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Jean Roesser, Last Republican To Represent Montgomery County in State Senate, Dies at 87

Funeral services to be held Saturday in Potomac for former legislator and state official

BY LOUIS PECK

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Funeral services will be held Saturday for Jean Roesser, a longtime state legislator who was the last Republican to represent Montgomery County in the state Senate.

A Potomac resident for 56 years, Roesser died at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda on Oct. 2 due to complications from leukemia, her son, Eugene Roesser Jr., said. She was 87.

Funeral services will take place at 11 a.m. at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, 9200 Kentsdale Drive in Potomac. Interment will follow in St. Gabriel's Cemetery.

After an unsuccessful bid for the Maryland House of Delegates in 1982, Jean Roesser won election to that chamber from District 15 four years later and served two terms.



Jean Roesser

MARYLAND MANUAL

In 1994, she ousted five-term Democratic state Sen. Laurence Levitan—who, as chairman of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, at the time was considered the most powerful member of Montgomery County's state legislative delegation.

Roesser was narrowly defeated in a bid for a third term in the Senate in 2002, but remained in public office. Republican Gov. Robert Ehrlich, with whom Roesser served in the House of Delegates, appointed her as secretary of the Maryland Department of Aging. Roesser took up issues ranging from standards for nursing home care to accessible parking for the elderly before leaving office in 2007.

Born in Washington D.C., she graduated with a bachelor of arts in economics at Trinity College (now Trinity Washington University), and did graduate study in economics at the Catholic University of America.

After moving to Potomac in 1961, she worked as a reporter for the now-defunct *Suburban Record* while raising three children. She later became involved in a wide range of organizations, including the Montgomery County Federation of Republican Women, of which she was president.

“She was very keen on working mothers, which was what she was. We kind of take that for granted now. But back in the day, when she first started to become active, it was not that prevalent,” said fellow Republican Howard Denis, who, as state senator from neighboring District 16, served with Roesser in Annapolis in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

“So I think she was a pioneer in a quiet and effective way, but very persistent,” Denis added. “She was out there as an example for working women, women generally, and, most particularly, for Republican women.”

Roesser, in a 2013 interview with the *Potomac Almanac*, credited her husband, Eugene, with encouraging her to take the step of running for public office. “When I mentioned the prospect of campaigning, he jumped on it,” she said.

The couple were married for 46 years. Eugene Roesser Sr. died in 2003.

Besides her son, who lives in North Potomac, survivors include two daughters: Mary Roesser Calderon of London, England, and Anne Marie Roesser of Gaithersburg.

Former County Council member Gail Ewing of Potomac, who challenged Roesser for re-election in 1998, said, “Jean was what a lady is supposed to be—gracious and nice.”

But Ewing also said Roesser could play political hardball.

“She ... could be as hard as nails and a politician’s politician—doing whatever it took to get elected,” Ewing said.

At a time when “you pretty much didn’t run negative ads” in local election contests in Montgomery County, Ewing recalled Roesser releasing a negative ad three days before the 1998 election; it was aimed at Ewing’s voting record on the County Council.

On Election Day, Roesser came out on top, 51 percent to 49 percent, in a district where, at the time, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by about 6,000 voters.

Roesser was widely regarded as a moderate Republican, but was criticized by Democrats as too conservative for District 15, which stretches from Potomac north to the Frederick County line. Democrats repeatedly targeted her on the hot-button issue of abortion, on which Roesser walked a political tightrope throughout her legislative career.

After the original Democratic nominee against Roesser dropped out in 1998, Ewing was recruited as a replacement candidate barely a month before Election Day by party leaders concerned about an erosion in support for abortion rights in the state Senate. In a phone interview Monday, Ewing recalled that abortion never came up in candidate forums in the closing weeks of the contest, but it nonetheless loomed over the race.

At the time, *The Washington Post* quoted the executive director of the Maryland affiliate of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) as accusing Roesser of “defrauding” voters “into believing she was pro-choice.” Roesser called the charge “way out of bounds” and contended she had made her stand on abortion “clear and definitive” to the voters.

“I do have concerns about abortion. No question about it,” she said. “But I go back to the saying that I respect the decision of the voters. The issue was decided in 1992”—a reference to passage of a statewide referendum upholding abortion rights.

Roesser’s arrival in the state Senate in 1994 was in part facilitated by an ethics controversy involving Levitan—who, as a private attorney, came under fire for representing clients before state agencies that he oversaw as a legislator. Levitan, who today is an Annapolis-based lobbyist, denied any wrongdoing, but the practice of state legislators appearing before agencies as private attorneys has since been banned.

Besides targeting Levitan over the conflict-of-interest allegations, Roesser invoked the Republican mantra of lower taxes, criticizing him for using his leadership position to raise taxes. Former Vice President Dan Quayle appeared at a fundraiser at Roesser's behalf in the run-up to her comfortable 55 percent to 45 percent victory over Levitan.

But Roesser also demonstrated her independence from GOP orthodoxy during her tenure, notably the 2000 vote in which she was one of only three Senate Republicans to join most Democrats in support of a bill requiring trigger locks on handguns sold in the state. It made Maryland the first state to adopt such a law.

Roesser's initial election to the state Senate in 1994 coincided with a Republican electoral wave nationwide, and 2002 was also a pretty good year for Republicans: The GOP recaptured control of the U.S. Senate, and, in Maryland, Ehrlich won the governorship. But, at the same time, Montgomery County, where the Democrats already held a large majority, took a step toward one-party domination.

Roesser was narrowly defeated, 51 percent to 49 percent, by Democrat Rob Garagiola, who later was state Senate majority leader and is today an Annapolis lobbyist. In addition, Roesser's good friend, Republican U.S. Rep. Connie Morella, was ousted by future U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen in 2002, and the Republicans lost a seat on the Montgomery County Council.

The results left just two Republicans in office in the county: Denis, by then a member of the County Council, and Roesser's District 15 colleague, Del. Jean Cryor. Both Cryor and Denis lost their seats four years later. No Republican has held elected office in Montgomery County in the decade since.

Both supporters and opponents acknowledged that a key to Roesser's 16-year run in elected office was her focus on constituent service and attention to detail.

"She was always there at every possible community meeting, making an impact," Denis said. "She made herself and her home available, and was always very forthcoming to people across a very wide spectrum." Roesser even sent out annual birthday cards to constituents—Republicans and Democrats.

Roesser remained involved in the political process throughout the final decade of her life after leaving the government.

Rose Li, a 2014 Republican candidate for delegate in Bethesda-based District 16, recalled that Roesser supported her candidacy even though the two women did not know each other well.

"She would send handwritten notes of encouragement. I will never forget her thoughtfulness and resolve," Li, now a member of the state Board of Education, wrote in an email. "She engendered so much respect from both sides of the aisle. A real role model for so many of us!"

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