



Governor Maura T. Healey has ordered that the United States of America Flag and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts flag be lowered to half-staff beginning immediately today, until sunset on the day of interment, in honor of the life and legacy of former United States Congressman from Massachusetts, John Walter Olver, who passed away on February 23, 2023.



Amherst, MA - "A workhorse, not a show horse" is what John W. Olver's campaign called him, in a phrase that closely matched his unflashy but solidly productive political career. Olver, who served both chambers of the Massachusetts legislature and the U. S. House of Representatives for a total of 44 years, died on February 23, 2023, at age 86, at home in Amherst.

Much admired by his constituents and colleagues for his intellect, broad vision, hard work, and attention to detail, Olver devoted himself to progressive causes and to supporting progressive candidates. On the occasion of his retirement from the U.S. Congress in 2012, the Boston Globe wrote that Olver had a reputation for being "low key and media shy." Yet he was not afraid to step up and speak out when the occasion demanded it. As his colleague U. S. Rep. Richard Neal put it, "He was happy to tell you he disagreed with you." But, added Neal, Olver also exercised the much-needed give-and-take skills of a legislator.

Olver had the tall, elegant appearance reminiscent of a member of the British royal family, but his was a distinctly non-royal background. Born Sept. 3, 1936, and raised on a farm in Beach Lake, Pennsylvania, he tended cows with his father while his mother ran a boarding house. He graduated from high school at 15 and from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute at 18, completing a master's degree in chemistry at Tufts, with an MIT doctorate at age 24. He taught chemistry at UMass Amherst for eight years, resigning in 1969 to enter politics as a state representative. In 1972, he was elected to the state senate, and in 1991 he won a special

election to succeed U.S. Representative Silvio O. Conte, who died in office. In both 1972 and 1991 elections he flipped the seat from red to blue, reflecting changing party preferences in western Massachusetts.

Olver's commitments were firm, steady, and progressive. He believed in using diplomacy rather than military force in international disputes, consistently voting against increased funding and deployment for military operations. He co-sponsored a bill to introduce universal health insurance. On the question of abortion, he was solidly pro-choice. He supported efforts to reform immigration laws to allow entrance to qualified immigrants, convinced also that undocumented immigrants should be offered a pathway to citizenship. He was arrested twice in front of the Sudanese embassy in protests against the Darfur genocide. U. S. Rep. James McGovern, who in 2006 was arrested with Olver, called his colleague "a person of integrity who has shown that standing up for what you believe is not only the right thing to do, it's good politics."

On both the local and national scene, Olver worked to keep water clean and forest and agricultural land free from development. His first congressional district, covering most of Western Massachusetts, was primarily rural, although it also comprised the cities of Holyoke, Pittsfield, Fitchburg, Leominster, Gardner and North Adams, as well as the academic communities of the Pioneer Valley. There, he worked to help improve the economic conditions of his constituents. One result, the Northern Tier Project, brought new business initiatives,

investments, collaborations, and training programs to communities along the Route 2 corridor, many of which have endured over the last 35 years. When Olver described his hopes for the project in 1984, staff member and longtime friend Michael Kane asked if there was a plan or strategy for the project. Olver replied, "I want you to figure it out." Other colleagues and staffers describe similarly high expectations, with staffers expected to do the original work and bring it to Olver to help implement.

On the other hand, Olver did plenty of that shoe leather work himself. As Jon Klein, a former top staffer on Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill put it, "John always showed up. He was everywhere in that sprawling congressional district. Trying to find and solve that next problem." Said Kathleen Merrigan, former Olver campaign manager and later U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, "John did not miss a parade, a spaghetti dinner at the Italian American Club, a local Democratic Town Committee event. He was just everywhere – not to give the big speech, but to listen, observe, and ultimately to serve." Patricia Lee Lewis (Pat Sackrey), chair of the former Hampshire County Commission, Olver's district director in his early years in Congress and his close friend to the end, said of him, "John had the highest degree of personal integrity of anyone I have ever known."

Efforts to improve infrastructure, in particular transportation, were key parts of Olver's political career. "There's probably not a transportation project in the state that doesn't have John Olver's fingerprints

on it,' said McGovern. Former state representative, the late Steven Kulik, has described the areas of Olver's work that he most admired: the federal designation of the Westfield River as the state's first Wild and Scenic River, the advancement of broadband to rural communities, community health centers and development corporations, strengthening the region's agricultural economy, and supporting transportation projects of all kinds. "These are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to John's legacy of leadership," Kulik said.

Married for 55 years to Rose Richardson Olver, a professor of psychology and the first tenured female professor at Amherst College, John was a devoted family man, spending time with his daughter Martha, a librarian in the Holyoke Public Library, whenever he could. He was an outdoorsman, enjoying hiking, rock-climbing, gardening, and tennis. His retirement coincided with redistricting that eliminated his congressional district, but also with his wife's diagnosis of ovarian cancer. She died in 2014.

After retiring from politics, Olver continued to work for causes he cared about. He worked with local land trusts, the Kestrel Trust and the Mount Grace Land Trust, to preserve critical land for conservation. UMass gave him an honorary degree in public service in 2014. He had advocated for a high-rise building on the university's Amherst campus to be built of wood rather than steel. That building, the largest academic contemporary wood structure in the country, was named the John W. Olver Design Building in 2017.