

Former San Bernardino County Supervisor Dennis Hansberger dies

Hansberger served on the Board of Supervisors for five terms and was a longtime fixture in San Bernardino County politics



In this file photo, former San Bernardino County Supervisor Dennis Hansberger poses for a portrait outside his office on fifth floor of County Government Center in San Bernardino. Hansberger, 78, died Wednesday, May 6, 2020. (File photo by Greg Vojtko, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

By [JOE NELSON](#) | jnelson@scng.com | San Bernardino Sun

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Dennis Hansberger, who served five terms on the Board of Supervisors and was a longtime fixture in San Bernardino County politics, has died.

Hansberger, 78, of Redlands, died of pancreatic cancer about 12:45 a.m. Wednesday, May 6, at his home. He was surrounded by his three sons, daughter, son-in-law, and his wife of more than 18 years, Karen Gaio Hansberger, she said.

In a telephone interview Wednesday, Karen Gaio Hansberger said that her husband was diagnosed only three weeks ago, and that the cancer was “very aggressive.”

“It caught us totally by surprise,” said Karen Gaio Hansberger, the former Loma Linda mayor and chief medical officer at Inland Empire Health Plan, or IEHP. “He had no risk factors for pancreatic cancer at all, and he had no family history of it.”



Former San Bernardino County Supervisor Dennis Hansberger represented the Third District. Hansberger died May 6, 2020, at age 78. (File courtesy photo)

Dennis Hansberger served five terms on the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors, from 1972 to 1980 and from 1996 to 2008, when he was unseated by former San Bernardino City Councilman Neil Derry.

As a young businessman in the late 1960s, Hansberger got his start in politics working as a field representative for then-Supervisor Donald Beckford. When Beckford decided not to run for re-election, Hansberger mounted a successful campaign for Beckford's seat on the board, and was elected Third District supervisor in 1972.

Possessing strong leadership skills, Hansberger was appointed chairman of the board in 1974, according to a resolution former Congressman Jerry Lewis presented for the Congressional Record in November 2008, honoring Hansberger for his decades of public service.

"I could not be more shocked than I am at this moment learning of Dennis' death," Lewis said in a telephone interview Wednesday. "I gather there were health problems I didn't know anything about. Suddenly he's not with us any longer."

Lewis noted Hansberger's staunch advocacy for clean air and stronger regulations. While serving in the state Assembly in the 1970s, Lewis floated AB 250, the Lewis Air Quality Management Act, which passed in 1976 and gave birth to the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD). Hansberger was a founding member of the AQMD board.

"A lot of things implemented from that have led to regulations and policy changes that have allowed us to clean the air. No question, Dennis was a very, very strong advocate in connection with that," Lewis said.

During his long and intermittent career as a county supervisor, Hansberger cultivated a reputation as an opinionated political leader who stood firmly by his convictions.

“There were times people agreed with him and times people disagreed with him, but Dennis always did what he felt was right for his district and the county,” said former Fourth District Supervisor Fred Aguiar, who served from 1998 to 2003. “Dennis was opinionated, but I felt Dennis would listen to the arguments on both sides and make an informed decision. He stood his ground.”

In 1980, Hansberger took a break from politics after serving two terms on the board, focusing on his business, Hansberger and Associates, and working as a consultant on land management and mining issues. In 1996, politics called on Hansberger again, and he was elected to another term on the board, then re-elected twice more before being unseated in 2008.

During his 16-year hiatus from county politics, Hansberger remained active in public service, serving three years as chairman of Redlands Community Hospital’s board of directors. He also served on the boards of multiple other organizations and agencies, including Cal State San Bernardino, the San Bernardino County Museum, the Inland Empire Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and the Capital Projects Committee of the Girl Scouts of America, according to the Congressional Record.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Redlands-Riverside on Wednesday issued a statement recognizing Hansberger for his support and the role he played in securing \$4 million in federal funding for the Redlands clubhouse, which is named after him.

“Dennis stepped up and helped direct some funds to help ensure our dream of a clubhouse was not lost,” said club CEO P.T. McEwen. “We at Boys & Girls Clubs are ever in his debt. We are proud to have our clubhouse bear his name and carry on his legacy of caring for the youth in communities.”

Hansberger counted among his greatest accomplishments the building of the Seven Oaks Dam, the San Timoteo Creek Project, securing federal funding to combat blight, his efforts to restore the public’s trust in local government, and the expansion of the San Bernardino County Museum, the board of which he served upon until his death.

As chairman of the Board of Supervisors, Hansberger in 2003 headed the response to an unprecedented bark beetle infestation in the San Bernardino Mountains, helping to obtain funding for the removal of infected and dead trees and assisting mountain residents in creating defensive space around their properties.

“Dennis is a legendary figure in the history of San Bernardino County,” Board of Supervisors Chairman Curt Hagman said in a statement Wednesday. “We will remember him as a fearless and vocal advocate for ethical, open, and intelligent government who guided our county through some of its most challenging times.”

Fifth District Supervisor Josie Gonzales said, “Dennis is a San Bernardino County icon who was always steadfast in his convictions and who valued the truth above his own popularity.”

Memorial services for Hansberger are pending. His widow said that, due to restrictions on public gatherings in response to the coronavirus outbreak, it is unclear when a service can be held.

“This situation would have been difficult under the best of circumstances, but COVID-19 has added another level of complexity that has made this incredibly hard,” Karen Gao Hansberger said.

Staff writer Sandra Emerson contributed to this report.