

Joan McKinnon

When Joan McKinnon was mayor of Waterloo she was known as a “feisty, down-to-earth” leader. “She’s very straightforward; she doesn’t beat around the bush. There’s never a hidden agenda,” said former mayor Brian Turnbull. “Obviously she’s high energy. And with high energy comes hard-working.”



McKinnon served as mayor between 1997 and 2000. She had been a City councillor for nine years when she was elected to the top post, serving for three of those years on regional council.

While her involvement with city politics was her most visible contribution, McKinnon also quietly served Waterloo for almost twenty years as a volunteer. She was an active leader for Girl Guides of Canada and had volunteered her time to everything from a summer camp for disabled children, to the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.

It was actually the gallery that first enticed her into community involvement. McKinnon had moved from Toronto to Waterloo with her family in 1966. After attending the University of Toronto and working as a high school teacher, she and her husband decided to move to Waterloo to raise their children in a smaller city. McKinnon herself was raised in Timmins, Ontario, a small northern Ontario community, where she remembered the support of warm and caring people.

Her initial years passed quietly in Waterloo, then one day a friend called asking for some help moving furniture at the K-W Art Gallery. From then on, McKinnon was deeply involved in the life of her community. She volunteered for the K-W Symphony, the Grand River Conservation Authority and St. Mary’s Hospital.

McKinnon, who also taught at Conestoga College, has been an active supporter of the establishment of walking trails within the city. While she was involved with the trails committee, more than 1,000 kilometres of trails were built. McKinnon, who enjoys canoeing the Grand River, helped bring the Trans Canada Trail to the region, and also helped build the popular Iron Horse Trail that links Waterloo to Kitchener.

In 1985, she was named Oktoberfest Woman of the Year. McKinnon has also received the Ontario Volunteer Service Award.

At the end of her term as mayor in 2000, McKinnon told council she was proud of the work she had done around regional restructuring, and the improvement of Uptown Waterloo. She had also worked with the University of Waterloo to help establish the Research and Technology Park on the north campus.

In her final speech to council, she said she was “instrumental in seeing the keel laid” for what was to become RIM Park. While it was the biggest project the City had ever undertaken, it later became the most controversial when the financing for the massive project was called into question, and a judicial inquiry on the matter called to investigate.

Upon leaving office, McKinnon said: “We are so fortunate to live in the best city in Canada . . . Waterloo has it all.”

Photo courtesy of The City of Waterloo