



## Pitkin County loses a visionary in land use

Dwight Shellman Jr. leaves a legacy of growth control

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Janet Urquhart, The Aspen Times – Aspen, CO

Former Pitkin County Commissioner Dwight Shellman Jr., circa the 1970s.

*Courtesy the Aspen Historical Society*

ASPEN — Dwight K. Shellman Jr., a land-use attorney and former Pitkin County commissioner who helped enact groundbreaking rules to keep development in check, died Wednesday at his home of 40 years near Woody Creek.

He remained feisty to the end, according to his son, Dwight Shellman III, the county's election manager.

“He did not hesitate to tell doctors and nurses how to do their jobs — and in minute detail,” the younger Shellman said.

Shellman, 77, had suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, or ALS. He was remembered Thursday by friends and colleagues as an outspoken, unwavering and visionary county commissioner who, along with fellow Commissioner Joe Edwards and, later, Commissioner Michael Kinsley, drove through growth-control legislation that prevented the sort of sprawl that is typical of many municipalities.

Kinsley credited Shellman and Edwards for the lack of condo complexes and strip malls on the outskirts of Aspen today, as did Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland, also a former county commissioner.

“People often remark that they can tell they're entering Pitkin County without seeing a sign at the border,” Ireland said.

“You drive into just about any other town ... you see car lots, burger joints, strip malls. You don't see that beyond Basalt — that's because of what we did,” said Edwards, who was elected as a commissioner along with Shellman in 1972. They began their terms in 1973 on what was then a three-member board.

“We felt like we were trying to preserve the town we loved,” Edwards said. “It was very exciting. ... It was a very intense time.”

“They did really nothing less than transform the nature of local government here from laissez faire to strict growth control,” said Kinsley, who was appointed to a commissioner seat in 1974 following the resignation of Max Marolt.

Shellman was among the 2010 inductees into the Aspen Hall of Fame, cited for work that included the downzoning of rural lands, implementing controls that regulated the pace of development and crafting a system that extracted public benefits from developers. He also was credited with helping establish the bus system that would become the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority as well as the local worker-housing program.

His work remains at the foundation of the county's land-use code today, according to Cindy Houben, director of the county's Community Development Department. She joined the staff as a planner in 1985 and came to know Shellman during his tenure on the county's Planning and Zoning Commission.

“What they did was very gutsy,” Houben said. “It included going up against a lot of longtime community members who didn't like it.”

While the commissioners had the support of the majority of the community — they survived a recall attempt — the battle was bitter at times and the opposition so vehement that there were death threats, Kinsley said.

Dwight Shellman III said he remembers a local newspaper ad that depicted his father as Hitler.

“I was very aware that he was very controversial,” said the younger Shellman, who was 8 years old when his family moved to Aspen in 1968.

Shellman was an associate and then partner with Holland & Hart, but he became increasingly involved in public policy issues, which led to his parting ways with the law firm, his son said.

Shellman did not seek re-election after his one term in office, returning to the practice of law, but he remained active as a member of the Planning and Zoning Commission and the RFTA board of directors in the 1980s and continued to speak out when issues caught his attention.

Suzanne Caskey, a former longtime member of the Planning and Zoning Commission, called Shellman a mentor and dear friend.

“Talk about a bulldog of a man,” she said. “He could see the urgency in preserving things. His clarity of vision was incredible. I think he could see things that the rest of us couldn't see.

“He really thought like a bolt of lightning all of the time.”

His last bit of local activism, which thrust him again into the headlines, was his opposition to Aspen's Burlingame Ranch worker housing on the outskirts of town. He viewed the development as sprawl and spent his own money on a divisive campaign in 2005, aiming to defeat a ballot measure related to the controversial project, which has since been partially constructed.

County Commissioner Rachel Richards, then on the Aspen City Council and a staunch Burlingame advocate, butted heads with Shellman during the campaign but remains respectful of his achievements.

“To me, Dwight epitomized great leadership,” Richards said. “He's someone who really laid the foundation for the upper valley. We have a lot to be grateful for.”

Shellman's final professional endeavor, his son said, was as president of the Caddo Lake Institute after joining then-Woody Creek resident and Eagles band member Don Henley in a lengthy battle to protect the northeast Texas lake and wetlands. The effort led to designation of the lake as a wetland of international signification under the Ramsar Treaty. Shellman also helped fight to establish a national wildlife refuge on a nearby, decommissioned Army base.

More recently, even after the onset of his illness, Shellman continued to study, read and take online courses, according to Caskey, who maintained a friendship with him that began during their years together on the Planning and Zoning Commission.

“He remained a scholar,” she said. “He was one of the smartest men I ever knew. I will miss him dearly. I do already.”

Pitkin County, she added, will continue to feel the impact of his legacy.

“He will continue to affect what goes on here for a long time to come,” she said. “He made his mark.”

A full obituary for Shellman will be published next week.

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