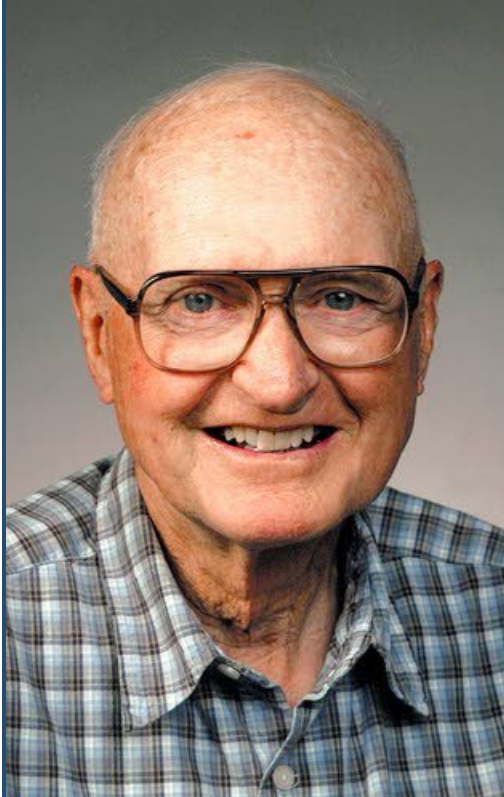


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Sweeney never forgot his passengers

- **August 20th, 2009**
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Marty Trillhaase



Bruce Sweeney...

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As a high school and college track star, Bruce Sweeney learned to rely on himself.

"The reason I liked it is the only one you had to depend on is you. You're either there or you're not there," he recently told the Tribune's Kerri Sandaine.

Of course, if a track star falters, so does his team's overall performance.

A former Air Force pilot, Sweeney was crazy about airplanes. It wasn't unusual to hear him planning a contingency landing in a forested area if one were necessary. A pilot has as much invested in his success as his passengers, but he alone is responsible.

At various times, Sweeney, who died Tuesday at 77 from bone cancer, was a businessman, school board member and volunteer track coach. But it was at the state level where you saw his attributes. Against a backdrop of regional and petty party politics, Sweeney was a big-picture public servant.

Even as the leader of the Democrats in the Idaho state Senate, some of his own flock sometimes accused Sweeney of being a closeted Republican. That reflected his willingness to work with anybody, whether it be the National Rifle Association when he sponsored the state's concealed weapons law, or the Mormon Church, when he helped shield the clergy-penitent privilege from mandatory child abuse reporting laws.

Tight-fisted Republicans, on the other hand, found Sweeney an implacable soul if they tried to short-change education budgets or transportation spending.

Sweeney's calm was put to a historic test in 1991-1992. His party hit its high-water mark, having won half the seats in the Senate. Republicans clung to narrow control by virtue of having won the lieutenant governor's office. With Democrat Cecil Andrus in the governor's office, the stage was set for gridlock.

A man with an outsized ego, political ambitions or even a proclivity to throw bombs could have paralyzed government in this state for two years. But there were no marathon sessions. Budgets were passed. Schools got a few extra dollars. Lawmakers even drafted their own redistricting plan.

It happened because Sweeney toned down the peacocks in his own party, many of whom were over-enthusiastic freshmen. He then managed to find common ground with reasonable Republicans, such as Laird Noh of Kimberly, Mike Crapo and John Hansen of Idaho Falls or Jerry Twiggs of Blackfoot.

Whenever a deal emerged, you rarely saw Sweeney claim the credit. Often as not, however, his fingerprints were all over it.

And when the era of the split-Senate passed, Sweeney relinquished his leadership role, going on to serve three more terms as Nez Perce County's voice in Boise.

During Sweeney's dozen years on Idaho's Transportation Board, the same pattern emerged. As much as he eschewed partisanship in the Legislature, Sweeney avoided parochialism on highway matters.

Straightening U.S. Highway 95 near Pinehurst technically benefited another board member's home district, but Sweeney supported the project because it helped Moscow and Lewiston motorists who traveled to Boise.

The four-lane highway from Coeur d'Alene to Worley wasn't in Sweeney's back yard, but it helped his constituents who drove to the Panhandle or to the Interstate.

People who worked with Sweeney said he liked where he was in this world. He was a humble person who didn't advertise it. He was a moral person who didn't push it.

Exceptional for its time, Sweeney's brand of public service, sadly, is rarer still today. - M.T.