



Chester Stranczek (1929 - 2015)

The former Mayor Chester Stranczek left this world, and his family, on September 5, 2015. Our condolences to his wife Diane, sons Michael and Robert, and with their families for their loss.

Not everyone knows or remembers all of the good he did in his lifetime, so in his honor, let's take a look back because everything Chet did for Crestwood he did from his heart and what he thought was in the best interest for our Village.

As many know, he was Mayor for the Village of Crestwood from 1969 -2007, having served as a Trustee for 12 years prior to being elected Mayor. In 1961, Mayor Musilek asked then Trustee Stranczek if he would be willing to resign as Trustee to accept the appointment of Public Works Director, which was a one man department. He handled everything from water/sewer to street repair and snow removal until 1966 when Crestwood started getting water from Chicago through Alsip and Sanitary District took over the sewer system.

He was one of a few South Suburban Mayors who was a strong, independent leader for decades, much like Mayor Vacco of Evergreen Park and Mayor Oremus of Bridgeview. Bringing Crestwood from a small, sleepy community to a growing, thriving community called for some bold decisions, some controversial.

When the houses on South End Lane continually flooded from run off from the Forest Preserve, a young Mayor Stranczek tried to get the Forest Preserve to do something about it. When the Forest Preserve refused, the Mayor took it upon himself, despite threats of legal action to fix the problem. The Mayor gathered some friends and built a dike to help those families. When other towns were spending money they didn't have and building up debt, Mayor Stranczek was frugal in building the growing village by paying in cash. When other towns and cities were raising taxes, Mayor Stranczek started offering tax rebates to the residents. Streets, water, and sewer were provided to every street in Crestwood without any Special Assessment to the residents and businesses.

Crestwood was one of a few cities in Illinois with Zero Bonds. The first city that paid their TIF off on time, returning over a million dollar surplus at the end of the TIF to the schools. The village's portion of the Real Estate Tax is one of the lowest percentages in the area. He gave rebates back to residents starting in 1993 and over the years, the total came to \$48 million, reached 76% of the entire tax bill, and his goal was 100%. He kept taxes low and built the village up from several dozen to several hundred businesses. Chester would also never charge any resident for garbage pick-up.

He made it possible for the "Volunteer Department" to become the Fire Department and be staffed 24 hours a day.

Along with the help of many volunteers, Chet brought about the "Look-Out Crest Festivals," the Franz Bentler concerts, and started the Mayors Golf outing, giving out scholarships to local children graduating from high school to give some financial support for college.

Chester was instrumental in attracting developers to invest in what is known as Rivercrest Mall.

On August 20, 1977, a referendum was passed creating the Recreation Commission. Chet thought a Recreation Commission would offer better value than a Park District for the taxpayers. Because of Crestwood's rapid growth, he wanted to assure villagers some green areas and provide programs for leisure activities for all ages.

Chester had the original Biela Center built for the Seniors on September 18, 1983. A few years later, he had an addition put on for the kitchen and dining hall. The center has various programs for fitness, classes, and lunches twice a week, many day trips to casinos, luncheon theaters and tours. The Biela Center is a place for seniors to drop in to watch TV, play cards, and visit with each other.

Having been a Minor League Baseball player in his youth, it brought great pride to the Mayor to bring professional baseball to Crestwood. The now Standard Bank Stadium opened June 2, 1999 and was paid for in cash. The Mayor could often be seen working on the landscaping around the stadium.

The construction of Crestwood's Wellness/Recreation Center was completed with doors opening on December 3, 2000. That ten million dollar project was also paid for in cash.

It was often said that Mayor Stranczek only cared about the seniors. That was NOT true. He loved the kids and enjoyed spending time with them. He was instrumental in securing the donation of the land and the building of Ceaser Park and Walker Park. He negotiated with ComEd to lease land under the tower lines to the Village of Crestwood for a designated area for a soccer field. The Mayor was a strong proponent of volunteerism, so when the volunteers of the various sports organizations wanted help from the village, the Mayor would do what he could. He was frugal with the village money, but would work to get the volunteers the help or material they needed. There was no one prouder when the sports organizations grew. In the late 90's early 2000's the sports grew to over 170 kids playing football, 300 soccer players, over 600 boys and girls playing baseball, t-ball, and softball. This also includes the 120 plus moms playing Ladies Powder-Puff Softball, which has been in existence now for 40 years.

Mayor Stranczek attended many opening day ceremonies. Chet umpired most of the Crestwood T-ball All-Star games from 1994 – 2006. He would come to the game with a stack of new \$5 bills, awarding one to any player that hit a home run over the makeshift fences. The Mayor would personally hand out trophies to every one of the t-ball players at the end of the season. One particular t-ball picnic at Ceaser Park, while the Mayor was handing out trophies, it started to rain. Some of the coaches wanted to stop the presentation, but our 70-something-year-old Mayor wanted to keep going so none of the children were left out. He then told everyone to make sure they came back that night to the stadium for t-ball fireworks display.

Chester made sure that each of the 22 Crestwood Little League teams could play a game at the new baseball stadium. In 2000, Crestwood Little League hosted the Big League State Playoffs. When the rains and downpours came that Friday night, the opening games were for sure going to have to be cancelled because the infield was soaked and unplayable. No one could have guessed what happened NEXT! The Mayor had Public Works get 10-20 gallons of diesel fuel, helped them pour it on the infield dirt, and then lit the infield of his brand new stadium on fire. It was a sight to see and the State Playoffs began!

In 2001, Crestwood Fastpitch took two teams to the Thanksgiving Tournament in Disney World. The Mayor and his wife Diane came to watch some of the games and cheer on the girls. The following year, Crestwood Fastpitch took three teams to the same tournament and again, Mr. and Mrs. Stranczek came to cheer them on. While there, the Mayor and Diane bought dinner for all the players, coaches, chaperones, and family members. Everyone had dinner together, took pictures, and had lots of fun. The kids and the Mayor loved it. The Mayor, was proud of his girls and the players felt very important that he would come all this way to see them play.

St. Christopher School has always been a big part of Chet's life. He attended St. Chris as a young boy and he believed in the message and community of St. Chris so much that he sent his kids there, and his grandkids also had the chance to experience that same powerful education and community. About a decade ago, Mayor Lou Presta, then Trustee, helped Chet to arrange a meeting with the Archdiocese of Chicago to help get St. Christopher School out of debt, and stay open, with a substantial personal check.

Chester Stranczek, sometimes old school, sometimes innovative, sometimes controversial, but often elected with over 60% of the vote, always put the needs of our village first and did everything he could to make our village continue to grow and prosper.

Everyone has their own story and memory with Chester Stranczek and he will be remembered by many people for many different things. Chester will always be a large part of Crestwood's history, is still part of our present, and helped light the path to our future. Thank you, Mayor Chester Stranczek, you will be missed by many.