

CATHY WURZER: We're going to talk about the governor's race, specifically looking at both the major party candidates, GOP challenger Scott Jensen and DFL incumbent Tim Walz. It's been more than three decades since a Minnesota governor seeking re-election has lost.

Incumbency has its advantages, but also leaves a record to defend. Governor Walz is pursuing another term after an eventful four years. Brian Bakst has our look back at his time in office.

LORIE SKJERVEN GILDEA: Do you, Tim Walz, solemnly swear--

BRIAN BAKST: The January 2019 inauguration day when Tim Walz drove home his One Minnesota campaign theme seems like a lifetime ago.

TIM WALZ: There's no doubt about it. We face some tremendous challenges in coming years. I'm not Pollyannish. Those of you who know me in here, I'm an optimist, but I also supervised the lunchroom for 20 years, so I'm a realist.

BRIAN BAKST: Not even Walz could have forecast how much challenge was ahead, from a nonstop battle with Republican lawmakers to a global pandemic to a racial reckoning that gained steam after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis Police custody.

I asked Walz recently how different his term wound up compared to what he expected coming in.

TIM WALZ: You don't know what's coming. You know, you need to be prepared for those types of things. And it doesn't do any good to wish these things wouldn't happen. You have to try and solve them.

BRIAN BAKST: Walz inherited a modest surplus. He pushed to boost education funding and recommended a mix of tax increases and extensions to pay for other programs. That first year, he also sought a big hike in the gas tax to invigorate road construction.

TIM WALZ: This is not a choice between having a gas tax or not. It's a choice between living in a state with the best and safest transportation system in the country or living in a state with crumbling roads and bridges that risk our safety and keep away businesses.

BRIAN BAKST: The tax plan went nowhere amid stiff opposition from Republicans. House Republican leader Kurt Daudt derided it by co-opting the governor's slogan.

KURT DAUDT: This is not One Minnesota. This is one expensive Minnesota.

BRIAN BAKST: Even with its demise, voters were reminded of the proposal when prices at the pump shot up this summer. Early on, Walz and lawmakers did speed through a fix to a flawed vehicle registration system, but they frequently collided over policy differences and the budget.

It required an overtime session to yield more aid for schools and the first income tax rate cut in nearly 20 years. Both sides left the bargaining table with some winds and left behind some priorities to fight over later.

TIM WALZ: There's a sense in a very chaotic and unpredictable world, normalcy to how we go about our democracy is important.

BRIAN BAKST: The first-year skirmishes would pale in comparison to the way COVID-19 upended daily life early in 2020 and the difficult choices Walz presided over for many months to come.

REPORTER: This is special coverage of an announcement by Governor Tim Walz of the temporary closure of Minnesota's K-12 public school system.

BRIAN BAKST: Classrooms emptied, restaurants closed, houses of worship and entertainment venues shuttered, and people were instructed to stay home if possible. Restrictions expected to last weeks stretched on longer and frustration mounted over expansive use of executive authority. Walz preached patience in the name of public health and pledged limits would gradually loosen.

TIM WALZ: It's not like a light switch because again, trust me. If you're the governor of Minnesota, shutting down your businesses is probably the last thing in the entire world you would ever want to do.

BRIAN BAKST: He bet big on an expansion of testing. A moonshot, he called it. That panned out. But Walz faced criticism over COVID-19 death rates in long-term care facilities. He encountered resistance to calls for people to voluntarily wear masks and hostility when he eventually imposed a mask mandate.

TIM WALZ: Not wearing a mask is not a sign of rebellion. It's just hurting your neighbor. And so I get it, that people are frustrated with the shutdown. But the way to protest that is just to yell at me or do whatever. But not wearing the mask makes it worse.

BRIAN BAKST: And critics mocked his administration's decision to buy a warehouse to serve as a makeshift morgue if the worst-case scenarios became reality. Walz defended it later, saying the significant deaths predicted in models were mitigated by precautions people took.

TIM WALZ: At that point in time, when I had to make that decision, it was the right decision. Here's what I'm hoping, and I will tell people this. I am hoping that that building never sees someone in it, and if they want to complain to me about that, that is a far better situation than having people stacked in U-Hauls, I can guarantee you that.

BRIAN BAKST: As if COVID wasn't challenging enough, May 25, 2020, produced another test of leadership.

REPORTER: It all stems from this video, showing the death of a Minneapolis man in police custody last night. You see at least one officer putting a knee against George Floyd's neck--

BRIAN BAKST: Floyd's death triggered days and nights of mass protests, some of which devolved into looting and destruction. Walz sent in state troopers and thousands of national guard members, but not fast enough to stop the burning of a police precinct and many businesses.

TIM WALZ: I spoke this evening to George Floyd's siblings quite extensively. I understand that rage. We've talked about it. We understand what has to happen. What's going on out there right now is not that. The wanton destruction and specifically of ethnic businesses that took generations to build are being torn down.

BRIAN BAKST: Walz and Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey publicly disagreed over who should have taken charge. At the capitol, Walz and lawmakers wrestled over police accountability. Some changes were made, but the trial of Derek Chauvin, the officer who killed Floyd, put the region on alert.

And the 2021 fatal police shooting of Daunte Wright reopened wounds and set off new protests. Meanwhile, COVID complications lingered. New variants kept the pressure on the health system.

TIM WALZ: We must remain vigilant. The only way we'll truly beat this virus is by continuing to social distance, wear a mask, and get tested. And of course, most importantly, Minnesotans need to get vaccinated.

BRIAN BAKST: After some early hiccups, the vaccination campaign hit a stride. Walz got his own jab alongside former Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty.

TIM OK, big boy.

PAWLENTY:

TIM WALZ: There you go. Good work.

BRIAN BAKST: The duo would reconvene in the fall for booster shots.

TIM Please get your vaccinations, if you haven't already. Get your second one, if you only got your first one. Get your
PAWLENTY: booster, if you're eligible. These vaccines are one of the primary ways out of this pandemic, and we want to get out of this damn thing as soon as possible.

BRIAN BAKST: Still, deep divides persisted, and satisfying initial demand for vaccines turned into nudging skeptics to get shots, including through incentives and workplace rules. Pawlenty's cooperation in the vaccine campaign was hardly indicative of his party's mood toward Walz.

WOMAN: I'm announcing that I'm a candidate to be governor of Minnesota.

MAN: --to announce my candidacy for governor of the state of Minnesota.

BRIAN BAKST: A crowded field of GOP candidates emerged to take on Walz, seven contenders overall.

SCOTT JENSEN: My name is Dr. Scott Jensen.

BRIAN BAKST: Scott Jensen outlasted them all to win the party nomination. That put him at the forefront of critiquing Walz on rising crime, nagging inflation, sliding student test scores, and more recently, an unrivaled meal fraud scandal that continues to unfold.

Capitol clashes, the closest to a constant in the Walz term, carried through to the end. Walz and the legislature deadlocked this year on how to dispense with a record-breaking surplus.

TIM WALZ: I would guarantee you the vast number of Minnesotans are like, just finish this thing.

BRIAN BAKST: During the recent interview where Walz reflected on the arc of his term, he described himself as a steady hand in pretty unsteady times.

TIM WALZ: I want to serve. I believe we've done a good job with it. I think I've surrounded myself with good people. But I remind people, this isn't about me. It's about the job. It's about the people of Minnesota.

BRIAN BAKST: He'll know in a few weeks if the people will let him keep the job for four more years. Brian Bakst, MPR News, at the Capitol.

CATHY WURZER: And of course, election day is November the 8th, exactly two weeks from today. We have voter guides on our website, MPRNews.org. After the break, we'll hear from Walz GOP challenger Dr. Scott Jensen.