

William A. Bowes

Compiled by Kurt Corey

The William A. Bowes Award is the highest chapter award given by the Oregon. It bears the names of distinguished Oregon public works professionals, one for each year since the inception of the award in 1978.

But just exactly who is William A. Bowes and why do we honor one of our members in his name each year? Well, according to the archives of the Oregonian, William A. Bowes was a Portland City Commissioner who was perhaps the last major Oregon politician to be able to claim a log cabin as his birthplace. He was born on a Clark County, Washington logging claim in 1894, moved to Portland with his family as a child and was apprenticed as a “printer’s devil”. He became a journeyman printer, enlisted in World War I and served in France as a hospital corpsman, and entered the world of politics in 1939 when he was elected to the Portland City Commission, a position he held until his passing in 1969.



He was one of the most controversial members the council ever had and was reportedly embroiled in an endless series of political brawls. He stood alone more times than any commissioner or mayor (at least to that point in time) and was described by his peers as a “man of unique energy and drive and a formidable adversary on any issue or in any campaign, while spending his career working to make Portland a better city”.

He is reported to have served as a member of the Oregon Chapter APWA board of directors, was a founding member of the Portland Metropolitan Planning Commission, and served a lead role in many critical initiatives in Portland throughout his career. Notable among these was his advocacy of the work of a New York planner, builder, and bureaucratic entrepreneur by the name of Robert Moses who helped to set the Portland planning agenda for the quarter century from 1945 to 1970. With the support and advocacy of William Bowes, the City of Portland, Multnomah County, Port of Portland, and School District together came up with \$100,000 to hire the Moses group. Their final report, titled “Portland Improvement” covered many aspects of civic enhancement. New parks, school and water system improvements, a civic center and new railroad station were proposed in the reports 85 pages, as well as an arterial freeway system that incorporated prior plans with a freeway loop surrounding downtown. “Portland Improvement” was an infrastructure plan and an early version of a public works stimulus package. And in subsequent years most of what was contemplated in “Portland Improvement” has been implemented.

He was once quoted in an interview as saying, “if anybody, anybody at all is mad at City Hall, they’re mad at me. My meter maids give them parking tickets, my engineers build the sewers they are assessed for, my people clear the snow off the streets and my people keep digging up the streets and repaving them again.” He was nonetheless known for his keen sense of humor and maintained that he held no lasting grudges.

On the occasion of his passing in 1969, the editors of the Oregonian tipped their hat to William Bowes with the following tribute:

“William A. Bowes served the City of Portland as an elected official longer than any other person in history. His was a service of the highest order – on the firing line. His Department of Public Works had those duties most likely to stir public criticism – planning, zoning, transit, traffic, streets, and highways.

Bill Bowes’ long tenure was not due to any avoidance on his part of the controversy that naturally developed over issues in his areas of responsibility. On the contrary he welcomed opportunity to take to the public forum to defend his policies and views on matters affecting city government. It was the courage and integrity displayed on such occasions that earned him the respect and admiration even of those who disagreed with him and resulted in his reelection time after time.

On at least two occasions within recent years, the current organization of Portland’s municipal government was threatened by replacement with another form – a City Manager system in one instance, a strong Mayor system in the other. Both proposals had strong community-wide support. It was Bill Bowes who both times personally assumed the burden of defending the Council’s position; and he has been properly credited with having a decisive part in the rejection of both reforms.

The editors of the Oregonian happened to hold the view that he was wrong on both issues. So did many others, because it was not Bill Bowes’ way to choose the popular side of an issue. He sometimes made it so, however, by the very force of his character and personality. But even his opponents on such matters found themselves admiring his mettle in political combat and wholeheartedly recommending his regular reelection.

When Bill Bowes was first selected as a member of the Portland City Council and Commissioner of Public Works in June, 1939, the editors of the Oregonian, who knew him well even then, noted that Mr. Bowes was a journeyman printer. “The thought is bound to occur,” they added, “that there will be times when the deliberations of the Council require a touch of the Ben Franklin tradition. We look toward Commissioner Bowes to supply the need as it arises, for assuredly the need will arise.”

2011