

JOANNE REDMOND DENWORTH

(March 1, 2024)

Joanne Denworth, retired lawyer and environmental expert, has died at 85

She was senior policy manager of land use for former Gov. Ed Rendell for seven years, and a Bucks County township supervisor said: “The fact that we have a voice in Harrisburg that’s strong and being heard is invaluable.”



Ms. Denworth is shown here in 2000 for a story in The Inquirer about suburban sprawl in Bensalem. File photo

by Gary Miles

Published Mar. 11, 2024, 5:47 p.m. ET

Joanne Denworth, 85, of Philadelphia, retired lawyer, longtime environmental expert, former senior policy manager for Gov. Ed Rendell, writer, teacher, and volunteer, died Friday, March 1, of Alzheimer’s disease at her home in Society Hill.

A champion of collaboration and an award-winning liaison herself for nearly 50 years, Ms. Denworth marshaled dozens of community and economic development agencies and organizations, shaped infrastructure policy in Pennsylvania, and crafted critical legislation that affected millions of people across the state. She was Rendell’s senior policy manager for land

use from 2003 until her retirement in 2010, and before that served as president of the 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania advocacy coalition and Pennsylvania Environmental Council.

“I truly love the state,” Ms. Denworth told The Inquirer in 2000. “It’s a beautiful place, and I hate to see us make a mess of it.”

Her main goals, she said often, were to enhance urban areas, improve coordination among development stakeholders, and protect open spaces. An Inquirer writer called her “the citizen avenger of sprawl” in 2000, and her family said in a [tribute](#) that she was “passionate but practical, excelling at both innovative ideas and real-world solutions.”

As Rendell’s senior policy manager, Ms. Denworth cochaired a team that wrote the influential report *Keystone Principles for Growth, Investment & Resource Conservation* in 2005. She also represented Rendell to the National Governors Association and other groups, and served as two-time chair of the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

She was president and executive director of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council from 1986 to 1998 and founded 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania in 1998. “Her ability to bring people together and find solutions became a hallmark of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council that continues today,” a former colleague said in an online tribute.

“How can we have an economically healthy state if over 1,000 of our communities are in decline, and we’re not spending public money to keep them healthy? Instead, we’re spending money to open up new territory for development.”

In directing the PEC’s Green City Philadelphia initiative in 1991, Ms. Denworth promoted the city’s parks, community gardens, mass transit, and close-knit neighborhoods. She told the Daily News: “We believe that Philadelphia can become a model urban human habitat by building on its 300-year investment.”

She founded 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania while still at the PEC to integrate the state’s many environmental nonprofits, community programs, and corporate efforts. “She wanted to be in the room where decisions were made,” said her daughter Lydia. “She cared about the wider world.”

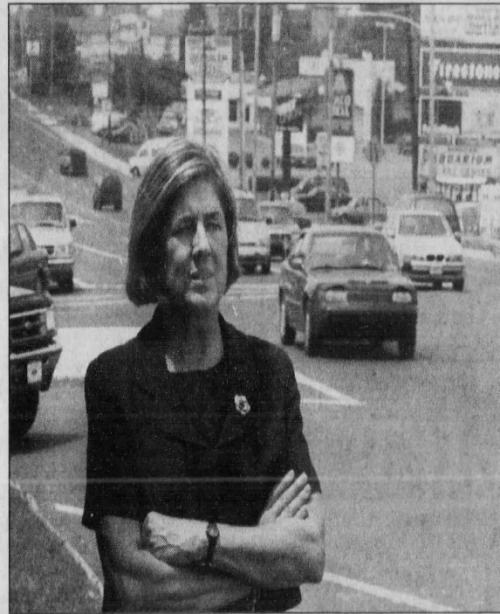
Philadelphia woman fights to preserve open space

ACTIVIST from B1
many lawmakers.
Denworth has helped to write legislation — up for a House vote Tuesday — that would give towns more power to shape their destinies. And she has fought backroom battles to keep it intact.

For months now, she has driven from Philadelphia to Harrisburg several times a week to lobby lawmakers. All over Pennsylvania, she has listened to the frustrations of borough officials and township supervisors who feel besieged by development.

"As a supervisor, there's a sense of powerlessness when you ask yourself, 'Is anyone out there hearing you?'" said Township Supervisor Janet French of Buckingham, Bucks County. "The fact that we have a voice in Harrisburg that's strong and being heard is invaluable."

Raised in a small town in Western Pennsylvania but firmly rooted in Center City, Denworth has taken on the sprawl issue as much from her love of cities and old towns as from her desire to protect open



JOHN SLAVIN / Inquirer Suburban Staff
Her back to some of Bensalem's strip shopping centers, Joanne Denworth looks every bit the fierce opponent of development who founded 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania.

work in environmental law.

In the 1970s, Gov. Milton Shapp tapped her to serve on the state Environmental Hearing Board. Back then, she said, environmental law "wasn't even a subject they taught in law school."

Many of the cases brought before the board were from citizens who wanted to stop development by doing things such as appealing sewer permits. "It was not so much an issue of environmental law as a land-use issue," she said. "But there wasn't a law you could hang your hat on to stop it."

Next came a stint while in private practice as a township solicitor in Newtown Square, Delaware County.

"I got thrown into the real world of development," she said. "I saw the constraints that townships are under when they're under pressure to grow."

In 1986, Denworth was asked to head the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, a nongovernmental organization that worked on conservation and land-use issues.

It was a time of breakneck growth in Bucks, Chester and Lancaster

James Gerlach (R., Chester) — credit Denworth with articulating the concerns of a broad range of citizens.

"When you're hearing a single voice speaking for many voices, the strength of that message has significantly more impact," Steil said.

The alliance brings together people who might not otherwise find themselves as allies: environmentalists and corporate leaders, lawyers and farmers, elected town leaders and urban planners.

Gerlach said he would not have heard from people such as Louis Appell Jr., chief executive officer of Susquehanna Pfaltzgraff Co., a York dinnerware manufacturer, if Appell hadn't been a group member.

For his part, Appell said he hooked up with Denworth's cause because he was troubled by the way the outer reaches of York were growing while the downtown core deteriorated.

"From a zero base, we've grown into an effective voice and cause, and Joanne has played the lead in making that happen," said Appell, who also serves on the board of

This article about Ms. Denworth appeared in The Inquirer in 2000.newspapers.com

Earlier, Ms. Denworth managed her own law office and worked for other firms in Philadelphia. She sat on the Pennsylvania Environmental Hearing Board in the 1970s, was township solicitor in Newtown Square in the 1980s, and taught environmental law at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1990s.

She cowrote *Guiding Growth, Building Better Communities, and Protecting our Countryside* in 1992, and *Planning Beyond Boundaries* in 2002, and The Inquirer and other outlets published many of her commentaries. She addressed the stalled development at Penn's Landing by ending a 1989 commentary in The Inquirer with: "Remember, less is more. Go for simplicity and elegance, and the people will respond."

Ms. Denworth chaired boards, volunteered on many committees and councils, and was president of the Society Hill Civic Association. She won a dozen service and leadership awards, including a 2000 Touchstone Award from the Society of Women Environmental Professionals and the 2008 Visionary in Historic Preservation Award from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Gov. Tom Ridge cited her as a Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania in 1998.

She also appeared on radio and TV programs and spoke at conferences and seminars. "She was fierce in the best way," her daughter said. "She was fiercely intellectual, fiercely loyal, and fiercely determined."

Joanne Redmond was born Nov. 2, 1938, in Youngstown, Ohio. She performed water ballet, played piano, and rode horses as a girl, and graduated from high school in Greensburg, Pa., 35 miles southeast of Pittsburgh.

She earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy at Vassar College in New York in 1960 and a law degree at Penn in 1963. She married lawyer Ray Denworth Jr. in 1962, and they had twins Lydia and Michael.

The family lived in Center City at first and then refurbished a colonial townhouse in Society Hill that was the talk of the neighborhood. Her husband died in 1999, and she was a partner to architect John Bower for the last 15 years.

Ms. Denworth adopted her husband's love of sailing, and the whole family crossed the Atlantic Ocean to Europe in 1979. She enjoyed tennis and spent lots of time with family and friends at their second home on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Ms. Denworth (second from left) enjoyed spending time with her family. Courtesy of the family

A former colleague [called her](#) "affable, intelligent, and fun." Her daughter said: "She was wonderful as a mom. She loved us so much, and we knew it."

In addition to her children, Ms. Denworth is survived by five grandsons, two sisters, and other relatives.

A celebration of her life is to be held from 2 to 5:30 p.m., Saturday, April 13, at the Philadelphia Marriott Old City, 1 Dock St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19106.

Donations in her name may be made to the [Pennsylvania Environmental Council](#), 810 River Ave., Suite 201, Pittsburgh, Pa.; and [Women's Way](#), 123 S. Broad St., Suite 1320, Philadelphia, Pa. 19109.

Ms. Denworth and her family loved to sail and went on many nautical adventures. Courtesy of the family