

Rep. Eileen Tompkins . . .

## Though leaving, member's political life will continue

By Jim Thielman



Outgoing Rep. Eileen Tompkins (R-Apple Valley) likes the maxim, "The world belongs to those who show up."

And that should answer any question about her plans to remain involved in politics despite her announcement that she won't run for an eighth term in District 36A.

"I don't intend to go and hide, that's for sure," she said. "I think I'll be involved in politics until the day I die."

Tompkins said she plans to spend the summer and fall helping with St. Paul Mayor Norm Coleman's gubernatorial bid.

"He's going to need a Republican majority somewhere," she said. "I don't see that will happen in the Senate, so I plan to help to get that majority in the House."

Tompkins has been involved in the political process as long as she can recall. Her father and uncle were city council members, and she vividly recalls a childhood of heated political debates at home.

When she got older, she became absorbed in precinct caucuses and moved on to manage another candidate's failed campaign for a House seat.

"I think it's in the genes," Tompkins said of politics. "I've been interested in it all my life. The news is always the most important television program at our house, which tells you something."

Tompkins recalls being devastated when the House campaign she managed didn't result in victory. She was certain she wouldn't get that involved again. But she rebounded quickly, and the knowledge she gained from that failed campaign helped her succeed in her first run for the House in 1984.

She said she balked when first approached by party members about running for that House seat, and her protests resulted in an exchange she still laughs about.

"I said, 'I'm too short and too fat to run,' but someone told me that would probably cost me only three percent of the vote," Tompkins said.

Her nine children were grown by then, and



Rep. Eileen Tompkins is leaving the House after her seventh term, but she vows to remain active in public life.

although three of her 22 grandchildren moved in with her after their mother died three years ago, Tompkins never felt obliged to leave the Legislature and stay at home.

"Plenty of women raise a family and work," she said with a shrug. "The oldest of those is now 21. They're good kids. They go to the same schools my kids did, and working in the House is much easier than it used to be."

She recalls floor sessions that ran until 4 a.m. during her early years in the House, and that members were back in their offices three hours later to start another day.

"It was more a process of wearing you down so you'd finally vote for anything," she recalled. "We did some of our own research and handled our own constituent services. There were many times I remember putting in 14-[to] 18-hour days."

Her party briefly had the majority in the House then, and there was only a smattering of women legislators. Now there are more women legislators, but her party is the minor-

ity. She said she hopes to help change that for Coleman.

"I've got too much energy to not be involved with this, and I'll still garden. I love to garden," Tompkins said.

Gardening is another product of her youth. Tompkins was raised on a farm and, she said, gardening came easily to her. As with politics, she attacked gardening with a rare zeal.

Tompkins went to the University of Minnesota to find a solution to a problem with a patch of raspberries she had planted and ended up taking class after class until she became a master gardener.

But, she said, her years as a representative have taught her things she couldn't have learned in a classroom.

"I've learned that everybody has worth," she said. "I've volunteered for Catholic Charities, and I've been to the White House. And I can't tell you there's a big difference between street people and the President of the United States. They all have a human spirit." 