many people, and was very well known. He was always willing to listen, and people from all over town ... knew him and thought of him as a friend.

"There will be a great void for northeastern Minnesota at the Legislature now that he is gone," Murphy said.

Solon's liver cancer was discovered early this year when he went to an emergency room for a pain in his side that he thought might be a bruised rib or muscle pull.

"When you first hear that you have cancer, it knocks you right over," he told the Duluth News Tribune at the time. "As time goes on, you start saying 'OK, I'm going to fight.' You want to keep yourself in that positive focus and not get yourself down."

He was speaking from experience. Solon had had a patch of skin cancer on his back and lymph nodes on the right side of his body removed in 1984. He had been without symptoms until doctors told him that a magnetic resonance image showed a cancerous lesion on his liver.

"His big thing in life was his love for Duluth and his passion for the city," said Sen. James Metzen, DFL-South St. Paul, probably Solon's closest friend and confidant in the Senate.

"His fingerprints are on every public building in the town. In his soft quiet manner, he got things done," Metzen said.

Solon considered bringing home projects that would generate growth and jobs to be his obligation as a legislator, Metzen said.

Solon was chairman of the Commerce Committee and, because of his seniority, sat on key funding committees where he was in a position to help steer economic development funds and projects to his part of the state.

Lobbyist and friend Ron Jerich said Solon's ability to get funding for projects in the Duluth region was prodigious.

"They [voters] sent him down [to the Capitol] to bring home the bacon and he brought home the whole hog," Jerich said.

A description of Solon's legislative prowess, in the 2001-2002 edition of "Politics in Minnesota: the Directory," said:

"Of his economic development achievements, Solon is especially proud of the Northwest Airlines legislation that brought facilities to northeastern Minnesota and Duluth, along with success in getting bonding projects such as the Duluth Entertainment and Convention Center, the Great Lakes Aquarium, Lake Superior Zoo, the Depot, the Government Services Center, the [Interstate Hwy.] 35 expansion and buildings on the University of Minnesota-Duluth and Lake Superior College campuses."

## Duluth native son

Solon, the son of poor Greek immigrants, went to Duluth Central High School and graduated in 1958 from the University of Minnesota-Duluth (UMD) with a teaching degree.

He taught social studies and physical education in Duluth's junior and senior high schools.

Charles Westin, a boyhood friend and later a lobbyist, grew up with Solon in the same Duluth neighborhood. "I loved him. He was like a brother to me," said Westin who was a few years junior to Solon.

"When we were kids, he was like the policeman for the neighborhood. It was a tough, tough neighborhood. He made sure we did things right."

Solon attended a Greek Orthodox church, and could speak, write and read Greek. He served 18 months in the Army as a Greek language interpreter.

## Honored at UMD

Earlier this year, the senator was recognized by his alma mater when UMD renamed a student services building the Solon Campus Center. Fittingly, it was a building for which he had helped secure funding.

To the 300 or so people who attended that day, Solon said: "I know that from now on, when I'm driving by the campus, I'll sneak by this way to make sure the name is still up there."

Solon's imprimatur is on other buildings and programs at UMD. He sat on the Higher Education Budget Division and was instrumental in getting funds for the UMD medical school, library and music hall and to train rural doctors.

"We grew up pretty poor, on welfare relief. Thankfully there's places to go like UMD," he said at the ceremony honoring him.

With a signature crown of white hair, Solon had the central-casting appearance of a legislator, or solon. His name, after the Athenian legislator, in English has come to mean wise lawgiver. He was old-school polite and had a reputation for seeking compromises among competing interests. "I've been around for 20 years and he was always courteous even if he couldn't help you," Jerich said.

His legislative career was not without blemishes.

In 1993 Solon admitted giving his state long-distance telephone access code to four people, including a lobbyist who was a longtime friend, and a St. Paul businessman. The lobbyist used the code to make personal calls. The businessman made business calls to South Africa and the Virgin Islands.

Solon reimbursed the state for all the calls, about \$3,000. He was officially reprimanded by the Senate, apparently marking the first time in Minnesota history that senators took disciplinary action against one of their own. Rising on the Senate floor, Solon apologized to his colleagues "for any mistakes that I may have made and any embarrassment I may have caused you and to this institution which I so profoundly respect."

The issue resurfaced in 1995, when it was discovered that Solon's ex-wife also had used the access code. Solon pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor in Ramsey County District Court and paid restitution.

The events did not affect his electability. In the 1996 election, Solon captured 65 percent of the vote. And in the 2000 election, he received almost 88 percent. He had planned to run again in 2002. "He was looking forward to coming back," Metzen said.

Solon is survived by his wife, Yvonne, and four adult children by a previous marriage; three brothers and a sister; and his mother, Demitra Eliopoulos Solon. Services are pending.

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