

Missouri State Representative

Mike Dethrow



Listening to the citizens of District 153 and bringing government closer to home for 8 years

BY NIKI DE SOTO

Walking into the Bobcat Station in Thayer, Representative Mike Dethrow is stopped several times by folks wanting to say “Hi” and wishing him well. After serving the people of District 153 for eight years, Dethrow is stepping down as representative due to term limits and returning to the family farm outside of Alton, the fourth generation of his family living and raising a family in Oregon County.

Dressed in blue jeans and a short sleeved shirt, Dethrow is the picture of the citizen representative. With an easy smile and a sharp wit, it’s easy to see how his time in Jefferson City defending the rights of rural Missourians has been so successful.

“I’m just a farmer and a small businessman and one day I woke up and said, you know, government affects the way I raise my family, the way I run my business,” said Dethrow. “Term limits allowed me to run. I think term limits are an important thing and I think we need them at the federal level as well.”

Dethrow won the primary election in August of 2002 by just six votes, and became a member of the Missouri House class of 2002, which featured 90 new members out of a total of 163.

“They were all just average citizens, like myself, and it’s been a great group. None of them were career politicians, but people from all walks of life you could ever imagine.”

Dethrow himself ran a sale barn that had been started by his uncle in 1959. Coming from a small business background, Dethrow understood that customer service was a top priority and he carried that belief right over into his time in

the Missouri House.

“You just work for people and that’s what I did in business, I worked for people and tried to take care of my customers. In the feeder pig market business, I had a customer base in the hundreds, and in this business I have about 34,000 customers, so there are a lot of people and you work for them and they reward you for your work by getting re-elected. The most important thing you can do as an elected representative, as a citizen representative, is to take care of your people, take care of your constituents.”

Entering the House without previous political experience, Dethrow says his time in Jefferson City has been an education in government and compromise.

“I’ve learned a lot about government and how it operates. I have really been blessed to get to serve on the budget committee and there’s only a few of us who get to do that. We craft the budget and spend those long days and nights going through every department, and that has been a learning experience, when you see what it takes to really run the government and you get to ask the tough questions. As citizens, we really need to know what’s going on with our tax dollars, and how our government operates.”

Dethrow’s slogan back in 2002 was ‘I’ll listen to You’ and it’s something he has lived up to in all four of his terms in office.

“As a citizen, I didn’t think some people in government were listening to me. One of my goals, just as a citizen representing people back home was to bring government a little closer to home. It was something way out there, in Jefferson City, that we didn’t know much about, so I started these listening posts in the five counties. I think I’ve done about 436 over the last seven and a half years, on Fridays when we’re not in session or after we adjourn. I wanted to give people the chance to put a face on state government, and I wanted them to know they could talk to me. Over half the time, they would discuss a federal issue, which gave me an opportunity to work with our U. S. Senators and Congresswoman to try to help them find an answer through those folks. We get a lot of questions and we try to find an answer, and I tell you if you look long enough and hard enough, you can always find an answer. It may not be the answer they were looking for, but you’ll find it. We’ve had the opportunity to help a lot of people and that’s what we set out to do.”

Aside from being on the state budget committee, Dethrow is a trustee and chairman of the administrative council in the Alton United Methodist Church, and is a current member or has served in the following organizations: Farm Bureau; Missouri Pork Association; National Rifle Association; District 9 Transportation Advisory Committee; MDA Marketing and Animal Health

A citizen's representative

Committees; Alton Area Chamber of Commerce; City of Alton Economic Development Committee; Oregon County Action Group; Lions Club; Oregon County Fair Board; Oregon County Extension Council and EXCEL graduate.

Being a small businessman himself, Dethrow has been a champion of small business, especially those in rural areas.

"From my small business background, most of us small businessmen were satisfied when government didn't do anything to us. We just wanted to be left alone. So two years ago, I introduced the 'Big government get off my back' bill. It just said that for small businesses, we would like the government to not put anymore regulation on us, not put any more fee increases on us, until they really look at how it affects us.

"Small businesses, especially with less than 25 employees, create most of the jobs in the state, and are especially important in our rural counties. Out here, as many as 25 percent of people are self-employed. We are in an area where there isn't a lot of big industry. So, if we don't have a job, we create a job."

Another big topic item for Dethrow is transportation and education.

"My first two years on the budget committee, there were only two or three of us from south Missouri. Missouri is a unique state – there's the St. Louis group and the Kansas City group, and they're really different from us rural folks. They have different needs. We've been trying to prioritize our spending the last few years to match the decrease in revenue. There's an Amtrak line that runs between Kansas City and Saint Louis, and it was always two hours late, never on time, and we were subsidizing it at about \$70 per passenger and I thought that was way too much. The service was terrible, and I would always try to take \$2-\$3 million out of their budget and put it into school transportation.

"Our rural schools are very dependent on that financial support. I'd give all the statistics about Amtrak, and how they're never on time and how many days they ran late and I'd say – Think about the school bus that comes by your house in the morning. Every morning, you can hear that bus, and you know what time it is. Unless they had a flat tire, or there's been a flood or an ice storm, that bus is running on

time, and that's our best transportation investment in the state.

Rural schools travel close to 100 miles a day to pick up kids and get them to class, and it gets really expensive. City folks just don't understand things like that. They can't relate to it."

Local volunteer organizations are also special to Dethrow.

"Without all of our volunteer organizations and all the money they raise and services they provide, our community wouldn't work near as well.

"Government can't do everything, so we pull together all of these volunteer folks to make a real difference. It's amazing to me how much they can raise when the community really needs it. It helps that we're a giving bunch in this area. When there's a need, the folks in this area come together, and neighbors really care about neighbors. That's the history of this area; it's the way we've survived. My family came to this area in the 1860s and it was up to yourself and your neighbors to help get you through."

Dethrow is enthusiastic about new blood coming into the Missouri House, and is encouraging of others to take the plunge and get involved.

"It's a difficult job. The thing that keeps people from running for elected office the most is the long job interview. In a private business, you can go in for a 30 minute interview and you'll know if you got the job or not. When I started my interview to be State Representative, I started in the early summer of 2001 for the 2002 election. I travelled and visited with people, said this is who I am, this is why I'm running, and it is a long, long job interview. But it has been well worth it.

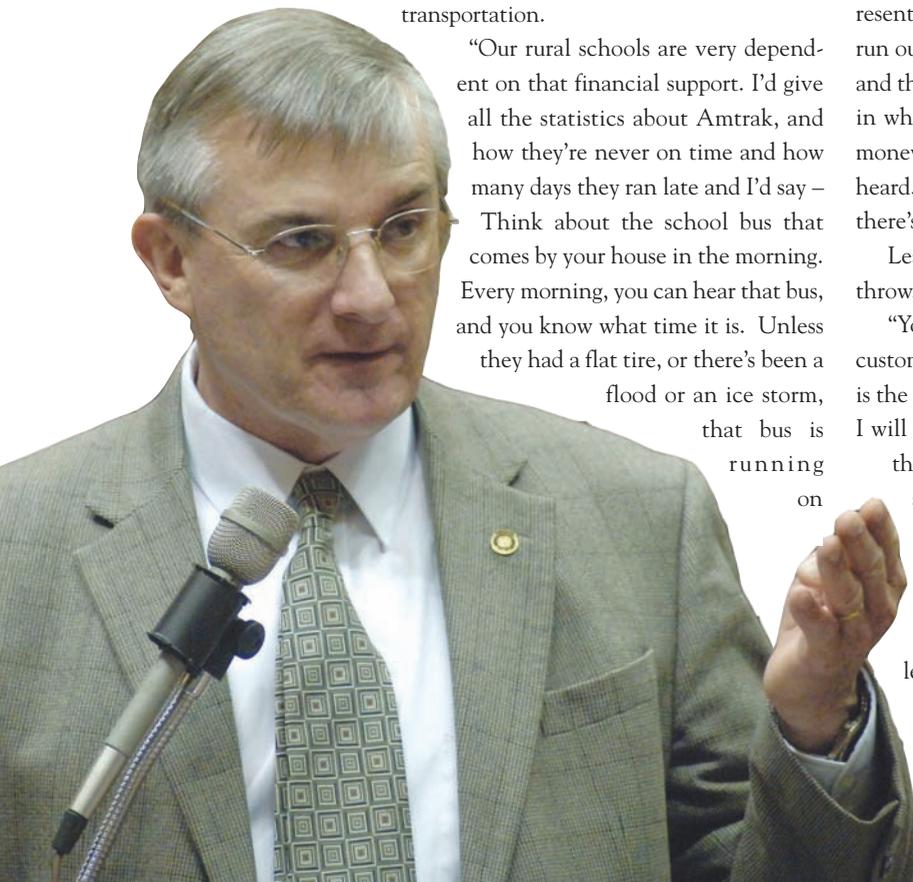
"Few people get to do this, and I realize that. If we want to change things in government, if we want to make changes in policies or in the people that represent us, then we have to show up. The people who show up are the ones that run our communities; the people who show up are the ones that run our state; and the people that show up are the ones who run our country. If we want a say in who runs our country, and who determines policy and how we spend our money and all of these things, then we need to show up and make our voices heard. That's as critical as anything for our nation to keep us free, because if there's anything we've got to fight for, it's our freedom – that's number one."

Leaving a job you have loved after eight years can be difficult, and for Dethrow, it's the people he's going to miss the most.

"You always miss the people. When I closed my business, I really missed my customers, and now, as a citizen representative, that is what I'll miss the most, is the people. You get to make a lot of friends – you make friends for a lifetime. I will miss the people in the communities and genuinely good honest people that you meet, and the wonderful folks at our area volunteer organizations, and those people I serve with I will miss as well. But mostly I'll miss the time talking with people back at home.

"It's been a privilege to serve. I have been blessed with not only a supportive wife of 40 years, but a supportive family and supportive friends, and in the Missouri House each of us has one employee – one legislative assistant – Agnes Rackers is her name and she has been just a fantastic legislative assistant and has helped me maintain timely responses, returned calls, e-mails, letters, but just maintaining that grass roots contact. We are very proud of our work there."

And his advice for whomever may capture the District 153 seat in the upcoming election? Listen.



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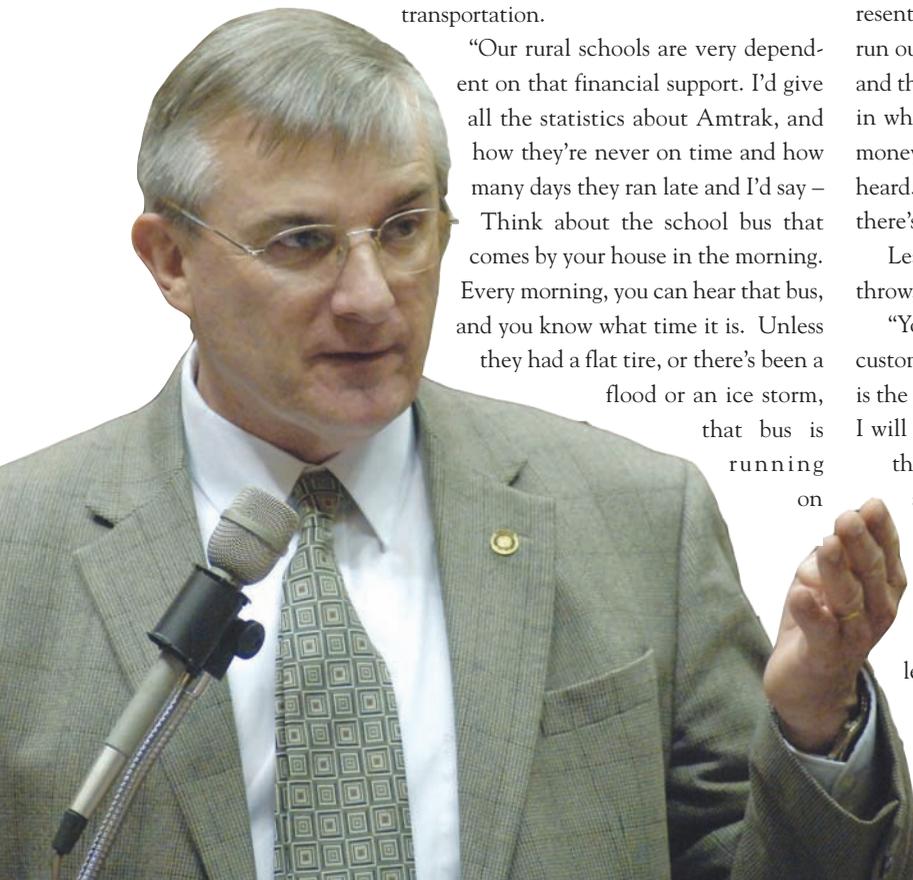
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Mike and Barbara Dethrow honoring legislative assistant Agnes Rackers for her dedication and service to the people of the 153rd legislative district.

“Listen to your constituents. Be available, listen to them. They’ll let you know what needs to be done. They’ll know a lot more than any special interest group in Jefferson City. A lot of the bills I filed came from back home. People talked about them at a listening post, and I would bring it to Jefferson City. You don’t have to be flamboyant to be successful. You can be successful by just doing the things people care about and helping them with every day problems.”

So what’s next for Dethrow? Enjoying time with his granddaughter and filling the role of full-time Paw-Paw.

“I just came back from Jonesboro for my 6-year-old granddaughter Sheridan’s kindergarten graduation. If we had been in session, I wouldn’t have gotten to attend. And in two weeks, she has informed me that she has a swim meet so Paw Paw is going to go see his granddaughter’s activities because she is just the greatest. I also have the farm that needs some attention – some repairs and maintenance – various things that I’ve had to let go since this turned into a full time job instead of a part time job. If the good Lord wants me to do something besides that, he’ll sure let me know. It’s just been an honor and a privilege to be the citizens’ chosen representative.” ♣

