

Obituary, Rodney Kreunen, 79

Longtime state railroad commissioner

Rodney Kreunen is dead



Rodney Kreunen, a gregarious booster of rail transportation in Wisconsin, has died, friends of his family confirmed. He was 79.

Kreunen, widely known as “Uncle Rodney,” said railroading was in his blood. He served as state railroad commissioner from 1996 to 2008.

“Rodney had more knowledge in his little finger about railroads than anyone else I’ve ever known,” said former Gov. Tommy Thompson, who appointed him commissioner. “He knew everything — date, chapter and verse — about every rail line in the state, maybe in the nation.

“He absolutely loved railroads,” Thompson said.

After his retirement, Kreunen remained a rail enthusiast who shared his passion freely through frequent contacts with politicians and journalists.

He clipped newspaper and magazine articles, sometimes had them laminated, and mailed them to people he knew, often enclosing a packet of flower seeds in the envelope. The packets were labeled with his name, phone number and the title “Railroad Commissioner — Emeritus.”

Kreunen was born in the Milwaukee area but graduated from West High School in Madison. During his lifetime he sold real estate and motorcycles. He was an ardent supporter of commuter rail for Dane County and once ran for state Assembly as a Republican but maintained many friendships in both major political parties, said Jeff Wiswell, a longtime friend.

“He was a seriously complex individual,” Wiswell said. “You could spend several days doing a seminar on Rodney.”

Wiswell said he drove Kreunen home Wednesday night from a dinner meeting of the Mendota Gridiron Club.

Wiswell and another friend of Kreunen’s, former Fitchburg Mayor Tom Clauder, said family members told them Kreunen fell ill and died late Wednesday or early Thursday. Kreunen is survived by his wife, Annette, and their two adult children. Memorial service arrangements were incomplete, Wiswell said.

“Rodney Kreunen was a legendary figure,” said state Supreme Court Justice David Prosser. “His intellect was astounding, his memory phenomenal, his curiosity and interest were unlimited, his friendship was invaluable because it always meant loyalty and support.”

The Office of Railroad Commissioner oversees railroad safety and rail line construction regulations.

Kreunen was devoted to rail safety, but he also saw himself as an ambassador for the rail industry. He was passionate about the importance of railroads for Wisconsin’s economic growth.

“I’ll be an advocate for coordinating the railroad industry,” Kreunen said in an interview with the Wisconsin State Journal shortly after he became commissioner. “It’s the future ... A railroad properly working can knit a country together.”

Kreunen said railroading was in his blood. His grandfather was a brakeman who lost his life while manually slowing a train, and his great-grandfather was a railway civil engineer who died when a boiler exploded, he told the newspaper.

He said that while he was growing up in Whitefish Bay outside of Milwaukee, his parents often put him on a train to visit relatives wearing a sign around his neck that said, “I’m Rodney, put me off in Waupaca.”

He studied mechanical engineering at UW-Madison but never worked professionally in the railroad industry because he wanted to live in Madison. He studied the history of railroads, traveled on trains throughout Europe and made his views on rail transportation issues known.

Kreunen was a member of the Milwaukee Road, Chicago & North Western and National Railway historical societies and the National Association of Railroad Passengers.

In 1996, Thompson bypassed other applicants with decades of rail industry experience when he chose Kreunen, who at the time was a 60-year-old real estate agent. The state Senate confirmed his appointment.

Kreunen's resume cited his activities as a rail booster, including co-hosting a radio program called "Rod Kreunen's Caboose" from 1965 to 1982.