

OBITUARIES

Clyde B. ‘Bernie’ Fowler, a former Maryland state senator who championed the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay, dies

By **FREDERICK N. RASMUSSEN**
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Clyde B. "Bernie" Fowler was a member of the Patuxent River Commission for more than 30 years and served as its head. He's pictured here in June 2008. (ELIZABETH MALBY / Baltimore Sun)



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Clyde B. "Bernie" Fowler, a former Maryland state senator who worked tirelessly to preserve the Patuxent River and restore the Chesapeake Bay, and was known for his annual "wade-in," died of heart failure Dec. 12 at the Asbury Care and Rehabilitation Center in Solomons in Calvert County. The Dares Beach resident was 97.

"Bernie was a leader in the bay's restoration. He knew how to be aggressive and forceful, and he knew how to be kind. It was a healthy mixture and what leadership should be," said Ann Pesiri Swanson, executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Commission.

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"He was kind, humble and intelligent and he used those traits in his campaign for bay restoration and believed that clean water was for everyone," Ms. Swanson said. "And he left behind an army who he knew would keep it going after he was gone."

Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun's former environmental reporter, is now the associate editor and senior writer for the Bay Journal.

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“He grew up on the Patuxent River and that was his first love and he also had a passion for the Chesapeake Bay,” Mr. Wheeler said in a telephone interview. “He was very kind and courtly, but the kind of an individual who had a steely resolve when it came to clean water.”



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Fowler, center with the cowboy hat, smiles as he and a group of supporters waded into the Patuxent River in June 1997 to see how far they could go in and still see the tops of their feet. Fowler, a former state senator, waded into the

Patuxent each June to measure how clean the river is. Third from left, next to Fowler, is Carol Browner, then the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. Fowler reached 44 1/2 inches that year. (Nanine Hartzenbusch / XX)

Clyde Bernard Fowler — he never used his first name — was the son of Howard Fowler, a farmer and waterman, and his wife, Claire Fowler, a homemaker. He was born in Baltimore as the fourth of six children, was raised on Broomes Island in Calvert County, and graduated in 1940 from Calvert High School in Prince Frederick.

During the Depression, he helped his family by working as a waterman, carpenter and machinist, family members said.

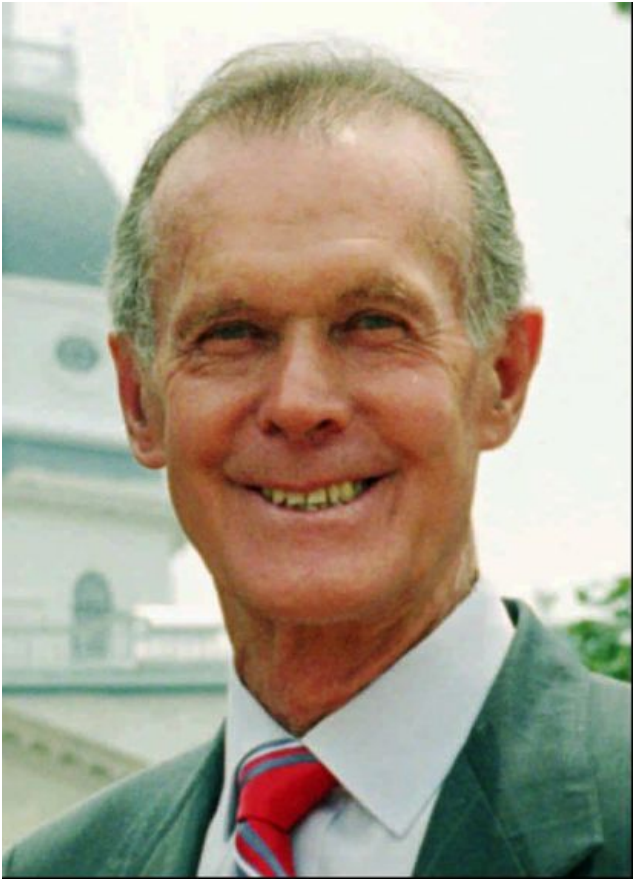
Mr. Fowler worked in the Washington Navy Yard as a machinist for several years before enlisting in the Navy and serving as a machinist in the Pacific theater aboard the destroyer USS Engstrom.

After being discharged at war's end, he returned to Broomes Island and established Bernie's Boats, a boat rental and deli business. In the 1960s, he founded Bernie's Speed Wash Laundries.

It was Mr. Fowler's deep affection for the Patuxent River and Calvert County that led him into a political career. From 1963 to 1969, he served as a member of the Calvert County school board and then was a county commissioner from 1970 to 1982. He was first elected to the Maryland Senate in 1982.

Mr. Fowler's appreciation for the 115-mile river, which courses through Central and Southern Maryland before it enters the bay, goes back to his days as a young man when he'd wade into the river to net crabs.

Named by explorer Capt. John Smith, the river rises near Parr's Ridge in Carroll County and enters the Chesapeake Bay at Drum Point in Calvert County. It is the largest and longest river whose watershed lies completely within the state, *The Sun* observed in a 2012 article.



Fowler is pictured in June 1994 in Annapolis as the running mate of Maryland gubernatorial candidate Sen. American Joe Miedusiewski. (CARLOS OSORIO / Associated Press)

Mr. Fowler told The Sun in a 1997 interview that at shoulder level in his youth the water was so clear he could see tiny juvenile crabs and shrimp swimming as they darted among the lush bottom grasses, but by the 1970s and 1980s, it had lost its clarity and many of its fish due to an expanding population that “dumped nutrient-rich sewage and sediment into its waters,” the newspaper reported.

He organized the fight to get the state and seven surrounding counties whose land drains into the river to restore it. And while a lawsuit was needed to accomplish that, it “became the model for the interstate bay restoration effort

launched in 1984,” The Sun said.

[Dr. Loren D. Jensen, a retired scientist who studied the Chesapeake Bay, dies](#)

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“The Patuxent is a microcosm of the bay, recipient of a flood of nitrogen and phosphorus from sewage and farm and fertilizers,” according to the newspaper article. “Those nutrients feed large algae blooms that kill bay grasses and consume the river’s life-sustaining oxygen.”

In 1988, he successfully got a law passed “that would fine the state’s counties if their wastewater treatment plants failed to meet their discharge limits,” the Bay Journal reported.

Beginning in 1988, Mr. Fowler began taking the pulse of the Patuxent by donning bib overalls, a blue denim shirt, a straw hat and white sneakers, and wading into the river the second Sunday in June to see how deep he can get before losing the sight of his feet.



Chesapeake Bay Foundation President Will Baker listens as Fowler speaks at an October 2008 news conference about bay cleanup. (XX)

The inspiration for the wade-in came from the late folk singer Tom Wisner, who was an environmentalist, educator and longtime friend, and known throughout tidewater Maryland as the “Bard of the Chesapeake.”

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[The annual wade-in](#) drew politicians, environmentalists, clean-water advocates and media attention, and by 1997, Mr. Fowler told The Sun that “the river is getting better.”

“The first event drew maybe a dozen people, Fowler recalled, and they picnicked and sang songs afterward,” Mr. Wheeler wrote at the time of Mr. Fowler’s death. “The Patuxent wade-in has grown since then, but retained the same festive flavor, and with encouragement from Fowler it inspired copycat events on other Bay rivers.”

Added Mr. Wheeler by phone: “It really became a template in bay restoration and he also had a knack for putting it in terms that people could understand. It really was like a baptism as people waded into the water holding hands to check the water quality.”

“The Patuxent and Chesapeake are cleaner and clearer because he had the courage to stand up to polluters and organized Marylanders to take action for conservation,” wrote Rep. Steny Hoyer, a Democrat who has represented Southern Maryland in Congress for 40 years, in a statement at the time of Mr. Fowler’s death.



Fowler, right, wades in in 1992, four years after he began the annual ritual to demonstrate concern for cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay. On his right is folk singer and bay advocate Tom Wisner, who died in 2010. (George W. Holsey, 1992)

In June 2021, Mr. Fowler waded into his beloved Patuxent for the last time, his sneaker-clad feet vanished after the 34-inch mark, and the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science gave the river a D-minus grade.

Mr. Fowler remained undeterred and continued to rally those who were like-minded with his trademark “never, never, never give up.”

“He signed on as a co-plaintiff in yet another lawsuit in 2009, this one brought by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation after the state-federal Chesapeake Bay Program had missed one voluntary restoration deadline and was on the verge of missing a second,” the Bay Journal reported.

“The lawsuit sought to force the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to put the Bay on a ‘Pollution diet’ as called for in the federal Clean Water Act. In a settlement, the EPA agreed to a timetable for Baywide total maximum daily load. Imposed at the end of 2010, it requires the state and District of Columbia by the end of 2025 to take all steps needed to reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment to targeted levels.”

For more than 30 years, Mr. Fowler served as a member of the Patuxent River Commission, including as its head, and also as a member of the Chesapeake Bay Commission.



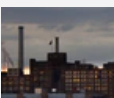
Fowler, a record-holding runner, competes in the 400 meters at Maryland Senior Olympics in October 1980 at what was then Towson State University. (MORTIMER / Check with Baltimore Sun Photo)

“Bernie was one of the lions of bay and river restoration and you have to think who will fill those sneakers in the future,” Mr. Wheeler said.

When he wasn’t concerned about water quality, Mr. Fowler enjoyed running.

“Bernie was an incredible runner who never trained or went to college,” Tom Horton, The Sun’s former environmental reporter and columnist, wrote in an email. “At the Salt Lake City Senior Olympics several years back, he became the senior world record holder in the 200 meters race. He was in his 80s then. He even told me he got urine tested and of course he passed.”

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He was a longtime member of Trinity United Methodist Church.

His wife of 69 years, the former Betty Lou Holden, a homemaker, died in 2018.

Plans for a celebration-of-life-gathering in June for Mr. Fowler are incomplete.

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Mr. Fowler is survived by a son, Clyde B. Fowler Jr. of Prince Frederick; three daughters, Betty "BB" Forrester of Prince Frederick, Lora Lee Fowler of Titusville, Florida, and Mona Lisa Monsma of Livingston, Texas; eight grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; and a great-great grandson.

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