

Lenn Hannon (1943-2010)

By Edwin Battistella

With a nearly thirty-year tenure, Lenn Lamar Hannon was the second longest-serving state senator in Oregon's history. Born on the Fourth of July in 1943, Hannon grew up in Ashland, where his father was a minister in the Church of the Nazarene. As a teen, he reportedly shook hands with John F. Kennedy, an incident that may have sparked Hannon's lifelong interest in politics and government.

After graduating from Ashland High School in 1962 and attending Southern Oregon State College from 1963 to 1964, Hannon settled into a job as a backhoe operator and truck driver with the city of Ashland. He married Dixie Lynn Gibbs of Medford in 1966; they had four daughters and a son. Hannon worked for the city until 1987, when he became an insurance agent.

In 1974, union officials persuaded Hannon to run for the Oregon Senate. He defeated incumbent Senator Lynn Newbry by just thirty-seven votes. Soon at odds with local Democratic Party officials and union leaders, Hannon faced a primary challenge in 1978 and switched parties in 1980.

Hannon's views were sometimes out of step with social progressives, and over the years he survived two recall attempts. But by 1998, he was running unopposed for what was expected to be his last term. When Oregon's term limits were ruled unconstitutional, however, Hannon ran one final time, winning an eighth term in 2002.

Streetwise and hardworking, Hannon served on the Senate's Joint Ways and Means Committee for two decades. By 2000, he was the committee's chair and helped shape a bipartisan solution to the 2002 budget crisis. In that year's longest-ever legislative session, Hannon resigned from the Ways and Means Committee after clashing with fellow Republicans; he was reinstated to lead the final budget process. The following year, with the Senate evenly divided, Hannon and Salem's Peter Courtney became co-leaders in an unusual power-sharing agreement: Courtney served as president, and Hannon was president pro tem.

Over the years, Hannon used his seniority to help secure funds for southern Oregon projects that benefited the Medford Armory, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Craterian Theater, the Bear Creek Greenway, the Medford Airport, and Southern Oregon University, whose library was named the Lenn and Dixie Hannon Library in 2004. He also received attention as a powerful opponent of funding a major-league baseball stadium in Portland. Hannon was described by his legislative colleagues as "feisty," "fierce," and "tough," but most recognized that his blunt, foot-stomping, fist-pounding style was just a technique.

Hannon remained in touch with the neediest of his constituents. He and his wife Dixie twice accepted the legislative challenge by the Oregon Food Bank to live for a month on the amount allocated for food stamp recipients. After receiving treatment for alcoholism, he became an advocate for improving the level of mental health insurance coverage for Oregonians. Hannon received an honorary doctorate from Portland State University in 2002, and afterward he remarked that he would have rather it had been a bachelor's degree.

In March 2004, Hannon ended his legislative career by accepting appointment to the Board of Parole and Post-Prison Supervision, a position he held until 2006. He died on April 1, 2010.

Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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