

The end of the road

Local government issues and family call Rep. Peg Larsen back home after three terms in the House

By CHRIS VETTER

Rep. Peg Larsen (R-Lakeland) can't believe time has gone by so fast. When she entered public life and ran for a Lakeland City Council seat, her youngest daughter was 2 years old. Now, that daughter, Jenna, is 16.

Larsen has decided to not seek re-election to her House seat, which she has held since 1994, to spend more time with her family. Prior to winning her legislative seat, she served eight years on the city council, including four years as the city's first female mayor.

"I really did some soul-searching," Larsen said. "I think it's time to put some normalcy in my life."

When Larsen announced her decision to leave May 17, many legislators were surprised, even though Larsen has been contemplating the move for more than a year. Larsen noted that her district endorsed her last month.

Larsen and her husband, Thomas, have four children, between the ages of 16 and 23. Two have left home; Larsen hopes to spend more time with the two still living at home.

"Fourteen years — in my mind, that's my own term limit," she said.

But it will not be easy to leave, she said.

"I have loved doing this," Larsen said. "I told my family I would stay as long as this is what I did, and did not become who I am."

Larsen said she never expected to become involved in state politics. Then, in 1994 legislators from her district approached her about running against incumbent DFLer Rep. Pamela Neary.

"I didn't know how anyone knew I was a Republican," Larsen said, noting that her city council is nonpartisan.

After two months of discussing the idea of running, Larsen decided to give it a shot.

"Win or lose, I decided it would be a positive experience," she said.

Among Larsen's top priorities was to scale back the powers of the Metropolitan Council. She sponsored several bills to abolish or rearrange the organization, which she contends has too much power for a nonelected body.

While her bills failed, Larsen argues that she won her case.

"The bill was to point out the Met Council is not accountable," she said. "I worked to make that well-known."

Rep. Sharon Marko (DFL-Cottage Grove), who represents a nearby district, co-sponsored legislation to abolish the Met Council. Marko agrees that the goal of curbing its powers has been successful.

"They should be partners, not facilitators," Marko said.

When Republicans won control of the House in the November 1998 election, Larsen was named the chair of the House Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs Committee, which she said was a big honor.

Legislators point to Larsen's efforts for bipartisan support as one of her key attributes.

"She worked very hard to develop friendships on both sides of the aisle," Marko said. "She's a true lady with a heart of gold and she's a hard

worker."

Rep. Loren Jennings (DFL-Harris) worked with Larsen on the Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs Committee.

"She doesn't look at party labels," Jennings said. "She's the kind of legislator you don't want to see go. It's difficult to replace someone of that caliber."

Rep. James Clark (R-Springfield) said Larsen was an outstanding committee chair.

"Her door is always open. She goes out of her way to address the concerns of members of the committee," Clark said.

A significant measure Larsen sponsored was

a ban on amortization passed in 1999. The law prohibits cities and counties from setting a deadline for property owners to cease operations that do not conform to zoning ordinances. The measure included an exception for when municipalities try to close strip clubs or other "adult" businesses.

Larsen and other critics said some local governments were exploiting the amortization process to force out businesses without having to pay fair market value for their land. If the local government set a deadline for a business owner to conform to a new zoning ordinance or move, potential buyers would have no incentive to purchase a property until after the deadline had passed, when the seller would have no negotiating power and the property value would plummet.

Larsen said one of the most exciting moments in her tenure was the first time one of her bills became law.

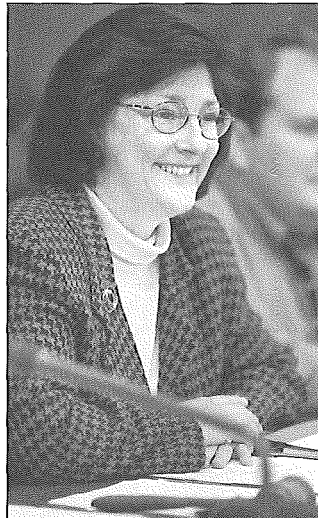
"When I found out, and I got the letter from the governor, that was exciting," Larsen said.

While Larsen is unsure what her future holds, it likely will involve managing urban growth. She helped found the Middle St. Croix Valley Planning Advisory Board, which discusses the impact growth in one area has on other areas.

Larsen, who earned a sociology degree from the University of Slippery Rock in Pennsylvania, has also worked as a special needs educational assistant.

She said she is happy with her accomplishments as she leaves the Legislature.

"I feel like I want to do something new and exciting," Larsen said. "At this time, I'm not sure what that will be." ❧



STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Peg Larsen
Republican
District 56B – Lakeland
Terms: 3

Career notes: After getting her start on the Lakeland City Council, Larsen worked heavily on local and regional issues at the Capitol. For the past two years, she has served as chair of the House Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs Committee.