

County commissioner spent decades in public service

St. Paul native Tony Bennett served in Legislature, worked as police officer.

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Tony Bennett, a police officer-turned-politician who made waves with an audacious attempt to build a new Vikings stadium in the northeast suburbs, has died.

Bennett, who served on the Ramsey County Board and in the Legislature, died Monday from complications related to Parkinson's disease at a Twin Cities care facility, surrounded by his family. He was 82.

A moderate Republican, Bennett was known for decades of public service and deal-making across political lines. Though most of his fellow commissioners identified as Democrats, Bennett served as either board chair or bud-

get chair for 14 of his 16 years in county office, said former longtime principal assistant Joe Murphy.

"He did not go into anything with a predisposed opinion," Murphy said. "He said, 'I can work with just about anybody at the end of the day.' He just liked to get things done."

Bennett represented Ramsey County's First District, which included the northern suburbs. He took pride in making sure his city of Shoreview and surrounding communities were well served, his family said.

"It was about the community, the parks and the library. That was also a big part of his politics," said granddaughter Alyssa Gauerke.

During his time on the

County Board, Bennett was instrumental in consolidating 911 services across the county, which improved emergency response, said Commissioner Rafael Ortega. Bennett was also the force behind a deal in which the county purchased 36 acres of land for \$1 from the U.S. Army at the former Twin Cities Army Ammunition site in Arden Hills.

"He wasn't a policy wonk. He really enjoyed the art of making a deal. That was the essence of his politics," said Ortega, a Democrat.

During two stints in the Legislature, Bennett was instrumental in passing such measures as right-turn-on-red, the creation of the Minnesota lottery and mandatory seat belt use.



Ramsey County Commissioner Tony Bennett pushed to get the Vikings stadium to Arden Hills.

"He was an incredible man," said Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt, a Democrat. "He was loyal and honest and you knew he was sincere. He could be kind of blustery, but you knew he cared and loved with his whole heart."

Anthony Lee Bennett was born in 1940 and raised on St. Paul's East Side, the son of a Sicilian immigrant.

"He was very proud of being from the East Side," said daughter Pamela Mulheran. "His favorite line was, 'Not bad for a first-generation Sicilian kid from the East Side.'"

Bennett graduated from

Johnson High School and attended college for a few years before joining the St. Paul police force in 1964. He attended the University of St. Thomas and University of Minnesota.

After an initial unsuccessful bid, Bennett served four years in the Legislature representing St. Paul. He returned eight years after another loss, this time as a Shoreview resident, and served from 1983 to 1990.

That year, President George H.W. Bush appointed Bennett U.S. marshal for Minnesota. When he was replaced with a Democratic appointee four years later, Bennett lost a race for Ramsey County sheriff. He went on to join the County Board in 1996.

When the Metrodome in Minneapolis started showing its age, Bennett led an un-

successful campaign to build a stadium in Arden Hills on the former ammunition plant site. The idea didn't sit well with his constituents, who ousted him in the 2012 primary.

Even in retirement, Bennett believed that bringing the Vikings to Arden Hills would have been a win for Ramsey County.

"He was somebody who had ideas and was not afraid to share them. He also wasn't afraid to be criticized," Murphy said. "The man never had any regrets."

Bennett is survived by wife, Patricia; children Chris, Steve and Pamela, who all live in the Twin Cities; nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Services will be announced at a later date.

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