

Death of Mank 'a big loss to the community'

U Ex-city official remembered for her generosity

By The News-Gazette

CHAMPAIGN - The woman who may have personified public spirit more than any other for the city of Champaign died Saturday.

June Mank, true to form, was at a Plan Commission meeting last Wednesday, complaining of a cold. Service on the commission was something she gladly took up after retiring from the Champaign City Council in 2001 after 22 years on the job.

Mrs. Mank, 79, of Champaign died at 9:45 p.m. Saturday (Feb. 8, 2003) at home. Funeral arrangements are pending at Morgan Memorial Home, 1304 Regency Drive West, Savoy.

To all who knew her, she was tireless in her generosity both in her public and private life. She was at once politically conservative, often without compromise, yet supportive with her time and money to many a liberal cause.

Mayor Jerry Schweighart started to talk about Mrs. Mank, then stopped, and finally said: "I was gonna say she was like the mother of the council."

"She wasn't bashful about telling you what she thought," said Schweighart, who also called Mrs. Mank "very knowledgeable, very community minded" and called her death "a big loss to the community."

Mrs. Mank was a self-appointed arbiter of public conduct at city council meetings, firmly chiding student observers to remove their hats and remove their feet from the furniture as a matter of respect to the tax payers who paid for the building and the elected leaders presiding.

Throughout her years on the council, she frequently placed herself in the middle of controversies without apology to those with whom she disagreed. She never strayed from her opposition to 19-year-old entry ages to bars or to pay raises for council members.

Some of her most heated arguments occurred with onetime council member John Lee Johnson, the longtime community activist with whom she would argue, then give rides home after the meeting.

When it came to annual social service grants to community charities, Mrs. Mank was typically the most resistant. But every week, she and the women of her church would cook huge pots of soup for the homeless that Mrs. Mank would then deliver to St. Jude's Catholic Worker House and other shelters.

Schweighart said she called him just last week to express her opinion, strongly, that the city was right to get involved in pressing for reforms at the Champaign County Housing Authority.

"She kept very informed on all the issues," he said, "very informed with the public. She was still very active."

"She was always willing to help and always had a joke to tell or was always happy, always smiling, just a joy to be around," said Councilman Vic McIntosh.

McIntosh characterized Mrs. Mank as a political mentor for him. "I owe a lot of my political career to June," he said.

"She's the one that got me interested in politics and coming to the council. She was a statesman of stature in this community."

McIntosh said the most important thing he learned from Mrs. Mank was "to listen. To listen to constituents. To listen to both sides of the issue."

"I believe she brought a very common-sense approach," he said. "She stood her ground and did what was best for the majority of the citizenry."

Local businessman Warren Huddleston, who got Mrs. Mank's assistance in revamping the once-troubled Shadowwood Mobile Home Park and counted her as a close friend, said her death will be a great loss to the community. "She was so public minded," Huddleston said. "She was just a fine lady and always willing to help somebody."

Mrs. Mank became involved with Shadowwood, and became friends with Huddleston, through her involvement in the city's Drug Elimination Group and Concerned Citizens for a Better Neighborhood. Her participation often found her marching around public housing projects to help discourage drug dealers.

In summer 1994, Champaign council members discussed a pay raise for themselves and other city officials at a study session, and in a straw poll, supported raising their salaries from \$4,000 a year to \$6,000. Miss. Mank was not at that meeting, but when the issue came up for a formal vote the following month, she was there.

"I would like to remind you ... I don't think this should be a job we seek for compensation," Mrs. Mank said. Two council members reversed their earlier support, and the raises were refused.

She scolded future county board member Tony Fabri for putting his feet on the furniture at a city council meeting, when Fabri was a candidate for the council. Not only should he have more respect than that, she told him, he should have had a sense that a lot of taxpayer money goes into maintaining city hall, including its seats, and that was money he needed to be worried about. Fabri later said he appreciated the advice.

And when the city's staff asked in 1995 for permission to make purchases for vehicles, including dump trucks, without consulting the council, Mrs. Mank and others said no: "The public wants to know what a dump truck costs," she said.

Besides remembering her service in city government, Schweighart, McIntosh and Huddleston also praised her involvement in community efforts such as organizing volunteers to shuttle cancer treatment patients to and from the hospital.

She also routinely ferried senior citizen neighbors to the YMCA for their exercise classes. McIntosh said that kind of activity only picked up after she retired.

"She came up with just more things to do as her time became available," he said. "She didn't slow down. She filled all that time with helping people."

"June obviously meant a lot to this community and she never wanted praise for anything she did," McIntosh said.