

Head of the class

14-year public education supporter leaves House for a more private life, but will remain active in local school and community issues

By MIKE DE LARCO

Known by her House colleagues as a passionate supporter of public education, Rep. Alice Johnson (DFL-Spring Lake Park) has carried out duties as a legislator with an ear for public well-being and an eye for what is fair and sensible.

Soon, however, Johnson will embark on a new chapter in her life. Having chosen not to run for re-election in the fall, she will bid the House farewell at the end of session following 14 years of attending to the needs and concerns of her constituents.

Johnson said recently that she'll miss the excitement "Capitol life" provides, but quickly affirmed that her decision to step down is met with no regrets.

"I just feel it's the right time for me to leave; it's a time to embark on a new stretch of my life," she said.

Aside from her work on education, Johnson will be remembered for her successful push to exempt newer-model vehicles from state emissions testing in 1995. The idea for the bill, Johnson said, surfaced out of discussion with a few constituents who disputed the need for the testing on new cars.

In 1999, the Legislature took Johnson's measure a step further and voted to do away with the emissions program altogether, citing problems of cost effectiveness.

Johnson's hard work in pushing for changes in emissions testing, say her colleagues, perhaps best exemplifies the thorough approach she's taken to issues before her.

"I think the Legislature will definitely miss her," said Rep. David Tomassoni (DFL-Chisholm).

"Alice, time and again, has been able to bring the common sense aspect of law-making into focus."

Johnson, 59, first took office in 1987, and it didn't take long for her to settle in. She had served as both a legislative assistant for 13 years and a member of the Spring Lake Park City Council before her election to the House.

"I probably was the most informed freshman elected that year," Johnson said with a grin.

The knowledge she brought to the position became quite valuable to others new to the Legisla-

ture, most notably former Rep. Richard Jefferson. Johnson and Jefferson became fast friends and eventually married last year.

"Richard had been my best friend during our time together in the Legislature and

shortly after his wife passed away we started to look at each other in a new light," Johnson said.

Johnson's work at the Legislature always kept her busy, leaving some to marvel how she had any free time for herself. She served as chair of the Sales and Income Tax Division of the House Taxes Committee in 1997 and 1998 and was chair of the House K-12 Education Finance Division in 1995 and 1996.

In addition, Johnson studied at Harvard University when not in session to pursue a master's degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government. After years of study, she obtained her degree in 1996.

Johnson's strong push in the House to better public education left some believing early on that Johnson, at one point, had to have been a classroom teacher. Not so, Johnson says.

"I do, however, believe that education is where the state's future lies," she said.

Tomassoni said it was a pleasure to serve with Johnson on the education finance panel.

"Her sense of humor will also be missed," he said.

Between them, Jefferson and Johnson have nine children. Johnson said community and family activities keep them very busy. She plans to take a year off before taking on any new job.

In addition, she won't quit going to local school board meetings and other community activities in Spring Lake Park, which she has actively attended for many years.

Johnson offered this advice to future legislators: "Don't be afraid to ask questions and raise issues. Chances are that someone else shares your concern." 



STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Alice Johnson
DFL

District 48B – Spring Lake Park

Terms: 7

Career notes: A leader on education issues, Johnson served as chair of the K-12 Finance Division in 1995 and 1996. She later spent two years as chair of the Sales and Income Tax Division.