

Bob Sutton, visionary Cobb engineer, dead at 78

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MARIETTA - Bob Sutton of Marietta was a right-hand man to Ernest Barrett, Cobb's first commission chairman, and is credited with being a leader in the development of the county.

Cobb's dramatic growth can be traced back to Barrett's success in paving roads and extending water and sewer lines in the 1960s and 1970s. As county engineer, Sutton played an important role in the growth of Cobb, overseeing the expansion of the water and sewer system.

On Friday, Robert L. Sutton Jr. died at age 78.

Sutton served as county engineer from 1970 to 1977, after he was appointed Cobb Sewer and Water System manager at age 37 in 1969. A Perry native, he was a graduate of Georgia Tech, where he received a bachelor's of science degree in civil engineering in 1955. He later earned an MBA from Georgia State University in 1972. After serving in the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers in the 1950s, he came to Cobb and was instrumental in the construction of Cobb County Airport-McCollum Field in 1960.

"I think Bob was a good engineer," said Joe Mayes of west Cobb. Mayes's engineering firm Mayes, Sudderth & Etheredge did design work for the system.

"But I think his greater talent was to see the long range and plan the Cobb County Waste System. The lines were pretty much planned while he was working for the county. He was able to see a way to develop those plans and find funding to create projects."

By 1964, when Barrett took office, much of Cobb existed on septic tanks and the county's streams were extremely polluted. In some subdivisions, developers had to build their own treatment plants and turn them over to the county to be maintained, according to historian Dr. Tom Scott's book "Cobb County, Georgia, and the Origins of the Suburban South: a Twentieth-Century History."

Former Cobb Commissioner Butch Thompson, a close friend, said Sutton never took credit for his important work in developing the water and sewer system.

"I give him more credit than anyone individually, including all the commissioners, for the vision he had from the standpoint of infrastructure and the needs of Cobb County," Thompson said. "Not only did he believe in it, he built it. He stayed there long enough to get it really up and going, putting sewer and water lines all over our county."

After serving as county engineer, Sutton became vice president and general manager of Arthur Pew Construction Co. In 1979, he returned to the public sector, serving as the Cobb's director of public works until 1982. That year, he again served as county engineer before working for several engineering firms. Even after retiring Sutton continued working for Marietta-based Croy Engineering.

"I've never known Bob to really retire," Thompson said. "Every time that he retired or would say he would retire, somebody would hire him. A few years back Paulding County, in the midst of all their growth, needed some expertise and they hired Bob."

Former state legislator Sam Hensley said he will sorely miss Sutton, who was a Georgia Tech classmate, fellow engineer and church member. In 1966, Cobb contracted with the Hensley-Schmidt engineering firm to develop the master sewer plan.

He was "one of the nicest guys I've ever known," said Hensley. "He helped me build my company."

Sutton was a member of a number of organizations, including the Lake Allatoona Preservation Authority, Georgia Water and Pollution Control Association, and American Water Works Association. He also received many awards, such as the Georgia Society of Professional Engineers' 1979 Metro-Atlanta Engineer of the Year in Construction, the Cobb Chamber's Dedication and Loyalty to Public Service Award in 1984. The Chattahoochee River Plant, which he helped establish, was renamed the Robert L. Sutton Jr. Water Reclamation Facility.

An Eagle Scout, Sutton was an active scoutmaster for Troop 144 between 1959 and 1961. In 1972, he served as president of the Lions Club. He was a longtime member of Marietta First Baptist Church, where he was a life deacon and Sunday School teacher.

"He has been a great role model for the way a true leader is to live and held himself to some of the highest moral standards of anyone I have ever known," Don Sutton said of his father. "He taught all his children and grandchildren the understanding of how a family works together in their support of one another so that they can do good for others in their community."

Robert Wigington of Marietta remembered that his grandfather always treated others with respect.

"I am going to miss my grandfather very much, but the things he taught me and the values he represented will always be a part of me and I am very grateful to him for all of those things," he said.

Other survivors include his wife Nancy W. Sutton of Marietta; two daughters, Lynn Wigington and her husband Frank of Marietta, Leslie Thomas and her husband Stan of Marietta; daughter-in-law Fran Sutton of Marietta; eight grandchildren including Jon Wigington, Anna Sutton, Lauren Sutton, Britany Middleton, Victoria Middleton, William Middleton, Olivia Thomas; and several nephews and nieces.

Funeral services will be at 2 p.m. Tuesday at First Baptist Church of Marietta, with the Revs. Dr. Bill Ross and Dean Hunter officiating. Burial will be in Cheatham Hill Memorial Park Cemetery in Marietta.

The family will receive friends from 2 to 4 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m. today at Mayes Ward-Dobbins Funeral Home in Marietta.