

Oregon's Longest-Serving State Lawmaker, Dies at 81

Courtney Died of Complications from Cancer in His Home

BY BEVERLY CORBELL

Long-time state Sen. Peter Courtney, the longest-serving Senate president, received volumes of praise after his passing on July 16.

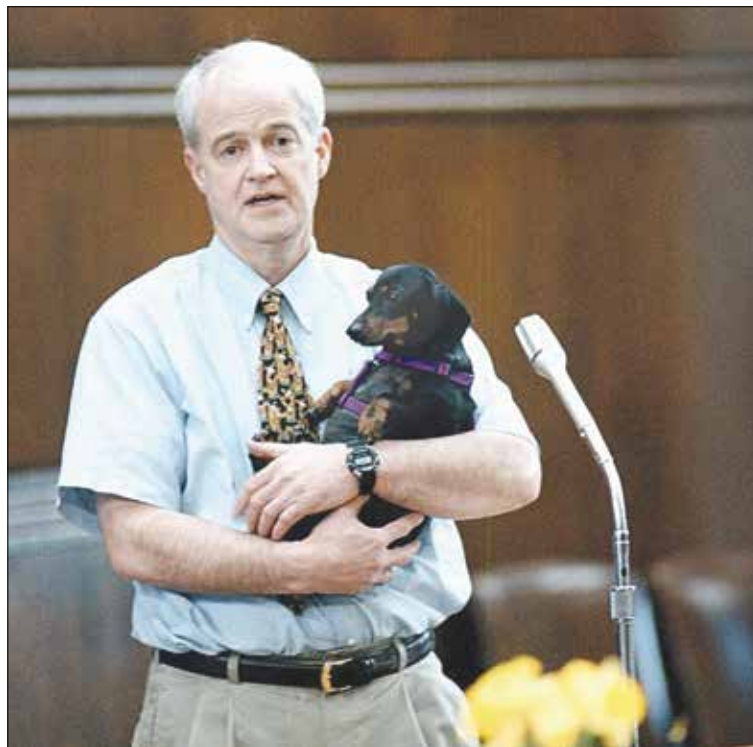
Gov. Tina Kotek said in a statement that Courtney leaves a strong legacy.

"President Courtney was a friend and ally in supporting an Oregon where everyone can find success and community. His life story, the way he embraced Oregon and public service, and his love for the institution of the Oregon Legislature leaves a legacy that will live on for decades," Kotek said.

"He led through times of prosperity and times of struggle – including the great recession and the COVID-19 pandemic – with a steadfast commitment to protecting people and making their lives better," she said. "His tenure in the legislature is marked by incredible triumphs, earned through his genuine statesmanship and enormous heart."

According to Oregon Public Broadcasting, Courtney served in the state Legislature for 38 years, between stints in the House and Senate. He spent 20 years in the powerful role of Senate President. Both are records, and Courtney attained a legendary status among old friends and foes.

"Peter was old school," said former state Sen. Ginny Bur-



Late State Senate President Peter Courtney, who died July 16. Photo courtesy of AP

dick, D-Portland, who served with Courtney for more than two decades, according to OPB. "He was truly a brilliant leader," Burdick said. "I've never really experienced anything else like that."

Courtney, a Democrat, was a leader in his party but also worked seamlessly with Republicans.

Sen. Tim Knopp, a Bend Republican who often squared off with Courtney, according to OPB, called Courtney a mentor and "one of the most important elected officials and political figures in Oregon history."

Courtney was very close with another Republican, the late Sen. Jackie Winters, who he eulogized in an article for OBP after her death at 82 in May 29, 2019.

"I've lost my partner in public service," wrote Courtney. "The Legislature and Oregon have lost a dedicated servant. We lost the best of the best."

the more captivating, animated and mercurial figures in Oregon politics. He was known for his skill as a speaker, dealmaker and his insistence on bipartisan support for legislation. Courtney helped move the Legislature to annual sessions, boosted K-12 funding, replaced Oregon's defunct and crumbling state hospital and fought for animal welfare."

Courtney, who retired from the Senate in 2022, "emphasized bipartisanship and compromise during this tenure running the upper chamber, befriending Republicans and making a point to learn the names of colleague's spouses and children," according to the Salem Reporter.

Courtney represented Senate District 11, which included north and east Salem, from 1998 until his retirement, stated the Reporter, and became Senate president in 2003.

"He knew politics inside and out. He knew how to manage people, coalitions and caucuses," Salem political strategist Chuck Adams told the Reporter.

Raised in New England, Courtney moved to Salem on a Greyhound bus in 1969 to take a job as a law clerk, according to the Reporter. "He took a room at the downtown YMCA and lived there for two years. He remained an advocate for the YMCA for the rest of his life."

He proved that in 2017 when he approached Adams, then president of the Y's board, to help him "go to war with him" to replace the Y's aging gym with state lottery funding.

"Courtney ultimately secured \$16 million in state money to make the project

happen, and another \$9 million for the YMCA's affordable veteran housing project next door," according to the Reporter. "The building, which opened earlier this year, was christened Courtney Place in his honor."

"Betsy Imholt, who served as Courtney's chief of staff and now runs the Oregon Department of Revenue, said someone once remarked that most people seemed monochrome compared to the rainbow of Courtney's personality," the Oregonian stated.

"That's the best way I could describe how he is: so charismatic, big personality, bit emotions, big thoughts and ideas," Imholt said. "Everyone remembers when they meet him because there's just nobody like him."

Courtney died at 81 from complications related to cancer, according to the Oregonian.

The Washington Post remarked on Courtney's beginnings.

"Courtney was born in Philadelphia. He said he spent his youth helping to care for his mother, who had Parkinson's disease. He grew up in Rhode Island and West Virginia, where his grandmother helped raise him.

"Courtney received a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in public administration from the University of Rhode Island. He completed law school at Boston University, and moved to Salem in 1969 after learning about an open judicial clerkship in the Oregon Court of Appeals."

Courtney is survived by his wife, Margie, three sons and seven grandchildren.

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