

WestValleyEditorials Blog

John F. Long shaped West Valley

A man of strong principle, a humble individual who took delight in bettering the lives of others, an innovator and visionary with a rock-solid work ethic who guided the growth of the West Valley in so many ways.



That's the admirable legacy of John F. Long, a prominent player in the development of Phoenix and the Valley who died Friday at the age of 87.

His is a significant loss. Though at an age when most would have relinquished the reins, Long worked until last year — a testament to his indomitable spirit and love of the west side. It is awfully hard to imagine what the landscape would look like had it not been for Long's competitive spirit and immense generosity.

Long built a homebuilding empire, but never let his wealth undermine his kindness or prevent him from exploring innovative ways to improve the region's quality of life.

In the pantheon of the Valley's titans whose contributions forever shaped our communities, Long stood among those who have made a difference: people like Eugene C. Pulliam, Walter Bimson, Frank Snell, John Rhodes, Carl Hayden, Barry Goldwater.

His gentle side was evident long before he amassed his wealth. In the 1950s, just as Maryvale, the west side's first master-planned community was taking shape, Long took pity on a young attorney who needed office space. He told her she could work out of a building at 51st Avenue and Indian School Road. That lawyer was Sandra Day O'Connor, who became the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. And in a footnote, when she retired from the high court recently, Long joked that she still owed him rent.

Developing Maryvale catapulted him into the limelight. He transformed the home-building industry by using economies of scale and other cost-saving techniques, such as pre-fab trusses and walls. Long set the standard for affordable family homes. His vision didn't begin and stop with homes. In vast acres of farmland, he saw the potential of commercial development — and the all-important jobs



that come with it — along then-unfinished Loop 101 through the West Valley.

He united West Valley mayors to collaborate on a Loop 101 employment corridor that will yield high-wage jobs.

He also preached water conservation before it became fashionable, and his love of the outdoors can be seen in his idea to transform the beds of the Agua Fria River and New River into a trail system.

Though he publicly was vilified for filing a lawsuit to block construction of University of Phoenix Stadium after his offer of free land was rebuffed, he did not back down. It went through the courts, and Long said that he filed it not over any “sour grapes” but because a sports authority was created illegally. To him, it was all about principle. As Jim Miller, a Long confidant, recalls Long often saying, “You could tell the pioneers by the arrows in their back.”

Some of his philanthropy made headlines, such as paying for the renovation of a floor of the Maryvale Hospital for a birthing center. Some went under the radar — his contributions to clubs, Little League teams, schools, churches and food banks.

John F. Long will be forever remembered as a pioneer who transformed cotton fields and helped create a thriving metropolitan region with an unparalleled quality of life.