

His Environmental Work is Never Dunn

By John Helland



You would be hard pressed to find another Minnesotan who has served the state's environmental community in so many capacities as former MCEA board member Bob Dunn.

But just when he thought his work was finished, he found himself striding through the halls of the Capitol this spring, just as he had when he was a legislator in the 1970s.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty had proposed doing away with the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board and transferring the handful of staff to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, a move MCEA opposed. The proposal rankled Bob enough that he drove from his Princeton home in April and testified before a senate committee on keeping the board intact. The Legislature listened and the proposal was rejected.

Serving as a state legislator, chairman of the Waste Management Board, and on many conservation-related boards, Bob has been a highly respected voice for the environment for nearly a half century.

He is part of a long line of Dunns who have served the state. His grandfather, also Robert Dunn, owned the Princeton newspaper and was elected to the Minnesota Legislature. When an investigation discovered that lumbermen were stealing timber from state land, the Republican Party recruited Dunn to run for State Auditor, which oversaw timber sales on state land. The elder Dunn was elected auditor twice and later was narrowly defeated in a run for governor.

The younger Bob Dunn grew up in Edina, son of a doctor, but always enjoyed traveling to Princeton to see his illustrious grandfather and his grandmother and do some canoeing, fishing, and hunting. After college and service in WWII as a Marine, he moved

to Princeton, first working in the family newspaper and then as owner of a retail lumber business. In 1964, he ran for a seat in the Minnesota House of Representatives in the Republican Party's progressive wing.

Though he always cared for the outdoors, Bob said it was a banker friend, who also was a Sierra Club member, who indoctrinated him about pollution issues that needed to be solved.

After Earth Day 1970, the Legislature focused on environmental issues. Bob authored the state's environmental policy act that passed the House in 1972 but failed in the Senate. Elected to the state senate in 1972, he continued as the chief author when the bill became law in 1973.

Bob considers passage of that act as his crowning achievement. The act promised to coordinate environmental policy for state agencies with disparate duties and the new Environmental Quality Board included citizen members. The act also required environmental impact statements for major projects.

Bob expressed disappointment that the act has not lived up to its early promise as a forum to deal with environmental issues. Support by governors, who appoint the board members, began to wane, and budget cuts and staff reductions limited the issues that could be addressed.

Bob's sterling legislative career ended in 1980 when he was appointed the first permanent chairman of the Waste Management Board. The board was to deal with growing hazardous and solid waste issues, including selecting a Minnesota hazardous waste disposal site.

After hearings throughout the state on potential locations, posters went up in parts of western Minnesota with a photo of Bob stating: "Dead or Alive!" Unfazed, he helped establish procedures for waste collecting and processing, while the disposal site controversy faded away. He left the job in 1985.



Photo courtesy of Dunn Family

Bob was soon appointed as a citizen member of the Environmental Quality Board and later was named the board's first citizen chairman.

"His great integrity and compassion on environmental issues was highly principled," recalled John Wells, a long time Environmental Quality Board staff member.

When he left the EQB in 1994, Bob wasn't about to retire and he soon joined the MCEA board, where he served for 13 years. He liked that MCEA had both a legislative voice and was a legal advocate for environmental actions. He appreciated that MCEA kept state agencies' "feet to the fire." Bob also was a board member of the League of Conservation Voters, Parks and Trails Council, and the Minnesota Forestry Association.

"He is a quintessential gentleman, lovely person, and a shrewd problem-solver," MCEA Executive Director Martha Brand said.

As I left his home, he mentioned he was leaving for his family cabin on Caribou Lake, off the North Shore's Caribou Trail, to plant more tree seedlings. Over the years, Bob, along with his sons George and Bill (a longtime PCA staffer), have planted 20,000 tree seedlings of pine, spruce, tamarack and eastern hemlock on 10 acres.

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