

Biography of Byron Matthews

Term of Office: (1968-77)



Byron J. Matthews (August 30, 1928 – March 25, 2023) served as Mayor of Newburyport, Massachusetts from 1968 to 1978 and Massachusetts Secretary of Communities and Development from 1979 to 1983.

Born in 1928 to Greek immigrant parents, Matthews took their work ethic with him in everything that he took his hands to accomplish. He watched his father work hard running the family's Maple Street grocery store to support their family. He worked beside his father for years - even after graduating from college. The market was a gathering place for residents and other business owners during both the city's heyday and its lean years.

A Newburyport High School graduate in 1946, he joined the U.S. Marine Corps and later earned a degree in accounting from Bentley College. He ran and expanded the family-owned Matthews Market on Maple Street.

Matthews entered politics in 1962 when he was elected to the Newburyport City Council. He was elected mayor in 1968 and served an unprecedented five terms in the two-term office. During his tenure as mayor, Matthews oversaw much of the restoration of downtown Newburyport.

"I enjoyed walking into the office every day, and I couldn't believe I was the mayor of this great city. As mayor, I got satisfaction out of helping people, and building a better city. I spent time in Washington and in Boston on behalf of the city, and was always proud to be working for a better community."

In addition to serving as mayor, Matthews also worked for Massachusetts Governor Francis W. Sargent as an advisor and campaign coordinator.

From 1979 to 1983, Matthews served as Governor Edward J. King's Secretary of Communities and Development.

In 1983 he was a candidate in the special election to fill the Third Essex District seat in the Massachusetts Senate vacated by Sharon Pollard. He lost to Democrat Nicholas J. Costello by 320 votes.

In 1995, Matthews unsuccessfully challenged incumbent Lisa L. Mead in the Newburyport mayoral election.

From 1996-2007 he was Chairman of Northern Essex Community College.

Matthews' cousin, Peter J. Matthews, also served as Newburyport's mayor from 1985 to 1987, and again from 1990 to 1993.

His Accomplishments:

He managed to have the telephone poles put underground throughout the HUD development Area. This was not usually done nationwide, but Byron pushed hard.

"It's not what you know, it's who you know," Matthews said. "It's all about people, not about how brilliant you are."

To prove his theory, Matthews explained it was a sometime golf buddy, the chairman of the board and president of Massachusetts Electric, who eventually got on board with the concept of burying all the downtown utility wiring, something relatively avant-garde for the time.

The first mention of burying wires got Matthews a very firm "no," he said, but he kept at it. Over the months, no became a "let me think about it," then "well maybe" and finally, "yes."

He aggressively obtained much needed funding from Federal and State governments through active trips to Boston and Washington.

"I think what was unique about Byron was his persistence and tenaciousness," said Michael Harrington, Newburyport's congressman during Matthews' tenure. "I used to say Newburyport was my favorite city in my district because of what it did for itself. Their singular success is they did (redevelopment) better than most communities and that gained them credibility."

"When we drove to Washington (D.C.) to see someone, Byron wouldn't leave until we got the meeting," said Jack Bradshaw, Redevelopment Authority director during most of Matthews' tenure. "If the person wasn't in, we'd wait until he was, even if it meant staying overnight. And we never had any money; I think I slept in a car one night.

"When we got the meeting, Byron never took 'no' for an answer," Bradshaw said. "We didn't leave until he got what he needed for this city. And we got it."

"You can never take 'no' for an answer if you want to get anything done," he said. "My city came first and that's what politics should be about."

He pushed hard for his friends Rupert Nock and Ed Burke to work on redeveloping the dilapidated Custom House with him which had been previously turned into a junkyard.

He pushed hard to rip out parking meters to encourage tourism.

That Matthews would take over in 1968 and pursue the city's urban renewal program with such energetic fervor was surprising to many. During his earlier years on the City Council, Matthews voiced concerns about urban renewal. However, for Matthews it wasn't the concept of redevelopment he was against, it was its original method.

"I wasn't against urban renewal," Matthews said. "I was against tearing everything down. I was in favor of the restoration plan we finally adopted. But I felt strongly that those we moved out of their businesses (during urban renewal) should have first preference to move back after everything was done. I knew how I'd feel if my father's business was moved out."

It took a few years' worth of appointments to get Matthews' people on the Redevelopment Authority, Bradshaw said. Once that happened, Matthews never looked back. The authority drove forward aggressively, improving the infrastructure, finding developers and tearing down some structures too far gone to restore.

But to hundreds of avid tennis players throughout the North Shore, Matthews and his business partner Jonathan Woodman may have saved their sanity during long, snowy winters by building what is now known as the Newburyport Tennis Center on Low Street. Matthews and Jonathan Woodman, a prominent architect in Newburyport, founded and owned the Newburyport Tennis Club from 1973 until they sold it in 2018.

He served as chair of the Newburyport Cooperative Bank and was appointed by President George H.W. Bush to the Board of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston.



A grateful and now prosperous community posted this monument on Inn Street where the first HUD development began, in 2011 in an area called, "Byron's Court".

His Impact:

He was initially an aggressive advocate for demolishing the Downtown and putting in a modern commercial strip with the aim of increasing the available parking in the city. Being a smart politician, he pivoted to reflect the increasing push by the residents for restoration rather than demolition.

He was not an advocate for strict historic preservation. Restoration was just a means to an end and not a strict objective of what was there before. He was a promotion for modern architecture that often clashed with the cohesive Federalist downtown. His aim was to promote the restoration of the economy in Newburyport and was determined to explore 'any avenue' toward that purpose.

He was responsible for building the utilitarian Sullivan Building. This was at the height of the Great Society by Lyndon Johnson seeking to eradicate poverty by building utilitarian housing. The funding was available and so it was pursued. This tall monstrosity still scars the Newburyport skyline. It also meant the destruction of over 30 historic buildings.

He allowed for the building of Merrimac Landing that violated the streetscape and appearance of the Federalist downtown. Even though architects warned him as shown clearly in the documentary, "Measure of Change" he advocated for a contemporary addition. Instead of direct street access at the storefronts, he allowed for an excessively large building with covered walks. To this day, these modifications have doomed small enterprises trying to attract traffic-flow away from the historic areas toward their businesses. Even regardless of being directly across from the Firehouse; it has been a poor addition to the downtown.

He heavily promoted the Newburyport Area Industrial Development that was supposed to resurrect re-employment to Newburyport citizens. He wanted to see the restored downtown filled with the previous locals who had made the city its strong economic backbone in the years before.

Instead, the light industry that filled the Lord Timothy Dexter Industrial Park did not provide the living wage to be able to live in Newburyport. The success of the HUD plan spelled doom to his original goal. Property values began to increase rapidly. Cheap labor from outside the city, usually low-wage immigrants happy to get a job filled much of the buildings, while locals moved out to less-expensive communities.

He advocated an oil refinery in the sensitive Common Pasture that was filled with marshland and prone to flooding. Advocated development in sensitive watersheds that would in the end produce costly flooding in the newly established residential districts and industrial park.

He promoted the demolishing of the historic Federal warehouses on the waterfront and other structures and promoted construction of buildings and parking lots right to the waters' edge.

He resisted archeological work on the waterfront fearing that it would delay HUD funding. He put the Watts Landing monument on the west side of the Fireside and forbade the excavation and research east of the Building. (Watts Landing is on the eastside near Market Square.)

A backlash over the years

As more and more residents moved in who began to focus more on quality-of-life issues and an infusion of more residents who wanted to focus more on conservation and heritage preservation, his style of administration that focused on providing economic benefits and jobs began to be less favored.

Ever a very, wise politician; and sensing the change; he left politics, and moved onto becoming more involved on state-wide issues, and in a position of consulting from 1996 onward. He later developed new residential communities in Florida, New York and New England.

Final years

He died in March of 2023 at the age of 94. He was survived by his wife Helen to whom he had been married for 69 years. They had two sons, John and Peter. For Byron & Helen's years of service to the Anna Jacques Hospital Foundation, the hospital's main entrance is named for the couple.

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