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For decades the dean of taxes, Rest ‘not done yet’

Story by ROCHELLE OLSON • Photo by LEILA NAVIDI • Star Tribune staff



Whether Sen. Ann Rest is running a late-night Senate session or an early morning Taxes Committee meeting, she brings a don't-mess-with-me zeal she has honed over decades.

"In fifth grade, I went to the teacher and said, 'Do you think we could have a class club? I'd like to be president,'" Rest said. "I learned how to run a meeting."

Last month, video snippets of the 81-year-old senator, standing on the president's podium running the

overnight Senate session, lit up social media as she chastised colleagues. Rest interrupted Sen. Eric Pratt, R-Prior Lake, to slam his breach of decorum with a rhetorical, "Where are you standing?"

She apologized and he laughed it off. "She's going to tell you what she thinks and she's not going to sugarcoat it," Pratt said. "So often nobody around here really wants to say what they think so when you find somebody and they say what they mean

and mean what they say, you respect them for that."

As the Legislature enters the final month, negotiations over the tax bill will be among the most intense of the session. Even though the DFL runs the Capitol, the House and Senate differ substantially in their tax proposals.

Rest, the only legislator in state history to have served as tax chair in both chambers, will be a major player in the talks along with Gov.

See **REST** on B4 ▶

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Sen. Ann Rest, DFL-New Hope, with Sen. John Hoffman, DFL-Champlin, at her 81st birthday celebration at the State Capitol on Monday.

Rest 'not done yet' as longtime dean of taxes

◀ **REST** from Bl
Tim Walz, Senate Majority Leader Kari Dziedzic, DFL-Minneapolis, and their House counterparts.

Rest said her mission at the Capitol is creating "a good and honest and progressive tax policy." She relishes finding agreement in a partisan atmosphere that can be mean-spirited. "I find that intellectually stimulating. What I do is fun and hard and tiring and boring on occasion," she said.

Minnesota's complicated property tax is her favorite because it's used for the common good, she said. "Although it's a regressive tax, we do a lot of things in our tax system to make it less so and I like that level of complexity and interaction," she said.

Although Rest can come off as an impatient teacher scolding recalcitrant youngsters, she said her insistence on following rules is about respect. "If you don't do that, there's nothing but chaos and good decisions don't get made," she said. "It takes so little to remember to obey the rules and customs."

She prefers action over posturing and long-winded speeches. "If you have the votes, why do you have to bother with rhetoric?" she said.

In conversation, Rest is warm, open and chatty. She's a fan of major league baseball, William Faulkner's "Absalom Absalom!," her home state of Virginia and the city of New Orleans, where she spent some of her childhood. From her third-floor corner office at the Capitol, she admires the grandeur of the building and feels connected to its architect, Cass Gilbert.

Rest was elected to the House in 1984 and served 16 years, including four chairing the Taxes Committee. She's been in the Senate since 2001,

the past six under Republican control.

Rest has a staggering number of elite degrees: a bachelor's and a master's in Latin and Greek from, respectively, Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and the University of Chicago; a master's in teaching from Harvard University; a master's in business taxation from the University of Minnesota; and a master's in public administration from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

But it was some paper tax extensions that were her gateway to public office. She had taught English at Robbinsdale's Armstrong High School, but by the early 1980s, she was working as a certified public accountant and was tasked with delivering extension requests to St. Paul.

On that errand, she stopped to watch the Legislature and saw lawmakers debating taxes and education. "I thought, 'I know that stuff; I can do that,'" she said. "It seemed like a good fit."

When she decided to run, friends told her she needed to do two things: Speak louder and cut her long hair. Rest said she pondered the advice before deciding it wouldn't change who she is and chopped her hair into a style she's maintained ever since.

She beat the incumbent by 57 votes, she said. "My opponent had been a student of mine, who said, 'You only won because you were organized,' and I said, 'Yes. We were very, very methodical.'"

Her hair, once dark, is now light gray. She uses a motorized scooter to zoom to meetings around the Capitol, but the rap on her remains the same as it has been for decades: Nobody knows more about taxes than Ann Rest. Asked for her thoughts on the claim, Rest took a

moment then said, "Senator Dziedzic comes close; she's very good."

Dziedzic said Rest has been a great mentor to her.

Outside of the Capitol, Rest grew up with parents who spent part of their honeymoon at Yankee Stadium, and she connected to them through the sport.

"For me, baseball is a world unto itself, and when you go to a baseball game, nothing else matters, nothing else intrudes. The most important thing is: Is that a ball or a strike?"

When she dies, Rest said, she intends to be returned to her native Virginia. "My family are Virginians for over 300 years," she said. "I'm very proud of that."

For now, she's focused on representing her northwestern inner-ring suburban district that includes Crystal, Golden Valley, Robbinsdale and her longtime New Hope neighborhood.

"I want to think that every single family and person in my neighborhood will believe that they benefited from the tax bill that we pass one way or the other — whether it's property tax relief, whether it's child care credit," she said. "Everybody's going to see that what we've done has benefited them."

As for what she wants Minnesotans to know about her personally, Rest said, "That I'm a caring person. I don't mind being smart. That I'm not done yet."

She also embraces her reputation as a fierce protector of Senate decorum. She joked that when she next takes the podium, she will lean into the microphone with a flinty warning to colleagues and say, "I'm baaaaack."

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