

Ben Boo Former mayor of Duluth

A 'consummate politician,' he put his city before himself

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DULUTH - Ben Boo, a former Duluth mayor and state representative, who steered the city through the turmoil of the Interstate 35 extension and the devastating closure of U.S. Steel operations, died Dec. 1. He was 96.

"He was the consummate politician," said Duke Skorich, a former Duluth reporter and radio person-

ality who covered Boo. "He had clarity of vision and the foresight to put the pieces and people together to get things done. To get positive change for this city at a time when it was desperately needed."

Boo served two terms as mayor, from 1967 to 1975 and five terms as a state representative, from 1984 to 1993. He also directed the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District and the Upper Great Lakes Regional Commission, and narrowly lost a bid to become the state's lieutenant governor in 1970 when he ran on a split Republican ticket against Rudy Perpich, who would eventually go on to become governor.

Boo was unpretentious, with a "quietly confident" leadership style, said Tom Berkelman, a former Duluth state representative who worked in City Hall when Boo was mayor.

"He built coalitions based on respectfulness and trust," Berkelman said of Boo, who arrived to work before anyone else, at 6 a.m. "He just simply led. It was never about him."

Kent Worley, a landscape architect who first worked in Duluth in 1967, recalls writing a letter to Boo in 1970 criticizing plans to construct a portion of I-35 22 feet over Lake Superior.

"It was such a horrible plan," Worley said, that would

reduce access and views to Lake Superior, oblivious to the significance of the precious resource. His letter reached Boo, and ignited a sequence of events that included further federally funded study and a halt to construction.

"Ben had respect for the public, and he responded to the public," Worley said. "And he followed up."

Skorich recalled a time when he reported on dilapidated downtown hotels, including the Metropole, that housed low-income residents in unfit conditions. Boo asked him not to expose the conditions, because it would cause the buildings to shut down and put residents out in the cold, he said, and he needed more time to find suitable housing.

"That began Duluth's movement toward [providing better] low-income housing," Skorich said.

As a lawmaker, Boo was a "pragmatic Republican," said Ben Gustafson, who served as a state representative for Duluth alongside Boo in the early 1980s.

A Democrat, Gustafson said, he was still able to sit down with Boo and amicably discuss issues "during an epic period for economic development in Duluth and north-eastern Minnesota ... [Boo] represented the good side of public service."

Duluth Mayor Emily Larson, who lived near Boo for several years, called him "a treasure."

Boo took twice daily neighborhood strolls, she said, while smoking his signature pipe.

"He'd wave, or say hello — always friendly, never intrusive," she said. "He never told me that he'd been the mayor, but of course we all knew. I really appreciated that in many ways he was just a person — a family man, proud of his community and watchful of our neighborhood."

Boo is survived by his wife, Mary; sons Chris, Peter, Michael and Matt; daughter Mary Jeronimus; 13 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. Services have been held.

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