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Former city mayor, reverend remembered fondly

By DAN HEATH

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PLATTSBURGH — Former City of Plattsburgh Mayor the Rev. Roland St. Pierre is remembered fondly by parishioners and those who worked with him in city government.

St. Pierre died Feb. 13, in Pawtucket, R.I., at the age of 83.

Former City of Plattsburgh Engineer George Miller said St. Pierre recommended him when he was hired in 1974.

“I enjoyed working with him. We had a good relationship,” Miller said.

He said as a priest, St. Pierre had a unique personality, very positive and benevolent. Religion was never an issue as St. Pierre and the other department heads conducted city affairs.

“Yet, he was realistic. He ran the city as a business,” Miller said.

He believes St. Pierre’s decision to run for office was to make the city a better place.

“He was a good mayor and a good man,” Miller said. “I always liked his ability to keep things in perspective and keep the city moving forward.”

Information provided by Plattsburgh City Clerk Keith Herkalo states St. Pierre was born in Fitchburg, Mass. He was raised in Pawtucket, R.I., and studied for the priesthood at the Oblate Colleges of Bar Harbor, Maine, and Natick, Mass.

He was ordained in Lowell, Mass., in 1952, after which he served as editor and publisher of the English and French magazines sponsored by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a missionary order to which he belonged.

St. Pierre was named pastor of St. Peter's Church in Plattsburgh in 1966. He is credited with coordinating volunteer parishioners in restorations at the church and establishment of a capital fund to meet future needs.

Clinton County Treasurer Joe Giroux said he served with St. Pierre shortly after he was named pastor at St. Peter's, the same year Giroux graduated from Our Lady of Victory Academy.

Giroux was one of many St. Pierre got to help with renovations at the church and chapel. He often had crews of 30 to 40 volunteers working on renovations such as a new chapel roof and church heating system.

"We couldn't afford to hire people to do that work. He had a way of getting people to do things," Giroux said. "He had, as far as I'm concerned, very good taste (in those renovations)."

St. Pierre received clearance from his superiors to run for mayor in 1971. He was elected to three two-year terms and served from 1972 through 1977, the first Catholic Priest elected mayor of a U.S. city.

His objective was two-fold, to eradicate patronage through a focus on Civil Service qualification and to run the city more like a business.

George Poitras served on the Common Council during St. Pierre's three terms from 1972 through 1977. He said St. Pierre may have experienced quite a change from running a parish to dealing with six aldermen.

"He was a hard-working man. He was always trying to do what he could for the city," Poitras said.

The mayor did a good job keeping a low tax rate, he said, including one year when it was zero percent.

The two did have some differences of opinion when it came to holding executive sessions.

"I was in favor of keeping meetings open," he said.

All in all, they had a relationship.

“He was a good man, a good mayor, and I’m just sorry to hear he’s died.”

Norm Langlois was superintendent of the City Water and Sewer Department from 1974 until he retired in 2001. He said he, too, had a good working relationship with St. Pierre.

“He would sit and listen to everyone’s story. He would let you know if you were doing a good job or not,” Langlois said.

He knew St. Pierre for many years before he was mayor. The Langlois family was among the many worshippers at St. Peter’s Church.

“He was very quick. He could give a sermon without looking at a piece of paper, yet he made them interesting,” Langlois said. “He was a very good speaker.”

After politics, St. Pierre served as chaplain at Dannemora State Prison from 1978 to 1984. He then transferred to the new state prison in Altona.

St. Pierre was named Irishman of the Year by the Plattsburgh-North Country Chamber in 1968. He also provided pastoral care to residents of the Sacred Heart Nursing Home in Plattsburgh from 1967 to 1989.

Mayor Donald Kasprzak said his wife has told him many stories about Sunday dinners with St. Pierre and her father, Leander Bouyea Jr.

“It was told to me they both enjoyed having after-dinner drinks and the traditional cigar Father St. Pierre enjoyed during his tenure,” Kasprzak said. “He was a character, and I’m sure he’ll be missed.”

In 1977, St. Pierre signed a law that required city employees, except firefighters, live within the city. Kasprzak said that law was repealed sometime in the 1990s, something with which he doesn’t agree.

“As mayor, I support that policy,” he said.

A private funeral service will be held today in Pawtucket.