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FEATURED

## Community leaders remember Steve Howard, former chamber CEO

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Stephen Howard in 2002. Courtesy photo

Hoosier Times

After hearing the news of Steve Howard's death, John Whikehart and his wife grabbed their daughter's baby book.

Inside the book is a copy of the brief speech Howard gave at the 2002 Picnic with the Pops event. That July day stands out for Whikehart because it was also the first public event he took his then 18-month-old daughter Sophie to after adopting her from China.

As part of his public remarks as president and CEO of the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce, Howard welcomed Whikehart's daughter to the country and community in front of the crowd — a memory that Whikehart said the two men revisited when they met three weeks ago for lunch.

"That was so very special to us," Whikehart said. "He was such a warm person and cared deeply about our community and who lives in our community."

Howard, 78, known for his business and community leadership, died Saturday after battling an illness.

Christian Freitag, a longtime personal friend and a former executive director with Sycamore Land Trust, said Howard was a man of service, whether that be for country or community. Freitag described Howard as respectful, honorable, generous, kind and moral. He said he could always engage in civil discourse with Freitag, even when they disagreed.

"The kind of person that he was, is the kind of person you teach your children to be," Freitag said.

Standing at 6-feet-7 inches, Howard was a "gentle giant" who cared deeply for his community, said Anne Bono, the Bloomington chamber's vice president and director of advocacy.

In addition to his executive role with the chamber, Howard also served as the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Crane Division commander.

Howard defended the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Crane Division, as a critical economic partner and employer in the region when it was targeted as part of the federal Base Realignment and Closure process. Jim Shelton, government relations manager with the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce, said the community and the region were fortunate to have Howard advocating to keep the base open.

Shelton said when Howard took over the chamber he really ramped up its advocacy and education efforts. During his chamber leadership, he worked on a number of economic development efforts with the Bloomington Economic Development Corp., Bloomington and Monroe County, including the growth of the Ivy Tech Bloomington campus, the location of the Cook campus and construction of a sewer plant in Ellettsville.

Howard led the chamber from 1994 to 2005.

Linda Williamson, who led the Bloomington Economic Development Corp. when Howard was chamber president, said he was also an advocate for Interstate 69. She said one of her fondest memories of Howard was when they attended the ribbon cutting event on Sections 1 through 3 of the new interstate between Evansville and the Crane base. She said Howard was ecstatic as they drove the new highway behind then Gov. Mitch Daniels.

"There were people standing and waving from the overpasses, and Steve would honk and wave and talk about the benefits of the highway," Williamson said. "It was a wonderful celebration with ribbon cuttings on both ends of the highway."

After retirement, Howard remained active in the community. Williamson said he advocated for the passing of a property tax referendum to raise additional funding for the Monroe County Community School Corp. Also, she said he worked on a start-up strategic plan for the Gayle and Bill Cook Center for Entrepreneurship at Ivy Tech.

He would still visit the local chamber office, which Bono appreciated. She did not directly work for Howard, but said he served as a mentor. Bono said she valued his opinion and many enjoyed when he stopped by the chamber, especially with his corgi.

"Steve was a powerhouse, and he would be deeply missed," Bono said.

In accordance with Howard's wishes, there are no immediate plans for a memorial service. Memorial contributions may be made to the Sycamore Land Trust. Allen Funeral Home is handling arrangements.



After his retirement, Steve Howard and his wife, Cassie, spent four years living aboard this sailboat in Mexico. The adventure was the topic of a 2005 My Favorite Ride column. Courtesy photo