

John Sarna Minneapolis legislator

He saved Stone Arch Bridge for pedestrians and bicyclists

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If county officials had their way, light rail trains might today be the main users of the Stone Arch Bridge.

But Rep. John Sarna, along with residents and historic preservationists, had a different vision for the Minneapolis landmark. They wanted the former railroad bridge to be repurposed for recreational use so that pedestrians and cyclists

could enjoy it and the sweeping views of the Mississippi River, the city skyline and the former mills that once fueled the city's growth.

Sarna helped make that a reality by introducing legislation transferring bridge ownership from the county to the state.

"Every time I cross the bridge while jogging or biking, I think of John," said former Minneapolis City Council member Joe Biernat. "He saw the bridge as the catalyst to revitalization of the riverfront. That's exactly what happened."

Sarna, who served in the Minnesota House from 1972 to 1996, died April 20. He was 86.

In 1992, former Star Tribune columnist Barbara Flanagan heralded Sarna's efforts to reopen the bridge for public use, instead of for light rail trains, as "heroic."

Hennepin County bought the bridge in 1989. It had been out of use for more than a decade. But many people balked at the idea of using it for light rail trains and possibly buses.

So Sarna, who was chairman of the House Commerce, Tourism and Consumer Affairs Committee, got involved. He thought the bridge could become "the prize of Minneapolis," attracting residents and tourists.

"I'm a history buff," he told the Star Tribune in 1992. "And I grew up in northeast Minneapolis near the river. The bridge is a special place ... the only spot in Minneapolis where you can look around you and see our beginnings."

After a \$2.8 million renovation funded mostly by federal

money, the bridge reopened for recreational use in 1994. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Sarna and his wife, Ann, were among the first to cross it, in a horse-drawn carriage with a procession of people behind them on foot.

Born and raised in northeast Minneapolis, Sarna had two sisters and a brother. His father was a glazier, a tradesman who cut and installed glass.

Sarna went to vocational school and worked at General Motors in the parts department. He also served as a business agent for the United Auto Workers.

A district DFL chairman, he decided to run for public office at the last minute when the state representative from his district suddenly retired. After some debate, Sarna agreed to throw his hat in the ring. A friend drove him to the elections office to file the paperwork, reaching it about 15 minutes before it closed on the last day of filing, his wife said. "He won, and then he never lost," she said.

Sarna's hold on that seat became one of the strongest in the state. He won 12 straight elections, often by wide margins, in the heavily DFL district. Still, he campaigned vigorously, assembling hundreds of people to knock on doors every election.

"Johnson Street was full of Sarna signs so nobody could miss the fact that he was running," said Ann Sarna.

He championed pension reform and residency requirements for public employees. He also authored one of the state's first car lemon laws and garnered the nickname of "Mr. Consumer Protection."

"He did not aspire for the limelight," said Biernat, who worked as an aide to Sarna for six years. "He always insisted on passing credit to other people."

And, he added, Sarna was responsive to constituents and always made it a point to answer his own phone.

Besides his wife, survivors include daughters Beth Sheaser and Barb Kronlokken and four grandchildren. Services were Tuesday.

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