

Raymond Watkin Reader's View: Saratogians benefit from McNeary legacy

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Many of us will miss Bill

McNeary and his intelligence, wit, business knowledge and ready smile. But many more Saratogians who may never have known him will experience the legacy of his public service for many years to come.

Bill was a great friend and devoted citizen of Saratoga Springs, not to mention a successful business owner. As mayor from 1974 to 1980, I was able to tap Bill's deep understanding of our city, his enterprise and creativity by appointing him to two key positions — chairman of the Recreation Commission, and member of the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Bill's energy and dedication to the public good came at a time when the city was coming out of decades of stagnation and needed leadership that was able to see ahead with a positive outlook.

As the first chairman of a brand new Recreation Commission, starting in June 1977, Bill's leadership created the foundations of the programs that have benefited thousands of families over the decades. During his years, the city took over maintenance of the East Side and West Side fields from the school district, enhanced the summer program that has given kids an active day camp while helping out so many working parents, and laid the groundwork for the programs that today we take for granted.

Bill also organized the structure of the recreation programs so that we could make most efficient use of city funding resources. Even though budgets were tight in those days, he was the force that expanded participation throughout the community, and ran the commission in a responsible, business-like manner, as one would expect from a successful entrepreneur.

Although some people greeted my appointment of him to the Zoning Board of Appeals with concern (in my view unwarranted), Bill served with distinction and integrity. His years on the ZBA were years when the city's redevelopment, including the adoption of historic and design criteria, was beginning to take root.

I felt it was important to have a person on the ZBA who understood the real estate business from the viewpoint of an owner/developer, yet balanced that with the priorities of the community for environmental, historic and aesthetic values.

Thinking back on those years, I find it remarkable that a businessperson like Bill had the time for all the meetings and base-touching those positions required. But he took the time because of his love for his hometown and its people, and his dedication to the future development of the city as a place that is friendly to business and families, alike.

Saratogians today who may never have known Bill McNeary, along with those of us who knew him well, should be thankful for his great service to our town, and for the legacies he has left us.

Raymond Watkin was mayor of Saratoga Springs from 1974 to 1980.

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