

# A challenge ahead

A former speaker of the House is leaving to take a top post with the Ramsey County attorney

By MICHELLE KIBIGER

When Rep. Phil Carruthers (DFL-Brooklyn Center) came to the Legislature in 1986, he brought his criminal justice background in an effort to change the system.

"I felt that the criminal justice system needed more accountability, especially concerning drunk driving and violent crime," Carruthers said. "I feel we've made some good progress."

Now, 14 years later, the former speaker of the House will take that knowledge back into the justice system as he leaves the Legislature for a job with the Ramsey County Attorney's Office.

"I won't have to stay up until three in the morning debating on the floor," he said with a smile.

Carruthers said being a member of the House has been very rewarding for him, especially his work with individual constituents to promote legislation.

He said he decided during his last term, when he was speaker and the DFL Caucus had a majority, that he would not seek an 8th term.

When he looks up from his desk, pictures of his sons — 11-year-old Alex and 8-year-old Rory — greet his eyes. They often accompany him to the Capitol.

Family played a big role in his decision to leave the House. Carruthers said he is ready for a more regular, normal life.

"It's a very intense job," he said. "It's exciting and satisfying. I have young kids. I'd like to have a little bit more sane lifestyle, a little more predictable."

Carruthers grew up in St. Anthony and attended the University of Minnesota, where he obtained a degree in political science and later attended law school. He received his law degree in 1979 and worked for a number of different firms.

In 1983, Carruthers was appointed to the Metropolitan Council. He served there for three-and-a-half years, until his election to the House of Representatives.

His two goals as a legislator were to change the criminal justice system and institute more openness in government.



During his first few years in the House, Carruthers served on committees dealing with judiciary, taxes, and financial institutions. In 1990, he sponsored a law clarifying the provisions of the state's no-fault insurance law. And by 1992, he had sponsored the omnibus drunken-driving and data practices laws.

He also sponsored laws providing due process for police officers in dispute situations and further clarifying the implied consent provisions for drunken driving arrests.

In 1993, he sponsored legislation restricting violent criminals' ability to be licensed foster parents. He also supported the provision that instituted zero-tolerance alcohol provisions for people younger than 21.

Later that year, Carruthers was elected as House Majority Leader, after Rep. Irv Anderson (DFL-Int'l Falls) became speaker of the House.

Carruthers served in that role for three years, until he was selected to replace Anderson in the speakership.

At the time, Carruthers' supporters said he would bring more openness to the House and

would strive for more cooperation between the DFL and Republican caucuses.

The DFL lost control of the House after the 1998 election, and Rep. Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon), assumed the role of speaker.

Looking back now, Carruthers said the most important lesson he learned was to get along with people and work with them. He said the House is not about partisanship, but it's about making the best decisions for constituents.

"It doesn't matter what party you are or what part of the state you're from," Carruthers said. "Everyone has something to contribute."


"It's easier and quicker for a few people to make the decision. But I don't think it makes for better laws."

Carruthers said it's important to get as many people and points of view involved as possible. He said he worries that the Legislature is becoming too partisan at the expense of the average citizen and his or her concerns.

"Minnesota has a very open legislative system," Carruthers said. "Average people can make suggestions and see them actually get accomplished. But the House tends to be too partisan in my view. Satisfaction is working hard to solve a problem in society."

Carruthers, who has been a city prosecutor in Hennepin County for 20 years, will serve as chief of the prosecution division for the Ramsey County attorney, when he begins his job. He will supervise the prosecution of juvenile and adult criminal cases.

Though the job will likely put Carruthers in the courtroom, he'll spend most of his time developing prosecution policies and working with the prosecutors in the office.

"It's very exciting," Carruthers said. "I'm looking forward to it." 

## STEPPING DOWN

**Rep. Phil Carruthers**  
**DFL**

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**Terms: 7**

**Career notes:** After serving as majority leader, Carruthers was elected speaker of the House in 1997. He led the House during years that were marked by passage of property tax rebates and rejection of public financing for a baseball stadium. Throughout his career, Carruthers has specialized in legislation related to civil and criminal law.