

Rep. Kathleen Vellenga . . .

A compassionate, issue-oriented legislator moves on



Last year, many legislators urged Rep. Kathleen Vellenga (DFL-St. Paul) to run for one of the top House leadership positions — speaker or majority leader. Vellenga, however, declined.

The duties of a caucus leader — raising money and managing election campaigns — include “tasks that never held much interest for me,” she said. She sought office because of her interest in the issues, especially those that affect society’s most vulnerable people.

Although she has seen much of her legislative agenda become law, Vellenga, one of only two women House members from St. Paul, has announced that her current, seventh term in the Legislature will be her last.

Vellenga has absorbed the social concerns of her family — liberal social activists from Nebraska. On her office wall hangs a framed campaign card from her grandfather, Rev. Tom Osborne, a Democrat who served in the largely Republican Nebraska Legislature in the 1940s. Her father, Rev. Howard Osborne, is a Presbyterian minister who continues to agitate for peace and justice issues. Two sisters and two brothers-in-law also are ministers.

As a lawmaker, Vellenga has practiced politics in a fashion that has earned her widespread admiration among her legislative colleagues.

House Majority Leader Rep. Phil Carruthers (DFL-Brooklyn Center) served on the House Judiciary Committee with Vellenga. He praised the lawmaker’s “heartfelt, sincere” approach to her work, and her ability to share power and involve people in the legislative process.

“She’s always had a concern for social policy and how the laws that we pass affect average citizens and those people who are least able to go to bat for themselves.

“We will definitely miss her. She’s a superb legislator, one of the best in the Legislature,” said Carruthers.

Vellenga, 55, now chairs the K-12 Education Finance Division of the House Education Committee. Before that, she served as



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Greatest accomplishment: Picking out one piece of legislation would be like choosing a favorite among her three children, Vellenga said. Rather, she points to her highly educated and concerned constituents who have backed her legislative agenda.

“They have not demanded that I bring home ‘x’ number of pork barrel projects. They’ve left me free to work on the issues, so I’ve been able to concentrate on issues to help vulnerable people,” she said.

chair of the Judiciary Committee’s Criminal Justice Division, and then chaired the full committee.

Because of her wide-ranging interests and service, Vellenga’s impact on state policy is felt in several areas.

Vellenga (pronounced VAL-eng-ga) has authored bills to provide school breakfasts for children and to create programs for earlier intervention in families where children are at risk of abuse. She sponsored legislation to help homeless people find transitional housing, to set up a 24-hour hot line for victims of domestic abuse, and to remove the statute of limitations for prosecuting rapists.

In addition, Vellenga sponsored a bill to enforce seat belt use by establishing a fine for not buckling up. Even though it failed twice on the House floor, Vellenga went back to her colleagues and asked for their support. The bill finally passed and Vellenga says she now has the satisfaction of knowing that her stamina helped “save a lot of lives.”

It has been a busy and productive legislative tenure, but another political campaign wasn’t in the cards, she said. Her desire to step down has nothing to do with the ongoing debate over legislative term limits. She opposes those anyway.

“I’ve noticed over the years that good people choose to leave or get defeated, and good new people get elected. Lazy and corrupt people leave or get defeated, and [new] lazy and corrupt people get elected,” she said. “I’m very grateful that I can choose *when* I leave.”

The lawmaker said she will miss talking

with constituents but not other aspects of campaigning.

“What I don’t like at all is having to describe yourself in glowing terms in a [campaign] brochure — I just hate that part of it,” she said.

Vellenga is now contemplating her “last career move” before retiring. She mentioned possibly returning to teaching. So far, she has agreed to serve on the board of Family Service of Greater St. Paul.

“I know what I don’t want to do: I don’t want to lobby, and I don’t want to sit home and twiddle my thumbs,” she said.

A less harried life away from the Legislature will allow her to spend more time with her 200-member church congregation in the Summit-University area of St. Paul. She can also indulge her fondness for roller blading, bicycling, skiing, and, in the privacy of her home, playing the piano and singing.

In the way of advice for her successor, Vellenga hopes that he or she “will be more interested in the work than in personal career moves.” She has seen legislators come to the Capitol thinking that it’s a “fast track” to business or political advancement, and quickly become frustrated trying to manipulate issues for personal “fame and adulation.”

While Vellenga acknowledges that ambition can make a person work hard, the “fun” part of the job for her has been working on issues that needed a legislative advocate.

—Mordecai Spektor