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Former Gresham Mayor McRobert dying as pancreas fails

Thanks to Gussie McRobert, the Portland suburb has a key role in regional planning

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FACTBOX

• Her book

Former Gresham Mayor Gussie McRobert is telling friends she is dying as her pancreas begins to fail.

McRobert, 75, says she has no idea how long she will live, but has spent the past several days planning a City Hall memorial service, getting her finances in order and talking to friends and her children, who arrive next week to spend the holidays with her.

"I know I want to get through Christmas with everybody here," she said. "This is not the way to live. I'm grateful not to be in pain . . . and not to be all medicated up."

McRobert said she lost about 80 percent of her pancreas in January 2005 after surgery to remove a benign tumor. Now, the remaining part of her pancreas has stopped producing enough enzymes to help her digest food, she says.

Her weight, normally about 125 to 130 pounds, has dropped to about 118 pounds, she says, and any effort -- such as talking to funeral home representatives -- leads to profound fatigue.

Although she was taking injections of vitamins and other supplements to boost her energy, they give her headaches and "it isn't (working) anymore and it doesn't help the pancreas, so there's no point in doing it anymore," she said.

McRobert said she will not attempt to get an organ transplant because "I think it's absolutely immoral for somebody my age who's had a good life and is ready to go to take a pancreas away from someone younger who could benefit the world."

McRobert's blunt and powerful style brought Gresham into the spotlight from 1988 to 1998. A proponent of citizen involvement, she's known for her political savvy and a willingness to fight battles, big and small, at every level of government.

"Gresham was not on the map until Gussie became mayor," said Gresham City Councilor David Widmark, who was drawn into civic service by McRobert. "When Gussie walks into a room, people pay attention. They know that she's no nonsense, and she's going to speak her mind."

That didn't mean she has been universally loved.

"One of the things I got from her leadership, and try to remember when I'm advocating for Gresham, is be direct and be passionate," said current Gresham Mayor Shane Bemis, who often bounces ideas off McRobert. "If you try to lead by making everybody happy, you do nothing."

McRobert was instrumental in developing the city's neighborhood associations, in recruiting a Gresham microchip plant founded by LSI Logic and creating city and regional plans that dictated how the area would grow.

"Basically, she helped to lay the blueprint for the way the region has built itself," said Metro Councilor Rod Park, who was mentored by McRobert.

While mayor, "She could see growth and knew it had to be planned and organized," Widmark said.

Yet McRobert has never considered herself a politician, and hopes she'll be remembered for "saying it like it is, no bull, no biases."

She says she has no regrets. Even her first marriage, which ended in divorce, inspired her to enter therapy and take control of her life.

Her determination not to define herself as a victim of abuse is the center of her recently completed memoir.

"You know, sometimes you learn more from the pain than the pleasure," she said.

McRobert said she is not scared of death, partly because she wants to be reunited with her second husband, Chet McRobert, who died in 2003.

"I think my nursing background helps me accept death as part of life, but I'm eager to see him," she said.

Friends say they weren't entirely surprised by an e-mail in which McRobert calmly announced plans to deal with her illness and death.

"Gussie's going to do it exactly the way she wants to do it, just like she lived her life," Bemis said.

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