

# First Hmong House member shifts focus

## Thao's family and business to get more of his time

By PATTY OSTBERG

Between the legislative time commitment and managing a growing assisted living facilities business, Rep. Cy Thao (DFL-St. Paul) said it's time to shift his priorities to his private life and not run for re-election. The change also means more desired time at home with his wife and two children, ages 6 and 9.

"In anything worth doing, you want to do it well, and I don't think you can do well on two things," he said.

The Thao family operates five assisted living facilities with a plan to double the number in the next few years. The business has been getting too big for his wife to handle alone while he is out serving his district, he said.

Thao says it's hard for mid-career professionals to be part of the process. It's a great place for someone who is starting out with no family or someone who is already retired and looking for something to do on the side. Being a legislator is "pitched as part-time ... but really it's not. It's full-time and the compensation is geared toward part-time," he said, adding that many legislators are forced to have a second job, and it's difficult to do two jobs well.

The dilemma leads to the Legislature missing out on participation from those who see firsthand what needs to be done and what is relevant to society's needs, he said. Thao believes the Legislature needs to become either full-time with pay accordingly, or go back to part-time when it met every other year.

In his four terms, he considers one of his greatest accomplishments instilling a sense of optimism and activism in the Hmong and Asian communities. Thao was the first

Hmong to serve in the House. "They have a way to be part of the political process ... and why they should be (is) because it does impact their daily lives," he said.

As chairman of the House Licensing Division, Thao said he realizes the tremendous responsibility he has had in moving Minnesota forward. "What you say or whatever direction you choose to go, that is the direction Minnesota will go with you."

Being a division chairman can be too much power for one person, Thao said. "I've been in conference committee where one chair could decide what to do and what not to do. ... Is that maybe too much power to be given to one person?"

One piece of legislation he's most proud

of is creating a mid-level dental practitioner position that has helped increase dental access for those in rural areas and the poor.

His advice to the person who fills his seat is, "Build relationships with staff, with members and with lobbyists." The more relationships you have, the better your chances of passing certain legislation, he said. When he began in 2002, the DFL was in the minority and he learned to ask the majority party to pass bills for him. "Being in the minority you have to be resourceful, and it's not so much about getting credit but passing what you need to get passed," he added.

The one aspect Thao has learned about himself is that he doesn't have a very thick skin for the scrutiny one receives in public office. "It's like you walk around with a target."

Earlier this year, the Minnesota Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board fined Thao \$4,700 for filing a false report and several questionable campaign payments, but that's not the sole reason he's not seeking re-election.

"There are so many reasons as to why I'm leaving and that could be one of them," he said. "Do I want that target on my back anymore? I really don't."

Yet, Thao isn't completely soured from the legislative experience. "Maybe in 15 to 20 years of doing business I might come back and be part of government again. ... Maybe by then I'll have thicker skin," he said with a laugh.

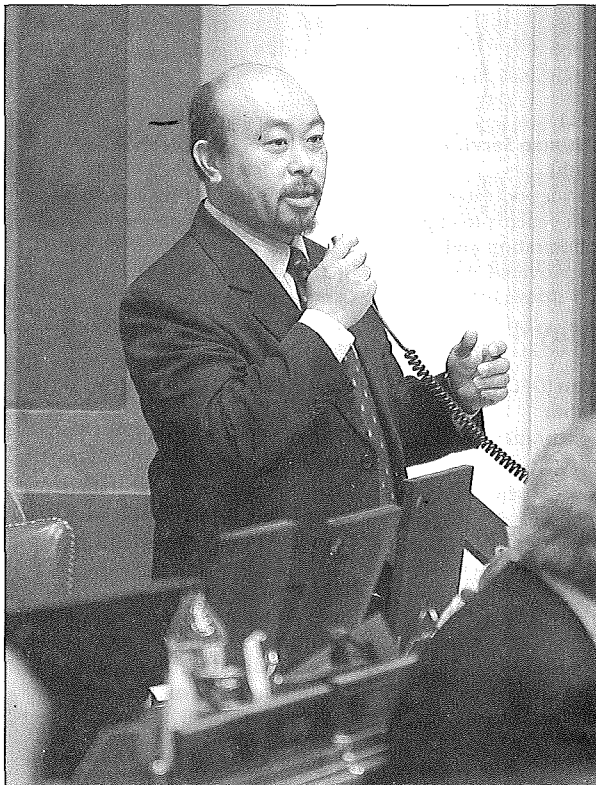


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

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### STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Cy Thao  
DFL

District 65A - St. Paul  
Terms: 4 (elected 2002)

Advice to successor: "Build relationships with staff, with members and with lobbyists."