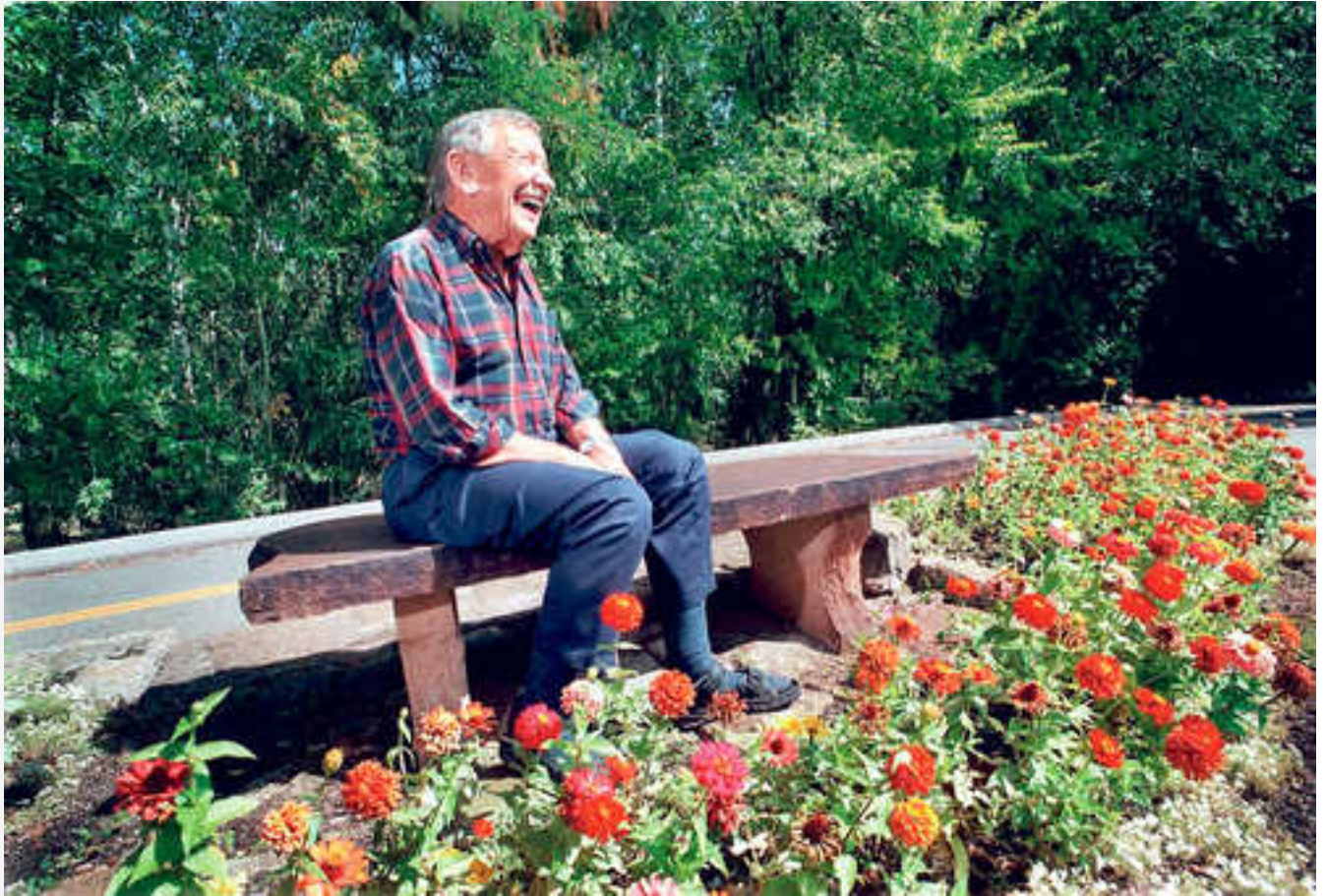


Love the Greenbelt? Thank Bill Onweiler

One of the first promoters of the paths linking parks and natural areas along the Boise River died Saturday at 86.

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A founding father revisits the Greenbelt in 1999. "I'm just glad it worked," said Bill Onweiler at that time about the Greenbelt, a project he helped launch as a Boise City Council member in 1966.

Cities sometimes mature and forget the origins of their best assets, and such is true of Boise.

Bill Onweiler was born here in 1923 and grew up in Ustick, a small village between Boise and Meridian that was long ago swallowed up by Idaho's largest city. A devoted father of six children and three foster children, he worked as a real estate appraiser and insurance agent.

He served on the Boise City Council for four years in the late 1960s after campaigning on a platform that included preserving open space within the city. In the Idaho House of Representatives he championed land-use measures and incremental taxing legislation for cities from 1969 to 1976.

“Bill Onweiler was one of those rare political people who always did what was right, not what was politically right,” said former Gov. Cecil Andrus. “He cared about people and what was right for the people.”

Onweiler was instrumental in enacting Idaho’s Sunshine Law in the 1970s that made information about political campaign contributions open to the public, said Ken Robison, a former editorial page editor for the Statesman.

“I admired Bill because he had the courage of his convictions, sometimes going against the tide,” Robison said.

As a Republican, he spoke publically in favor of protecting the White Clouds mountains in central Idaho when most in his party would not, Robison said.

Longtime friend H. Tom Davis said Onweiler’s testimony in Sun Valley for the Sawtooth National Recreational Area/White Clouds U.S. House hearing is one of his favorite memories.

“I have a number of Idaho heroes and Bill was among them,” Davis said. “Actually high on the list since he didn’t mind fighting and winning in the trenches. I was very proud of Bill.”

Davis said Bill and Cordelia Onweiler were key leaders for statewide and Boise issues, and they often won their battles.

“Death is inevitable, but we’ve lost another All-Star,” he said. “I hope Idaho takes note.”

It is Bill Onweiler’s work in helping make the Greenbelt a reality that his family and friends hope will be remembered.

“My pop accomplished some remarkable things in his life,” said Jeb Onweiler, Onweiler’s eldest son who is general manager of the Panama Beach Raceway in Florida. “But the Boise Greenbelt was probably his proudest political accomplishment. I remember all the time he spent on it when I was a kid.”

In a 1999 Idaho Statesman article about the Greenbelt, Onweiler described how the project began in the 1960s.

“I was in a back room, talking ... about ways to prevent building in the flood plain. We were discussing it when Gordon (Bowen, then the city parks director,) came by and, with a twinkle in his eye, said, ‘We could make it parks.’ The Greenbelt was born at that moment.”

Onweiler and others worked hard to garner public support and money for the project when some landowners and businesses were against it. They approached service clubs for support, and Onweiler produced a film with aerial footage of the Boise River to promote it.

“We had people remark they’d never looked at the river before,” Onweiler told the Statesman in 1999.

He also shared a letter he’d written to his children in 1987, apologizing for dragging them all over the future Greenbelt and for all the time spent away from family while he worked on the project.

"We ate with bugs in the Old Soldiers Home area, crawled over barbed wire buried back of a business at the Fairview bridge and were run off by shotgun from the Farmers Canal near the river," Onweiler wrote.

"I remember thinking this deal must be pretty dang important, because it sure is taking up a lot of his time," Jeb Onweiler said. "He loved Boise very much and worked like the dickens to leave it a better place than he found it. I believe he did just that."

Onweiler retired in 1999. The Onweilers moved to Rancho Mirage, Calif. The couple also traveled and lived in Europe.

"We never stopped wanting to learn," Cordelia Onweiler said. "We got excited about politics still."

Onweiler was preceded in death by two sons, Dirk and Eric. He is also survived by a son, Karl; daughters Gina Onweiler and Lisa Swenerton; foster son Wallace Yates; and seven grandchildren.

Swenerton said her father showed her how to have a complete, balanced life full of curiosity.

"Watching my father, I just couldn't meet a more incredible man," she said.

His grandchildren said his character is their legacy as well.

"I remember how much he cared about community," said granddaughter Alena Onweiler Swanson, 27, of Olympia, Wash. "That's part of the the reason I serve my community in AmeriCorps."

Grandson Sean Lopez, 17, also of Olympia, said his grandfather was a model of what it means to be a man.

"He just showed respect to everybody he met," Lopez said. "He had more dignity and integrity than anyone I've ever met."