

METRO

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THE PLAIN DEALER

Robert Sweeney dies at 82

Lawyer, Democrat influenced local, world politics

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Robert E. Sweeney, a Democratic politician and well-known lawyer who left his mark on Cuyahoga County, the nation and his beloved Ireland, died early Saturday in his Gates Mills home after battling the effects of a heart attack for eight years. He was 82.

Sweeney had a gift for waging tough campaigns, then melding warring parties to work for common causes. He used humor — usually a litany of Irish jokes — to treat his friends, disarm opponents and persuade juries.

Sweeney lost more political races than he won, but he did serve as a member of Congress for one term in the mid-1960s, voting on such historic measures at the

Voting Rights Act and Great Society legislation pushed by President Johnson. He lost his seat when Ohio began electing congressional members by district instead of at-large.

As a Cuyahoga County commissioner from 1976 to 1980, he supported regional government, finished the Justice Center, pushed for renovation of Playhouse Square, helped create the county's solid-waste district and started the county's first public defender's office.

In the late 1970s, he became one of the first lawyers in the nation to file an asbestos case. His sleuthing discovered what he called the "smoking gun" document showing asbestos manufacturers had covered up the dangers of the substance for half a century.

"They were the key that opened the

golden door," he once told a reporter, referring to the documents.

Sweeney never forgot Ireland. In 1992, he pushed through the so-called "Irish Plank" into his party's national platform. President Clinton then made peace in Northern Ireland a top priority.

Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams credited Sweeney's move for persuading world leaders to focus on peace in Northern Ireland.

Saturday, Adams sent his condolences to Sweeney's wife, Kathryn, and the rest of the family, said his spokeswoman Rita O'Hare. "Robert Sweeney was one of the first people in America to help the efforts to get justice and peace for the people of the north of Ireland."

Other accolades poured in.

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FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Robert E. Sweeney, shown here in 1981, was a well-known lawyer and considered to be a maverick Democratic politician.

SWEENEY

FROM BI

Local politician dead at 82

"His friendship, his knowledge and his wit were an inspiration to me and to countless others who are involved in the effort to secure freedom, peace and justice in a 32-county united Ireland," said Roger Weist, past president of the Ohio Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Said U.S. Sen. George Voinovich, a Republican who served with Sweeney as a county commissioner: "He was sincere, honest and in government for the right reasons."

His son Robert of Lakewood said Sweeney's greatest passion was being a lawyer for everyday working people.

"He was a warrior, a very good litigator," his son said.

Sweeney was born in Cleveland's West Park neighborhood, one of four children and the son of Martin Sweeney, a member of

Robert E. Sweeney

1924-2007

Survivors: Wife, Kathryn Mary; sons, Robert P. of Lakewood, Daniel of Bay Village, William of Cleveland, Martin of Los Angeles, John of Cleveland, James of Ferndale, Mich., Thomas of Cleveland Heights and Edward of Portland, Ore.; daughters, Mary Brigid of Chesterland, Patricia of Portland, Alice Marie Laverdiere of Folsom, Calif., Eileen of Lyndhurst and Catherine of Portland; stepdaughters, Nancy Jean of New York and Mary Ellen Lavelle of Bay Village; a brother; 37 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Funeral Mass: 10 a.m. Tuesday at St. Malachi Catholic Church, West 25th Street and Detroit Road, Cleveland.

Contributions: Little Brothers and Sisters of the Eucharist, 2182 East 35th St., Cleveland, 44115.

Arrangements: Busch Funeral and Crematory Services, Fairview Park

Congress. He graduated from St. Ignatius High School, Baldwin-Wallace College and the Cleveland-Marshall Law School. He was a World War II veteran.

Because his father was a congressman, "he had a view of Washington that most people never had," his son said.

Despite his political acumen, not all elections went his way. He lost bids for Cleveland mayor, Ohio attorney general, the Statehouse and a later try for

Congress.

At one point, Martin Sweeney urged his son to avoid a career in law and become an undertaker.

"You'll never make a dime in law," Martin Sweeney said.

He did not make a dime but earned millions of dollars as seven-figure asbestos settlements became routine for Sweeney.

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