

# Leonard Johnson, 91; was longtime public servant

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Leonard Johnson of Minneapolis, who served the public all his adult life as an elected official or employee of city, county and state governments, died Saturday. He was 91.

Johnson, a graduate of South High School, was a married father of two working on Minneapolis street crews when the United States entered World



Leonard Johnson in 1972

War II. He served stateside for two years as a Navy petty officer. He and his first wife, Emily, were divorced after he returned. He married his second wife, June, in 1948.

Johnson noticed a lack of playgrounds near his 1946 postwar apartment in the Seven Corners area, and was told by a Minneapolis Park Board member that it was the policy to have property owners pay for their own playgrounds. His neighbors were mostly renters, and the landlords weren't interested in paying for parks.

He filed as a candidate for the park board the next day, he told the Minneapolis Star in 1972. He won, and the next year helped push through a \$1 million citywide bond issue for parks.

Johnson was elected to the state House in 1948 and received a bachelor's degree in public administration from the University of Minnesota in 1950. At the end of three two-year terms he chose not to run again, because he was so busy as administrative assistant to the Minneapolis city engineer, said his wife, June.

At the time, the City Council had 26 members, all of whom showed up at his office with reports of holes in the streets, water problems and related difficulties. In 1955, he was named administrative assistant to the City Council — later called city clerk — a post that was developed that year af-

ter the council was cut to 13 members, "and I still continued to take care of problems," he said in 1972.

Said Donald Risk, a DFLer who served as a 1st Ward alderman in the 1960s: "He made politics pleasurable. He was always straightforward and told you the truth whether it was what you wanted to hear or not."

Johnson's post made him the city's chief election officer, and in 1956 the City Council accepted his plan to buy voting machines and pay for them over 10 years with the money saved through election streamlining, which included not having to pay people to count paper ballots by hand. The \$1.8 million debt for 1,000 machines was retired in 1967, the year Johnson left city employment to become administrator for the Hennepin County District Court.

He had a casual style working with people, but was very well-respected, said Jack Provo of Eden Prairie, who studied Johnson's presentations of the court's budgets in the 1960s as a county board member and chairman.

In the five years Johnson was court administrator, the court's backlog was reduced from 8,000 cases, or a 3½-year wait for trial after a case is filed, to 4,200 cases, or a one-year wait. Johnson attributed the increased efficiency to the judges working hard, but he also worked at keeping the judges' calendars full and at prodding lawyers who were trying to stall the proceedings.

He retired from the court post in 1972 and ran again for the state House in 1973, but was defeated in the primary.

In addition to his wife, June, survivors include daughters Jill Robertson of Minneapolis, Julie Topping of St. Petersburg, Fla., and JoAnne Volden of Minneapolis; a son, Jeffrey of Minneapolis; four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Another son, James, died in 1995.

Burial services were private. Arrangements are pending for a memorial service in the autumn.

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