

Opatz, Wejcman take speaker's gavel when needed

Presiding over hours and hours of sometimes contentious debate on the floor of the Minnesota House of Representatives can be too much for one person.

Even if the speaker's hectic schedule doesn't demand he be elsewhere, simple exhaustion may require him to call in some relief.

This session, two lawmakers will share duties as backup to Speaker Phil Carruthers (DFL-Brooklyn Park).

Rep. Joe Opatz (DFL-St. Cloud) and Rep. Linda Wejcman (DFL-Mpls) have been named speakers *pro tempore*, as the position is officially known (or *pro tem* for short).

As the title makes clear, the speaker pro tem assumes the role of the speaker on a temporary basis whenever necessary.

"Later in the session, we are on the floor for very, very long periods of time," Opatz said. "It's just physically difficult for a person to stand up there for a dozen hours in a row.

"Just as importantly, the speaker is going to have to be meeting with other members, conference committees, the governor, [Senate Majority Leader] Roger Moe, the minority leadership. [Carruthers] will have other responsibilities that take him away from the floor, and that's where our role comes in."

While their time in the speaker's chair may be limited, Opatz and Wejcman likely will be required to make quick decisions on important, controversial issues.

Seemingly mundane procedural rulings, such as deciding whether an amendment is germane to a bill, can have a significant effect on the ultimate fate of the legislation.

"Determining if an amendment is germane can be a major issue, especially as we get to the end of session," Wejcman said. "There will have to be a lot of trust on the part of other legislators that I will be fair and I will make the right decisions."

Wejcman and Opatz have been selected to fill a position that is relatively new in the history of the House.

House rules have long allowed for temporary speakers, but the practice of selecting a stand-in has varied. Designating a speaker pro tem is a practice less than two decades old.

Before the 1980s, temporary speakers could not serve for more than one day. And instead of being appointed by the speaker, they were chosen by a majority of the House or by the House Rules and Legislative Administration Committee.

Carruthers began his new job as speaker with a vow to foster bipartisan cooperation in the lower chamber. The speakers pro tem say they aim to support the speaker's efforts.

"I think I tend to be a fairly nonpartisan, objective person," Opatz said. "I see myself behaving in a way very consistent with the way [Carruthers] would like the floor to operate. It should be businesslike, and it should be civil."

body is here because they really want to do the right thing."

In addition to standing in for the speaker, Wejcman and Opatz will work with the majority leader and assistant majority leaders as part of the caucus' leadership team.

Wejcman is beginning her fourth term representing what she describes as a "wonderfully diverse" district in south Minneapolis.

Neighborhoods in the district include a mix of people from varied ethnic groups and economic classes, according to Wejcman. And she has focused her legislative work on universally important issues: child care, housing, employment, and safety.

Wejcman sponsored a 1996 law that will require all new police officers hired after Aug. 1, 1997, to have completed a course in community policing.

Opatz is in his third term representing a portion of St. Cloud and surrounding areas. Perhaps his most publicized legislative work was a 1996 law he sponsored requiring insurance companies to allow mothers and their newborn babies to stay in the hospital for at least 48 hours.

"There is no other legislation that I have ever carried that has gotten such a positive response in terms of its personal impact on people's lives," he said. ". . . That's been very gratifying."

Opatz also has worked heavily on land-use planning issues, with an eye toward controlling urban sprawl. And he has been active on issues related to education, which is something close to his heart. When not tied up at the Capitol, he works as an administrator at St. Cloud State University.

The speakers pro tem both say they are pleased to be part of Carruthers' vision for the House.

"It's really an honor to have that faith put in you, to be trusted," Wejcman said.



Reps. Joe Opatz and Linda Wejcman have been named speakers pro tempore and will step up to the podium to give the speaker a break.

The Legislature can meet the public's call for less partisanship, according to Wejcman.

"Everybody elected to the House is here with the intention of doing what their district wants and what they think is best for Minnesota," she said. "We might differ a little bit from district to district, but every-

— Nick Healy