



IN MEMORY OF MICHAEL KAISER

1939-2021

Executive Director of the
Lehigh Valley Planning Commission
from 1968-2013

When Mike Kaiser sold his South Whitehall Township home last year, his daughter spent hours in the basement packing thousands and thousands of slides and photos. It included everything from architectural plans to blue prints to photos of landscapes, roads and just about anything that caught the longtime planner's expert eye.

The overwhelming volume only re-enforced what Wendy Kaiser knew about her dad.

"He had a lifetime love affair with the Lehigh Valley," Wendy Kaiser said. "He was so proud of this region and so proud of his work."

Kaiser, who spent more than 45 years as Executive Director of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission before retiring in 2013, died August 20 after a long battle with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's Disease. He was 82 years old.

In some ways, he was one of the architects of what his beloved Lehigh Valley has become.

Kaiser was a 1961 Penn State graduate who was hired in 1963 as a planner just two years after the inception of what was then known as the Joint Planning Commission (JPC), the original name of the combined planning effort of Lehigh and Northampton counties. The JPC would later be renamed the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission. Kaiser showed his skills quickly, as an instrumental part of drafting the region's first comprehensive plan – the first regional plan adopted in Pennsylvania. He became assistant executive director in 1967, acting director four months later and director in January 1968.

He remained at the helm until his retirement in June of 2013 – a nearly 46-year stint in which he helped shape how we live, work and travel.

And while he's most known for building highways and interstates, his greatest pride came in the commission's work getting municipalities to change their zoning to protect or preserve farmland, open space and park lands, Wendy said.

"He was a fighter for the environment and farmland preservation before it became popular," said 30-year LVPC Commissioner Percy Dougherty, who is also a Lehigh County Commissioner. "And I'll always remember our frequent trips to Harrisburg to fight to give counties more power to control development in the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code. If I was going to take a fight to the Capitol, I wanted it to be with Mike. I miss him dearly."

Kaiser had no problem bucking trends, even as he was tracking them for the region. He was bicycling to work in the 1980s, long before that was cool, and he didn't mind facing criticism if what he was planning was right for the region. That happened when the JPC aggressively promoted the building of Interstate 78 and Route 33 in the 1970s, and it happened again in the 2000s when he endorsed a push to widen Route 22.

Often, he faced the opposition with data -- and humor.

"Everyone in the world is crazy, except you and me," Kaiser would often joke to whatever colleague was standing closest. "And right about now, I'm not so sure about you."

His skills as a planner and visionary were well-known. After the first comprehensive plan, he went on to draft three more, in 1977, 1993 and 2005. He also led the state's first regional Hazard Mitigation plan, the opening of Interstate 78 in 1989, the extension of Route 33 and the building of an extensive trail system.

"When you look at that original regional plan, it's genius," said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley, who was chosen in 2013 to succeed Kaiser. "Look at all they projected, from the expansion of the road system to where farmland should be preserved to the hundreds of miles of trails he set out to build. Not a day goes by that I don't take inspiration from his 50 years of brave, persistent and committed public service that shaped our region."

While Kaiser seemed to live his work, Fritz Brock, a retired 37-year Planning Commission planner who spent 32 as Kaiser's assistant director, always marveled at the dizzying number of hobbies Kaiser somehow found time to take on. He was an avid gardener, a classical guitarist, a scuba diver, cross country skier, competitive cyclist, and along with his late wife of 50 years Nancy, a ballroom dancer.

And he did nothing halfway. His home included a Japanese garden in which every plant, every stone and every shoji panel had purpose and symbolism and was installed by hand – his hand.

"He was a true renaissance man. He did a lot and was good at almost all of it," Brock said. "But still, his true passion was planning. It's what brought him the most satisfaction."

Kaiser is survived by daughter Wendy of Havertown, PA, son Mike of Nashville, TN, son Chris of Brooklyn, NY, grand-daughter Molly of Washington, DC, sister Mary Lou Thomas of Philadelphia, and the Thomas children and grandchildren.

His family asked that any donations, in lieu of flowers, be made to the Alzheimer's Association at www.alz.org