

Bruce Vento: 1940 – 2000

# A champion until the end

*Praise pours in for environmental crusader, advocate for homeless*

## Vento's political career

- **1970:** Elected to Minnesota House; served three terms.
- **1976:** Elected to U.S. House to represent Fourth Congressional District; served almost 12 terms.
- **Top issues:** Championed environmental and homeless causes.
- **Key position:** Chairman of the House Natural Resources subcommittee on national parks, forests and lands for 10 years.
- **Latest legislation:** Pushed bill making it easier for Hmong who fought with U.S. forces during the Vietnam War to become U.S. citizens by waiving the English-language requirement for them. The bill included their spouses and widows.

STAR TRIBUNE OCT 11 '00  
By Greg Gordon  
and Tom Hamburger  
Star Tribune Washington  
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WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. Rep. Bruce Vento, one of the nation's foremost crusaders for the environment and the homeless, died at his St. Paul home Tuesday after an eight-month battle with a rare form of lung cancer.

He celebrated his 60th birthday Saturday.

Doctors' discovery that Vento had mesothelioma, a fast-mov-

ing cancer almost always associated with asbestos exposure, forced the veteran Democrat to announce in February that he would retire at the conclusion of his 12th term in the House.

In a speech on the Senate floor, Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., said that Vento's new wife, Susan Lynch Vento, his grown sons, Michael, Peter and John, and other family members were at his side and that all told the Fourth District congressman, "You can let go."

"What a beautiful, caring, loving family, and what a beau-

tiful, loving, caring man," Wellstone said, choking back tears at one point.

Word of Vento's death triggered an outpouring of emotion and salutations from the White House, politicians of all stripes, environmental leaders and advocates for the down and out.

**VENTO continues on A20**

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- *Remembered by colleagues.* **A21**
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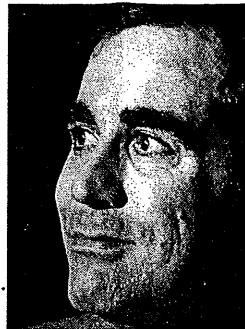


Star Tribune photo by Duane Braley

**Rep. Vento in his St. Paul office in February. The congressman died Tuesday morning in his home, surrounded by family and friends. For details on the funeral arrangements, turn to A20.**

*"Bruce not only talked the talk, he walked the walk and cared really deeply about people in need."*

— Rep. Jim Ramstad, R-Minn.



## BRUCE VENTO

- **Born:** Oct. 7, 1940
- **Education:** Johnson High School, St. Paul; University of Minnesota; bachelor's degree, University of Wisconsin-River Falls.
- **Career:** Taught science and social studies in Minnesota public schools. Elected to Minnesota House in 1970; elected to U.S. House in 1976.
- **Health history:** Announced in February that he would not seek reelection after receiving a diagnosis of malignant mesothelioma.
- **Family:** Wife, Susan Lynch Vento, whom he married in August. Sons Michael, Peter and John.

### VENTO from A20

*He was 'the best friend a hiker, camper or canoeist' could have*

Throughout the day and into the evening, U.S. representatives took to the House floor to pay tribute to Vento, who died at 11:20 a.m.

President Clinton hailed him as "a great teacher, a great representative, a wonderful human being."

Vice President Al Gore, who was elected to the House with Vento in 1976, called him "a great public servant" whose "conservation legacy will endure for many generations to come."

Gov. Jesse Ventura ordered flags on all state buildings flown at half-staff from sunrise today until Vento's burial Friday. St. Paul Mayor Norm Coleman similarly directed that city government buildings lower their flags, saying: "A man of such honor and character graces us all too seldom."

Vento, a former high school science teacher and state legislator, leaves behind one of the most tangible legacies of any member of Congress. He shepherded passage of more than 300 laws that preserved natural lands from the Florida Everglades to the Alaska wilderness.

Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, remembered him as "the best friend a hiker, camper or canoeist could ever have."

At a news conference at the state Capitol, Republican Sen. Rod Grams called Vento a friend whose work he respected despite their frequent differences. "We agreed on the outcome much more than

we agreed on how to get there," Grams said.

He noted that even while afflicted, Vento won passage in his final year in office of legislation easing citizenship requirements for widows of Hmong veterans living in the United States — a measure that passed just two weeks ago.

"It's too bad to lose him," said former U.S. Sen. Eugene McCarthy, 84, who held the same congressional seat as Vento from 1948 to 1958. "He was such an established person in the Congress, but cancer is pretty impartial."

Shortly after his illness was diagnosed, Vento underwent surgery at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., for removal of his left lung and diaphragm. Mayo doctors had drained fluid from his right lung on at least two occasions since June to assist his breathing. His condition deteriorated sharply in recent weeks, and the doctors found that despite months of chemotherapy and radiation treatments, the cancer had spread to his remaining lung.

Mesothelioma is almost always associated with asbestos exposure decades earlier. Vento, who held several factory jobs from 1958 to 1969, sued in late September, accusing 11 companies of negligently exposing him to microscopic asbestos fibers. His lawyer, Mike Sieben, had planned to take a videotaped deposition from Vento this month, but Vento died before that could be done.

Sieben said Tuesday that "the litigation will continue, and I'm very optimistic that we'll prevail."

Vento's death just four weeks before the general election threw a bit of uncertainty into the three-way race to succeed him. Lawyers in the Minnesota attorney general's office declined to say immediately whether they believe a murky state succession law might allow Ventura to appoint an interim successor. Such a move seemed unlikely so close to the election.

Democratic state Rep. Betty McCollum, Republican state Sen. Linda Runbeck and Independence Party candidate Tom Foley are vying for Vento's seat in the traditionally Democratic district, which includes St. Paul.

Vento approached his ailment and last months in office with a graceful determination that won him the admiration of political friends and foes in Washington.

At a testimonial in June, Clinton praised his courage in fighting "a disease that has not yet yielded all its secrets to science."

Vento helped turn the bipartisan tribute dinner for him into a fund-raiser that produced more than \$500,000 for scholarships to train high school science teachers. As a legislator he was known for using every opportunity to pursue causes he held dear: Directing more resources to poor city neighborhoods, promoting public schools, raising the minimum wage and, always, protecting the environment.

In his first year in Congress he

worked with others for the establishment of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA). And in every ensuing year, his name was associated with wilderness preservation legislation. He was best known in Minnesota as a defender of the ban on the use of motorized vehicles in the BWCA, though he wound up having to embrace a painful compromise that allowed two motorized portages there.

He rose to chair a House subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands and, until the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, was at the center of similar fights in dozens of other states. Vento became better known in some parts of the West than he was in Minnesota.

"The name Bruce Vento is without a doubt a very dirty word in many communities in the West,"

said Charles Cushman, president of an organization of private property owners in Washington state. "Any place there's a national park, they fear Mr. Vento with a passion."

The Sierra Club credits him in part with preserving and protecting 5 million acres of wild lands during the decade in which he held the chairmanship. He also tended the designation of 76 rivers as "wild and scenic."

His passion for parks came to him through personal experience. His father, a Machinists union officer, was not wealthy and couldn't afford fancy holidays or a lake cabin. "We depended on the parks along the St. Croix River," recalled Vento, an avid outdoorsman. "That was our Sunday picnic, our vacation."

Vento received 100 percent rankings most years from labor

and liberal interest groups, while getting extremely low ratings from conservative and Christian fundamentalist organizations.

From his seat on the House Banking and Urban Affairs Committee, Vento in 1982 became one of the first members of Congress to urge action to deal with homelessness. His proposal that year to provide \$50 million to repair derelict buildings for temporary shelter was never brought to a vote by the full House.

Vento persevered, however, and eight years later he was the prime sponsor of the \$1.3 billion McKinney homeless aid bill, which won approval and was signed into law. He later became chairman and ranking member of the Housing and Community Opportunity Subcommittee.

Former St. Paul Mayor George Latimer, who served as a consul-

tant to the Department of Housing and Urban Development during the Clinton years, said Tuesday of the homeless: "A lot of people don't know the name Vento, but they lost a friend today."

## Fighting for Hmong

After St. Paul became one of the major centers of Hmong immigration in the 1980s, Vento embraced the needs of the former Laotian hill tribespeople who had fought with U.S. forces during the Vietnam War. He pushed for federal housing and educational assistance and to waive the English-language requirement for citizenship for those who had fought with the United States in Laos.

In the 1990s, Vento's office became an informal Washington headquarters for this new group of Americans. His office walls was decorated with an enormous Hmong tapestry given in appreciation. And, on occasion, his inner and outer offices were lined with former Hmong soldiers in fatigues using his phones and desks to plan their lobbying assault on Washington.

Before coming to Washington, Vento served several terms in the Minnesota House, where he rose to the job of assistant majority leader under Speaker Martin Sabo, who would later be Vento's close colleague in Congress.

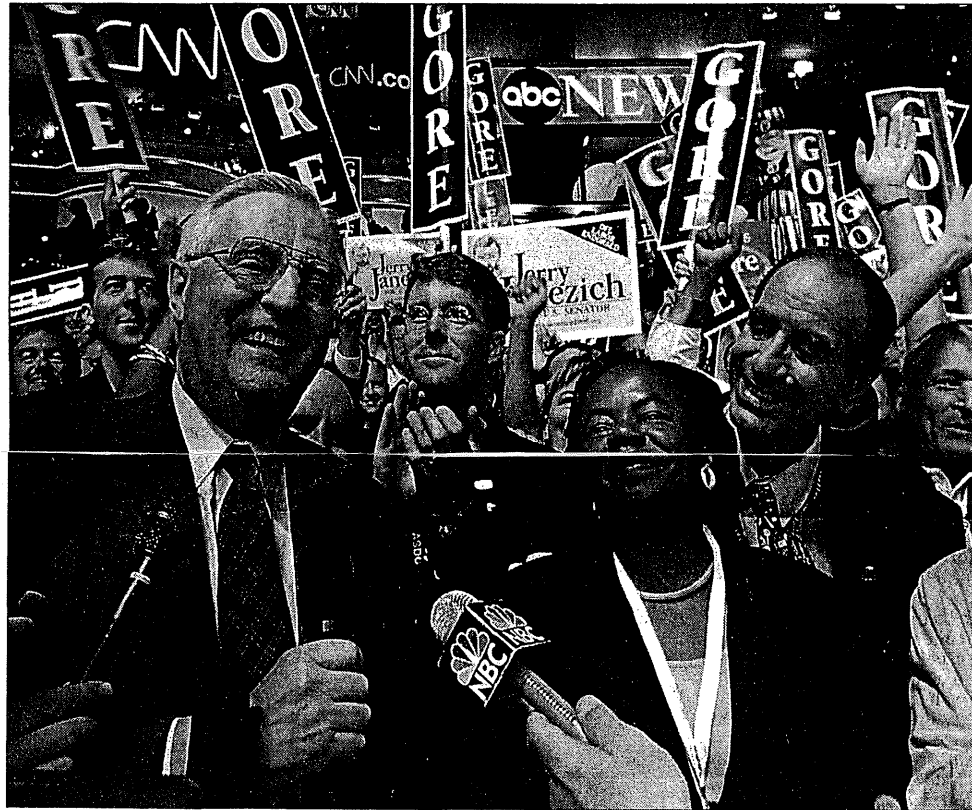
When St. Paul's nine-term congressman Joseph Karth decided to retire in 1976, he endorsed the volatile Vento for his seat. That and strong labor support helped Vento win the party endorsement. His longevity enabled Democrats to hold the seat for more than half a century.

In Congress, Sabo and Vento usually voted alike. But in de-

## 2000:

Vento stayed politically active during the past few months. He appeared at the Democratic National Convention with Minneapolis Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton and former Vice President Walter Mondale, left, as the state cast its ballots for Vice President Al Gore.

Star Tribune photo by Jeff Wheeler





**1996:** From left, Rep. Bill Luther, President Clinton, Vento and Sen. Paul Wellstone waved to the crowd at a Target Center rally in Minneapolis. Clinton remembered Vento

Star Tribune photo by David Brewster



**1976:** Nine-term U.S. Rep. Joseph Karth, left, celebrated with Vento after Vento won the DFL primary for Karth's seat.

Star Tribune file photo



**1987:** Collecting on a baseball playoff wager, Vento enjoyed pizza delivered by Rep. Robert Davis, R-

Star Tribune file photo

meanor, they couldn't have been more different. While the Scandinavian Sabo was sparing with words, Vento was known as a ceaseless orator who sometimes had trouble ending a sentence.

Wellstone quipped Tuesday that he knows he will be talking regularly with Vento "up in heaven. . . . It's still going to be a one-sided conversation."

### Personal life

Vento's final year in Washington was not filled with funereal sentiment. In August he married a fellow educator, Susan Lynch of Chatfield, Minn.

A week before the nuptials, Vento, smiling but wan, attended the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, appearing with former Vice President Walter Mondale and Minneapolis Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton as the Minnesota delegation cast its ballots for Gore.

Despite having lost 25 pounds and some of his hair from the chemotherapy treatment, he would tell those who inquired of his plans: "I'm looking forward to fishing. That's the ulterior motive in all the environmental protections I've fought for."

In addition to his wife and three sons, Vento is survived by his parents, Frank and Anne Vento of St. Paul; three brothers; four sisters, and four grandchildren.

— Staff writers Curt Brown, Bob Whereatt, Bill McAuliffe and Andrew Donohue contributed to this report.

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### Funeral plans

U.S. Rep. Bruce Vento's funeral will be at 11 a.m. Friday at the Cathedral of St. Paul. Internment will follow at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Maplewood.

Public visitation will be from 3 to 8 p.m. Thursday at O'Halloran and Murphy Highland Park Chapel, 575 Snelling Av. S., St. Paul.

Vento's office directed that memorials be sent to the Bruce F. Vento Science Educator Scholarship Fund, c/o the St. Paul Foundation, 600 Norwest Center, St. Paul MN 55101, or to the St. Paul Dorothy Day Center, 183 Old 6th St. St. Paul, MN, 55102.