

Education funding champion

Dittrich says serving was 'just the perfect pinnacle experience'

By ERIN SCHMIDTKE

When Rep. Denise Dittrich (DFL-Champlin) entered the House eight years ago, she had a set of goals in mind. Now, after advocating for increased education funding and an agenda to support small businesses, she is stepping down.

Dittrich's reasons for leaving are both professional and personal. Her youngest son will graduate from high school this year, leaving her and her husband, Allen, empty nesters.

"It was just the perfect pinnacle experience where someone else can come in and also see things anew, hear things anew and do different things and leave their own legacy," Dittrich said.

For years, Dittrich has kept busy with education finance, a longtime passion of hers. As a parent of three boys in the Anoka-Hennepin School District, which she also attended as a student, Dittrich immersed herself in school funding. She took classes on the subject and was later elected to the school board.

She began to notice the district only received a fraction of the compensatory aid of other districts, which is based on district size and the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunches. Dittrich's work to secure that funding for the district took her from the school board to the House in 2004.

"I remember being on the House floor and thinking, 'Wow, this is an issue I have worked on for almost 10 years now,'" Dittrich said. Following efforts by her and other supporters, the district's compensatory aid has tripled since 2005.

Not content with increasing funding for only her home district, Dittrich has also spent her time in

office working to change the way the state manages its school trust lands. She learned that Minnesota received millions of acres of land from the federal government when it became a state, with the requirement that the land be leased, sold or used to fund education. She believes that the state has missed opportunities to maximize profit from the land.

"I had always dreamed before I got here, in the previous 10 years, that we need a stable, long-term predictable funding source for education, so people can look at this Legislature and know they're going to get that every single year," Dittrich said. She believes that source could come from the trust lands.

Dittrich served as the chairwoman of the

School Trust Land Oversight Committee in 2009 and co-sponsors a bill this session, HF2244, which would transfer the responsibility of managing the land from the DNR to a separate entity established by the Legislature. A conference committee is in the process of working out an agreement.

Throughout her time as a lawmaker, Dittrich has tried to represent her district on a nonpartisan level. That promise she made to constituents has motivated her as a politician.

"That I am extremely proud of, and that's more of a personal thing for me to walk away with that integrity," she said.

Her effort to be nonpartisan extended to another priority: economic growth. In 2010, along with Rep. Keith Downey (R-Edina) and former Rep. Maria Ruud (DFL-Minnetonka), she formed a small business caucus that focused on improving the state's business climate.

"We made it bipartisan, we developed it to be results-oriented and we said that we were going to be collaborative. And we did that," she said.

The caucus saw a series of bills passed, including the Angel Investor Tax Credit, which provides a 25 percent tax credit for investments in qualified small high-tech businesses. The caucus also successfully brought forth measures that would streamline business permits, study business regulations in the Midwest and support programs facilitating use of renewable energy in businesses.

Throughout her eight years in office, Dittrich has noticed an increased focus on accountability and reform in the legislative process. To help navigate through state politics, Dittrich advises her successor to find a mentor. She herself found one in Rep. Ann Lenczewski (DFL-Bloomington). She also believes that political effectiveness requires work.

"Do your own research. Don't take everything at face value and just nod your head and say, 'OK, thank you very much for that report.' The job requires homework," she said. 🌿



PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Denise Dittrich is leaving the House after eight years. She has been an advocate for education funding and small business.