

City/Region

PEOPLE



Wilbur Ternyik has been a major force in Florence politics for decades. He's standing on the bank of the Siuslaw River with the Oregon Dunes in the background, where he introduced the use of beach grass to stabilize the sand.

The sand man of Florence

For years, Wilbur Ternyik has been a powerful advocate for the Oregon Coast

BY WINSTON ROSS
The Register-Guard

FLORENCE — In local politics, power is the ability to speak your mind without fear of repercussion.

By that measure, Florence's Wilbur Ternyik may be one of the most powerful men ever to walk Oregon's shores.

When Gov. Tom McCall came here in 1970 to preach land use planning, it was Ternyik who carried his message to skeptical local officials who saw the governor as an outsider threatening property rights. When federal budget managers — again and again — zeroed out money for local ports, it was Ternyik who went to Washington to demand meetings with the peo-

ple who could restore it.

When the National Parks Service and U.S. Forest Service battled for control over the Oregon Dunes, it was Ternyik who spoke up for the Forest Service, which now maintains one of the coast's most treasured resources.

But Ternyik did much more than speak. He changed the actual face of the dunes during his time with the federal Soil Conservation Service in the 1950s, after discovering the power of European beach grass to stabilize sand that was smothering houses and roads.

He revitalized the moonscape of dredging spoils that had become Miller's Sand Island in the Columbia River, introducing the right mixture of plants to bring an island of sand back to life. His pioneering work as chairman of the



Ternyik, with his tomahawk-turned-gavel.

Oregon Coastal Conservation and Development Commission paved the way for the state's landmark Senate Bill 100, which governs Oregon's acclaimed land use system.

Ternyik also spent 29 years on the Port of Siuslaw Commission and 16 years on the Florence City Council. And, in his spare time, he rehabilitated hundreds of injured birds, deer and other wild animals at his quiet home on Rhododendron Drive.

Wearing his trademark buckskin jacket, a Cree Indian creation older even than Ternyik's 80 years, and wielding a tomahawk for a gavel at the meetings he governed, Ternyik strikes an imposing figure. He has counted McCall, Sen.

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Ternyik: Toughness reinforced in fighting on Okinawa

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Mark Hatfield, Sen. Bob Packwood and Sen. Wayne Morse among his closest friends and allies. But it was, and is, his tireless decades of public service for the coast region for which he will always be remembered, admirers say.

"A single individual can change the world," said Onno Husing, director of the Oregon Coastal Zone Management Agency, which Ternyik founded. "People like Wilbur Ternyik come along once in a great while."

Born in 1926, Ternyik is a direct descendent of Chief Coboway, the Clatsop Indian who greeted Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery when they arrived in 1804. Ternyik's father, a Hungarian immigrant, didn't see his son born, having returned to the East Coast to be with his family after impregnating a 16-year-old Astoria girl. Ternyik's mother battled alcoholism throughout his childhood.

"She would walk down to get some groceries and disappear for three years," Ternyik remembered. "I was mostly raised by my grandparents. I earned my keep by cleaning out the barn and milking the cows."

After he graduated from high school, Ternyik joined the Marine Corps in 1944, just in time to be shipped to Okinawa for one of the deadliest battles of World War II. For 40 days, Ternyik fought the Japanese until a bullet pierced his shin. He returned to the states with a flag

from the helmet of a dead enemy soldier as a keepsake.

Ternyik worked for the Soil Conservation Service upon his return to the states. The agency was puzzling over how to stop shifting sands from invading unwanted territory on the coast. Before long, people were calling Ternyik the Johnny Appleseed of European beach grass, which stays erect throughout the coast's harsh winters and created the fore-dune that now lines much of the shoreline.

But he will perhaps most be remembered for his actions after Gov. McCall delivered a speech in Newport on May 4, 1970, before 140 coastal government officials.

"You people on the Oregon Coast must do land use planning," McCall warned the crowd. "If you don't, someone else will do it for you — and you won't like the results."

McCall was all but booed off the stage. But Ternyik agreed with the governor, and set about building a coalition of people on the coast who wanted to control their own fate. In 1973, Ternyik and his group persuaded the state Legislature to create the Oregon Coastal Conservation and Development Commission, which in four years developed a set of planning goals for coastal development that would serve as a model for Senate Bill 100.

Husing says without Ternyik's work, the bill would never have had the support it needed to narrowly pass.

"There were 140 people in

the room that day who heard McCall's message," Husing said. "There was only one that got in his pickup and started to make it happen."

From there, Ternyik's clout, and his legacy, grew. And he never hesitated to speak his mind — even when it landed him in hot water.

At a meeting of the conservation and development commission, Ternyik once suggested a picnic. To properly appreciate what he said next, understand that he's always scoffed at the idea that the Western snowy plover is any different from the inland plover population, thus undeserving of its place on the Endangered Species List.

"I said, 'I can bring some snowy plover pot pie,'" Ternyik remembered. Fellow Commissioner Ellen Lowe "came unglued. She said, 'Wilbur! You're the chairman. You cannot say a thing like that.'"

There's also the time he clashed with State Sen. L.B. Day, who later chaired the Land Conservation and Development Commission. Ternyik had his tomahawk-turned-gavel, with a blade at one end and a peace pipe at the other.

"One time L.B. Day got into me at a meeting. He looked at the tomahawk and said to me, 'Are you threatening me with that?' I said, 'L.B., there's a business end and a peace end, and you can choose which one you want.' He laughed."

On the state of the city: "Development and real estate people control the council, the planning commission and the

port commission. From Old Town, I can't see up the river anymore (because of development blocking the view). Very soon people will come to Florence and they're not going to see the river at all."

On the Three Rivers Casino: "I like their chicken strips. Are they ever going to get any money out of me? No. Do they have a right to be there? Absolutely."

And he's always talked like this, somehow managing to maintain the respect — if not adulation — of just about anyone who knows him.

"God broke the mold when he made Wilbur," said Jim Ross, former executive director of the coastal commission.

Last month, Ternyik got the recognition he never expected when his supporters unveiled a life-sized bronze bust of him at the Florence Events Center.

Ternyik pooh-poohs the accolades. These days, he's more concerned with the ear-splitting headaches that make him won-

der whether a brain cyst he had mostly removed in 1991 has grown back. Without the money to pay for more tests, Ternyik is "toughing it out," the way he did for 40 days on Okinawa.

That flag he lifted from the dead soldier, by the way? In the late 1990s, Ternyik tracked down the man's family and returned it.