Longtime Silver Spring civic activist dies

Transportation advocate died of kidney cancer Wednesday

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

Harry Sanders, a Silver Spring resident and transportation activist instrumental in organizing community support for local transit initiatives such as the Purple Line, died Wednesday at age 63.

Sanders was known by friends and family for always putting the well-being of the community over partisan politics, said Barbara Sanders, his wife of 33 years. She hopes her late husband is remembered for whom he was and not on which side of the issue he stood.

“He’s a mild-mannered Midwestern man that wanted to come to solutions that everyone could get behind,” she said Thursday in a phone interview. “No single piece of any project should be so overriding that you can’t talk to and work with others to reach a final solution that everyone can accept.”

The couple has one son, Greg, of Ellicott City.

In 1986, Harry Sanders co-founded the Action Committee for Transit, a pro-public-transit activist group, and in 1996, he founded the group that would eventually become Purple Line NOW, which promotes use of light-rail transit on the long-planned intercounty transit route.
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Sanders attended meetings for the groups he founded up until just a few weeks before his death, from kidney cancer.

"Although Harry won't be present for the groundbreaking or ribbon-cutting, I know the Purple Line will be built because of Harry's leadership," said Montgomery County Councilman George L. Leventhal, (D-At large) of Takoma Park, a member of the council's Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee, in a statement.

Friends said Sanders' efforts were a great benefit to Montgomery County.

"He's pursued transit solutions for the entire region over his many years," said Tony Hausner, a longtime friend and fellow activist from Silver Spring. "The more we develop transit solutions for the county and state, the more we are all indebted to him."

Sanders was chairman of the Montgomery County League of Women Voters Transportation Committee and helped maintain the Silver Spring Trails Web site, which promotes pedestrian and bicycle trails in the Silver Spring area. He also volunteered at the historic Silver Spring B&O Railroad Station and was a longtime supporter of the nonprofit organization IMPACT Silver Spring. Sanders, a retired computer analyst, lived in the Woodside neighborhood of Silver Spring for the past 31 years.

"He treated people with respect, even those who were on opposing sides of issues," said Webb Smedley, a neighbor and friend of Sanders for 21 years. "It was appreciated by a lot of people who, because of that approach, were a little more willing to listen before responding."

For years, both Barbara and Harry Sanders used public transportation exclusively to travel to work, and connected over their activism early on in their relationship. Barbara Sanders is a board member of the Montgomery County League of Women Voters.
"He stood for having the least imprint on your surroundings," she said. "And the most impact on your surrounding community."

She said a memorial service will be held in April and contributions can be made to Purple Line NOW, the League of Women Voters or the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

In memory

A fundraiser scheduled from 6 to 8 p.m. March 22 to benefit Purple Line NOW will still be held and will also serve as a tribute to group founder Harry Sanders. To learn more about registering and participating, go to www.purplelinenow.com. The event will be held at the Montgomery College performing arts center at 7995 Georgia Ave. in Silver Spring.