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George Roberts honored in Legislative Office Building he championed

By ADAM DRAPCHO, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN Oct 28, 2019 Updated 10 hrs ago

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Gov. Chris Sununu, artist Richard Whitney and George Roberts stand next to the portrait of Roberts, a former three-term speaker of the NH House, which was unveiled at the Legislative Office Building in Concord on Friday, Oct. 25. (Adam Drapcho/The L Daily Sun photo)

CONCORD — Lou D’Allesandro, now a state senator, first met George Roberts when the latter man was serving in the NH House of Representatives about 45 years ago.

“George said, ‘I’m going to take you on a field trip,’” D’Allesandro told a standing-room-only crowd gathered at the Legislative Office Building in Concord last Friday afternoon. The two walked to the old U.S. District Courthouse and Post Office building – built in 1888 behind the State House – which was slated to be torn down to make way for a city parking lot.

D'Allesandro remembered seeing "this junky, dilapidated building that was falling apart." He recalled ducking pigeons and stepping over trash, and that Roberts, who would soon begin his tenure as Speaker of the NH House, saw something completely different.



The result of that vision is the Legislative Office Building, a space where legislators meet in committees to discuss bills. It's because of Roberts that the building still stands, and, as a tribute to his efforts, the entry is now known as George B. Roberts Hall, and a portrait of the former speaker was unveiled in that hall last week.

Roberts, a native of Massachusetts who grew up in Gilmanton, was elected to his first term in the NH House in 1966, when he was 27. He said that the legislative body was not what he was expecting. Roberts, who soon rose to become majority leader, started to initiate changes to elevate the status of the House of Representatives.

"The legislature was steeped in some archaic ways," Roberts said. "I started saying, this is senseless, there has got to be a better way."

He pushed for, and got, a roll-call machine. Before then, roll calls were done by hand, which took 45 minutes per vote. And he championed administrative changes that ensured that every legislator could sponsor a bill, and that every bill could, if its sponsors insisted, be debated on the house floor.

"Speaker Roberts did more in his time as speaker to make the House a co-equal branch of government than any other speaker before him," said Steve Duprey, who was the youngest legislator ever elected in 1970. Duprey was 19, and said that Roberts treated younger representatives the same as their more seasoned colleagues, and that he "had more women appointed committee chairpersons than anyone in history."

Gov. Chris Sununu said that Roberts was known for giving the minority a chance to be heard, and for ensuring that the rules were fair and evenly followed. “It’s not about the legislators themselves, it’s about the people they represented,” Sununu said.

Speaking after the ceremony, Roberts said it wasn’t always easy. Even though his colleagues agreed that reforms were needed, they didn’t want to be the ones who spoke for change.



“In each case, the people around me were somewhat gunshy of the Manchester Union Leader (as it was then known) criticizing them,” Roberts said. “Because the executive branch dominated state government for so long, the legislature was a rubber stamp. We decided that if you are going to be a good legislature, you have to check the executive branch once in a while.”

Under Roberts’ tenure, those checks occurred as veto overrides and lawsuits. Nine times he sued the executive branch over constitutional issues, and he won each time.

“There were many, many changes that went on in my years that I’m happy about,” he said.

Roberts left the legislature in 1980. After a failed run for U.S. Senate, Roberts began a career as a lobbyist in Concord, which he has pursued for 39 years. He still lives in Gilmanton.

Roberts encouraged others to follow in his footsteps, to become involved in their local governments and nonprofits, and perhaps to run for state office.

“We need turnover in our democracy, we need young people to get involved,” he said. “You can’t have self-government, you can’t have freedom, if you sit back and watch it on TV. You have to participate.”

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