

John Devens, mayor of Valdez at time of oil spill, dies at 74

By DEVIN KELLY

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John Devens, executive director of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council. (Unknown)

On the eve of March 24, 1989, John Devens was living what was, for him, a near-perfect life. He was serving as the mayor of Valdez and as the president of a community college he'd expanded. He had also gained a license to operate a charter boat, and was running a small audiology practice on the side.

Then the Exxon Valdez oil tanker ran aground on a reef in Prince William Sound, spilling nearly 11 million gallons of Alaska crude into the water and altering forever the course of Devens' career.

In the chaotic aftermath of the spill, Devens organized the mayors of "oiled" coastal communities to ensure a voice in the response and to demand accountability. Then, one year later, instead of running again for mayor, Devens launched the first of two campaigns to unseat Rep. Don Young in the U.S. House of Representatives.

"Without the spill, I never would have done this," Devens told the Associated Press in 1990.

Devens lost both of his congressional races, but by margins that remain some of the closest in Young's election history. In 1998, Devens began his tenure at the helm of a federally mandated watchdog organization formed to provide citizen oversight over the oil industry.

After retiring from that post in 2009, Devens moved to the Copper Center area to be closer to family. He died there this week at age 74. Family members found his body at his home on Friday.

The cause of death is not yet known, but his daughter-in-law, Terry Devens, said Devens had been battling the flu.

Known as a levelheaded, persuasive leader who was effective at working toward consensus on tough issues, Devens emerged after the Exxon Valdez disaster as a key voice in the prevention of and response to oil spill issues in Prince William Sound.

Tom Barrett, the president of Alyeska Pipeline Service Co., who worked with Devens as a Coast Guard commander in the late 1990s and early 2000s, said he enjoyed working with Devens, describing him as a "strong advocate, but a positive one."

"He had the ability to be candid and work an issue forward," Barrett said.

For 11 years, Devens headed the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, weighing in on issues surrounding environmental safety and regulation in the Sound, such as pressing Exxon to replace its fleet of single-hulled oil tankers with double-hulled vessels.

But even as mayor of Valdez, first elected in 1984 and focused on fostering development, Devens showed signs of concern over environmental regulation in Prince William Sound. The night before the spill, one of Devens' ad hoc committees met to discuss the danger of an oil spill in the sound.

"He was a visionary in that regard," said gubernatorial candidate and former Valdez mayor Bill Walker, a longtime friend.

When the feared spill did come to pass, Devens kicked into high gear, working 17-hour days seven days a week.

He made unilateral decisions in that time that cost him some of his popularity, he told the Associated Press in 1990. After saying that he didn't plan to welcome Exxon Valdez back into the port once the tanker was removed from the reef, someone mounted a sign at the Exxon office. "Benedict Arnold Devens," it read.

"I lost a lot of friends, but I made good decisions and I'm proud of that," Devens told the AP.

John Searle Devens was born March 31, 1940. He grew up in Shickshinny, Pa., a small town in the rural north-central part of Pennsylvania. The only child of a farming couple who raised corn and soybean crops, Devens cultivated a lifelong love of horses, which he would later show at competitions in the Lower 48.

As a child, he was burned badly in a fire, which left one leg shorter than the other. He wore a shoe with a lift and always walked with a bit of a limp.

In 1971, Devens moved to Fairbanks to run a research project on the use of satellites in health and education programs in rural Alaska. Between 1971 and 1973, he worked as a traveling audiologist for the state and conducted hearing tests in villages.

He earned a doctorate at Wichita State University and moved to Valdez in 1977 to direct a new branch of the University of Alaska. Once there, Devens is credited with transforming the tiny program with a \$54,000 budget into an accredited college, Prince William Sound Community College, with a \$2.5 million operating budget and 28 full-time employees. He served as its very first president.

For a number of years, Devens ran a bed and breakfast in Valdez, the Lake House. He also served as president of the board of Connecting Ties, a Valdez-based nonprofit that serves individuals with disabilities.

After retiring from the Regional Citizens Advisory Council, Devens left Valdez for a quieter life in the Copper Valley. He was extremely devoted to his grandchildren, and spent the last years of his life helping care for them, his family said.

His survivors include his son John Devens and daughter-in-law Terry; his daughter Jerilyn Devens; his son James Devens and daughter-in-law Christel Ling; his daughter Janis Reynolds and son-in-law Chris; and 12 grandchildren.

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Read more here: <http://www.adn.com/2014/06/14/3517455/john-devens-mayor-of-valdez-at.html#storylink=cpy>