

Former El Paso Mayor Ralph Seitsinger dies

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(Photo: RUDY GUTIERREZ/EL PASO TIMES)

Ralph E. Seitsinger, a retired Lower Valley furniture merchant and the oldest living former mayor of El Paso, died Wednesday. He was 100.

Seitsinger, who was mayor from 1961 to 1963, died in his sleep while at a hospice facility, his family said.

"I'm very very sorry to hear that," former mayor Bert Williams said of his friend. "He was a great friend of mine. He was a solid individual and we had a great City Council with him as mayor. He and that council did a lot of great things for this city. We stuck together."

Seitsinger served as El Paso's 36th mayor. His administration played a key role in developing the North/South freeway and laying the foundation for the Chamizal settlement, the border highway and a new Lower Valley sewer plant.

He liked to think that he helped contribute to El Paso during a period of rapid growth and expansion.

Seitsinger once said the accomplishment that meant most to him was advocating as an early proponent of the twin plant concept between Mexico and the United States. Seitsinger self-identified as a successful businessman and not as a politician.

"Being in politics is an ego trip unless you're rich or crooked," he said in an oral history [interview taped at the University of Texas at El Paso](http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1943&context=interviews). (<http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1943&context=interviews>)

Seitsinger spent part of his life outside of politics explaining why he vetoed a city ordinance that outlawed discrimination in public places. Williams, who was a city alderman before becoming mayor, and Alderman Ted Bender organized and overrode Seitsinger's veto.

Seitsinger later said he had a verbal commitment from various restaurant, motel, apartment and hotel owners that they would voluntarily integrate their businesses.

"I felt passing the law might cause some problems. Though, in principle, I believed in it," Seitsinger once told an interviewer. "I am now proud that it passed."

The ordinance ended segregation in El Paso two years before the federal Civil Rights Act became law.

In the same oral history interview, Seitsinger said Raymond Telles, the first Hispanic mayor of El Paso, helped steer him into municipal politics. He was first elected to public office as a candidate for City Council on the Telles ticket. He served four years as a city alderman and mayor pro-tem.

Telles usually credited Seitsinger and the other men who ran on his People's Ticket as aldermen — Ted Bender, Ernest Craig and Jack White — for helping him accomplish everything he proposed.

Seitsinger once cited the development of El Paso International Airport and the growth of park lands as some of his greatest achievements. Described as a "hands-on mayor," he tried to run city government as if it were an efficient business operation.

"When I saw something to be done, I did it. I take no credit for myself, other than to say I took the energy God had given me to serve in the manner I thought he wanted me to do."

Born in Kinross, Iowa, to German immigrant parents, Seitsinger used to say that he learned the values of work delivering newspapers from grade school through high school.

He attended Mt. Union College in Alliance, Ohio, and then transferred to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque where he stayed with relatives. He earned a degree in chemistry and taught for a while before becoming a Boy Scouts executive in New Mexico.

Seitsinger first landed in El Paso as a soldier stationed at Fort Bliss. After serving in the Army, he opened his own furniture store in 1947, the Ambler Furniture Company in Ysleta. By 1961, he had three furniture stores in El Paso.