

# Doreen Thomas



The outspoken Doreen Thomas was a female politician ahead of her time. As a city councillor in the late 1970s, Thomas stood firm on issues like the environment long before it was fashionable to do so.

“She was very strong willed, yet compassionate. She was dedicated to her family as well as her community,” a long-time friend once said.

Thomas also became the first woman to serve as chairperson of the Waterloo County Board of Education in 1975. The following year she was named K-W Woman of the Year in politics. Born in Winnipeg, she moved to Kitchener-Waterloo in 1965 and became a school board trustee for eight years beginning in 1970.

She ran for City council first in 1978 on matters like the environment and Uptown revitalization. Predicting a doubling of the population in the near future, Thomas said, “The people of Waterloo have made it clear . . . there has to be restrictions on development and the environment has to be protected. I support them in that.”

As a local politician, Thomas approached issues with a view to how they would affect future generations. She was adamant that Waterloo’s downtown be revitalized in a thoughtful way. “Like it or not” she said, “the fact of the matter is that downtown cores, not just in Waterloo, but in every other place in the country are dying through . . . lack of adequate foresight on the part of the city councils to encourage development that would bring people downtown.”

During her tenure on council, which included two years on regional council, Thomas became well-known for her forthright approach to issues. She strongly supported busing to the new suburbs saying, “I’m going to keep fighting until we get a decent transit service, whether the mayor likes it or not.”

In 1983, Thomas chaired the Laurel Creek Watershed Study, a well-regarded report that was later used as a model across the province for balancing the needs of the environment with population growth. Later, the Doreen Thomas Environmental Fund was established to help preserve and rehabilitate the Laurel Creek watershed. She also sat on the board of governors of the Grand River Conservation Authority and Wilfrid Laurier University, and was a founding member of the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery.

Thomas, who served as director of both the provincial and federal Liberal associations, was interested in higher office. She lost the provincial nomination, however, to Herb Epp in 1978 and two years later Frank Epp beat her out for the federal nomination.

Following her death in July 1997, a 1.1-kilometre trail on the west side of the Laurel Creek Conservation Area was named in her honour. After the ceremony, a City official

stated: “The trail runs by the Laurel Creek reservoir, the heart of the Laurel Creek watershed, so it seems appropriate to have her right in the centre of it all.”

*Photo by Personal Studio, courtesy of City of Waterloo Heritage Collection.*