

John T. Knox, longtime Contra Costa Assemblyman, dies



Herman Bustamante Jr./Times archive

Former Assemblyman John T. Knox from West Contra Costa died Tuesday at 92.

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RICHMOND — Former state Assemblyman John T. Knox, a liberal Democrat who was a driving force behind the 1970 creation of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission in 1965, died Tuesday at Kaiser Permanente Hospital in Richmond after a long illness. He was 92.

Knox represented Contra Costa County in the Assembly from 1960 through 1980, and served as the Assembly speaker pro tem for the last four years of that time. Because of CEQA, state and local agencies are required to identify and mitigate significant environmental impacts of development, construction or other actions. The BCDC's mission is to enhance and protect San Francisco Bay and ensure responsible development along the water.

Knox's son, John H. Knox believes those may be his most important accomplishments; his greatest legacies in a political career with a long resume that also included authoring

the Knox-Keen Health Care Service Plan, which regulated California's health-maintenance organizations (HMOs).

"He liked to say he was very proud of being a politician, and that wasn't a dirty word to him at all," said the younger Knox. "He was a master negotiator; he got (Gov.) Ronald Reagan to sign the Environmental Quality Act, if that tells you something."

Former Congressman George Miller said Wednesday that Knox approached his job like the lawyer he was — he prepared thoroughly and presented his arguments smartly and concisely.

"He wasn't interested in small issues or small ideas — he wanted to save San Francisco Bay, and rewrite how local government works," said Miller, who said he was mentored by Knox much as Knox was mentored by his father, former state Sen George Miller Jr. "He saw what it was that government was for, to get change for the people, to get things done. And he wouldn't let himself be derailed."

John T. Knox was born Sept. 30, 1924 in Reno, moving to California at age 5. He got a bachelor of arts degree from Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1949, and a law degree from Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco in 1952. He set up a private law practice in Richmond soon thereafter.

He joined the Assembly in November 1960, after a special election to replace S.C. Masterson, who had resigned. He represented District 11, which at that time represented most of West Contra Costa as well as parts of Orinda and other areas east of the Caldecott Tunnel. He was elected Assembly speaker for the first time in January 1976, and was re-elected each of the following three years, retiring in 1980.

Knox's son said creation of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission may have saved the bay from a dramatic downsizing, as plans were afoot to fill in large parts of it, including most of the stretch between Richmond and Berkeley, where some sought to build an airport.

"There was rampant filling of the bay going on," he said. "They had to fight hard to get that bill through."

There also was the Knox-Nisbet Act of 1963, which helped establish Local Agency Formation Commissions through which cities now annex new lands. That allowed the construction of the 6½-mile stretch of Interstate 580 between the I-80 interchange near Golden Gate Fields west to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, which is formally called the John T. Knox Freeway.

"That stretch used to be Highway 17, a four-lane undivided highway known as 'Blood Alley' because of all the traffic collisions," John H. Knox said. "It was unsafe and

congested.” The freeway was built from 1987 until 1991, with funding coming years after Knox left the Assembly.

And then there is Miller/Knox Regional Park near Point Richmond, named for him and George Miller Jr.

“There is a reason things are named after him; he got things done,” said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond. “He did the heavy lifting and the hard work needed to make things happen.”

After leaving the Assembly, Knox joined the San Francisco office of the Los Angeles-based law firm Nossaman, Krueger & Marsh (later Nossaman, Krueger & Knox) as an attorney and lobbyist. He worked for the firm as an attorney and lobbyist for almost 20 years. In later years, Gioia said, Knox would often be seen eating lunch at the Hotel Mac in Point Richmond, talking issues with whomever sat down with him. He had done a similar service years earlier, talking to civics classes at Richmond High taught by John Gioia’s father. “He was willing to be out in the community like that,” Gioia said.

In addition to his son, John T. Knox is survived by Jean, his wife of 67 years; daughters Charlotte Knox and Mary Knox; and seven grandchildren. Memorial arrangements are pending.