

OBITUARY

Leon Billings, who crafted monumental green legislation, dies

Emily Yehle, E&E News reporter

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Leon Billings, a longtime congressional staffer who was instrumental in the passage of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, died yesterday. He was 78.



Leon Billings. Photo courtesy of Energy Now via YouTube.

Billings was known as a dynamic presence on Capitol Hill, starting in 1966 when he became the first staff director of the Senate environment subcommittee. In that role — and later as environmental adviser and chief of staff to Sen. Edmund Muskie (D-Maine) — Billings crafted the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, negotiating unprecedented environmental statutes that still stand today ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 20, 2014).

He suffered a stroke Monday in Nashville, Tenn., while visiting a nephew who is serving in the Army.

Former colleagues were shaken by the news of his death. Billings, who went on to serve in the Maryland Legislature from 1991 to 2002, kept in touch with political allies and adversaries alike.

Tom Jorling, the minority staff director of the subcommittee, said that he was still processing the news. He and Billings worked closely on the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act; the two even commuted together to work, hashing out critical provisions in a pickup truck.

"We're all the beneficiaries of Leon's skills and talent as a legislative craftsman and political figure respected by both Republican and Democratic members of the committee, and without that reputation, the product of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and the like would not have been enacted," Jorling said today.

Jim Tozzi, a former longtime official at the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, called Billings "one tough guy" who had many different sides. He remembered evenings at the Tune Inn on Capitol Hill, enjoying a few beers after intense negotiations; the two were on opposite sides, with Tozzi representing a Republican administration.

Later, Billings intervened when Tozzi was at risk of losing his OIRA job under the switch of administrations.

"If we had people in D.C. now like Leon Billings, this town would work," Tozzi said. "He was known for having a bipartisan staff."

Billings was born Nov. 19, 1937, in Helena, Mont., to journalist parents who had instilled a liberal streak. His father encouraged him to go beyond his hometown, and so he moved to Washington, D.C., for a job on Capitol Hill.

He gained a reputation as abrasive but fair, demanding but professional. Some called him "Senator Billings," for both his personality and the authority Muskie handed him.

In an interview with the *Missoulian* newspaper earlier this year, Billings recalled how Muskie described him to President Carter, who was considering Billings as a candidate to head U.S. EPA but had some concerns.

"Abrasive?" Billings recalled Muskie saying into the phone. "Abrasive, Mr. President? You've never met Leon Billings. You have no idea how abrasive he is."

After Billings left Capitol Hill, he served as executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and went to work for Muskie at the State Department when the former senator served as Carter's secretary of State. He was appointed to the Maryland House of Delegates to replace his late first wife, former Del. Patricia Billings (D), in 1991, and then won two full terms. He served as president of the Edmund S. Muskie Foundation and created a National Caucus of Environmental Legislators.

Billings lectured on environmental law and American politics for nearly 50 years at various universities, and was a consultant to the National Democratic Institute's programs in China, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka.

Billings is survived by his wife, Cherry Billings, of Bethany Beach, Del., as well as his three children, who live in the Washington, D.C., area: daughter Shannon Billings, married to Graham Anderson; son Paul Billings and wife Teresa; and daughter Erin Billings and husband Jay Driscoll. He also is survived by his grandchildren Alec Anderson, Kelsey Anderson, Elizabeth Billings and Katie Billings.

In lieu of flowers, his family is asking for donations to the Billings family scholarship at the University of Montana School of Journalism.

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