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Robert J. Schmitz; was state senator

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Schmitz, shown in 1976, was a DFL senator for 16 years.

Robert J. Schmitz, a former DFL senator who for 16 years was known for his nonpartisanship, died Monday of complications from Alzheimer's disease at the Valley View Nursing Home in Jordan. He was 78.

Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe, DFL-Erskine, said Schmitz was "without a doubt . . . one of the most honest, humble, hardworking senators ever to walk the corridors of this Capitol."

"He was a real friend of local government and the veterans of this state. He was very quiet, but very, very effective in his approach to public policy. He was a true citizen legislator and a true gentleman."

Kris Beuch of Shakopee said her father didn't let any one person influence him but considered everyone's opinion. "He tried to help everyone with their problems," she said. Schmitz ran for the Senate twice, and once for the House, losing all three times, before he was elected for a two-year Senate term in a special election in 1974.

As chairman of the Senate Veterans and Military Affairs Committee, he sponsored a bill to compensate Vietnam veterans who were victims of Agent Orange, and their families. He also was chairman of the Local Government Committee. In 1985, Schmitz sponsored a bill that would exempt townships and counties from claims for property damage or personal injury arising from travel on rarely used roads. He said his goal was to relieve counties and townships of the expenses of maintaining the roads at the same standard as more heavily traveled routes.

Schmitz retired from office in 1990, but when DFL gubernatorial candidate Mike Hatch asked him to be his running mate in 1994, he agreed. He said he thought the other candidates were overlooking rural Minnesota. Rep. John Tuma, R-Northfield, said Schmitz taught him the importance of knowing constituents. He interned for Schmitz while in college and worked on Schmitz's 1982 campaign. He said Schmitz endorsed him when he ran for office, even though he was a Republican. "He wasn't afraid to stick his neck out," he said.

Schmitz was born on a farm near Jordan and lived there until he moved to the Valley View home.

In addition to his daughter, Schmitz is survived by three other daughters, Karen Sjulstad of Mankato, Minn., Susan Seifert of Chaska and Robin Lawrence-Jones of Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.; a son, Murray of Baudette, Minn.; a brother, Cecil of Blissfield, Mich.; 14 grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

Visitation will be held from 4 to 9 p.m. Thursday at the Ballard-Sunder Funeral Home, 104 W. 1st St., Jordan. Services will be held at 11:30 a.m. Friday at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, 201 N. Broadway St., Jordan.