

JOE BEGICH 1930 - 2019

Ex-legislator was staunch Iron Range defender

By PAUL WALSH
paul.walsh@startribune.com

A proud Iron Ranger whose long-time political career took him from Eveleth City Hall to the State Capitol has died.

DFLer Joe Begich, the onetime mayor of Eveleth and former state representative, died Saturday morning. He was 89.

"St. Louis County has lost a friend with the passing of Joe Begich," said Commissioner Keith Nelson, speaking on behalf of the St. Louis County Board. "While we mourn his death, we celebrate his life and draw inspiration from his legacy of public service as a legislator, mayor and Army veteran.

"He was a champion for his beloved Iron Range and for our citizens, in particular miners."

Begich, born in Eveleth in 1930, served as its mayor for four terms and then in the Minnesota House of

Representatives from 1974 until 1993, when he chose not to seek re-election.

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar said in a statement that her state has "lost a longtime advocate and defender of the Iron Range, labor, seniors and Minnesota's working class families. Joe was dedicated to improving the lives of others and devoted many years to public service.... I will always remember Joe as a champion for the Range and preserving Minnesota's tradition of mining, education and health care."

Nelson recalled that when a section of Hwy. 101 that passes by Begich's home was renamed in his honor two years ago, "he told our commissioners, 'It'll be nice to finish off my life by this new road.' What a privilege it was to honor him in this way."

Begich spoke up for mining interests as recently as March 2016 when he wrote in a Star Tribune letter to the editor that he was shocked at then-

Gov. Mark Dayton's opposition to the Twin Metals mining project.

"Governor, I care deeply about the Iron Range," Begich wrote. "I was born here and lived here for my entire 86 years, except for the years I spent in the U.S. Army [in Korea]. Let me die as a proud Iron Range DFLer. Reverse your decision on Twin Metals."

After leaving elective office, Begich served on the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board (IRRRB). Away from politics, he served on the boards of the Hockey Hall of Fame in Eveleth and Camp Chicagami children's camp. He also was board chairman of the Eveleth Health Services Park, a nursing home offering mental health services and kidney dialysis.

Begich's reputation as a public servant who pulled no punches when it came to his beloved Iron Range was on full display in 1992, when he wrote a scathing letter to Republican Sen. Earl Renneke, of Le Sueur.

"I just found out that you are retiring from the Senate after a long career of doing nothing but criticizing everyone else. ... You constantly threw vicious attacks on the Iron Range for no reason other than dirty politics and a coverup for your shortcomings as a 'do-nothing' senator."

Renneke said at the time in response to Begich's letter that "I don't know that we've ever had a conversation at all, but I have been a critic and asked hard questions about the IRRRB. ... As a legislator, we're supposed to ask those questions. I must have been able to get under somebody's skin."

A lifelong Eveleth resident, Joe Begich served four years in Korea with the Army infantry. He was a long-time employee of the Erie Mining Co.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Paul Walsh • 612-673-4482

Online title:

Former State Rep. Joe Begich, a Spirited Iron Range Defender, Dies: The Former Mayor of Eveleth Was 89.



Joe Begich was a state representative from 1975 to 1992. Credit: Star Tribune file