

# George Van De Voorde Biography



Fire Chief and Mayor photos courtesy of the Elgin History Museum

**George Van De Voorde - Class of 1943 - b. 1925 d. March 7, 2000** From the EHS Yearbook: Map Reading Club.

Former Elgin Mayor George Van De Voorde and Fire Chief, 74, helped lay the groundwork for the city's economic upturn in the 1990s.

Mr. Van De Voorde also helped protect that city in his 17 years as fire chief during a 37-year firefighting career before his retirement in 1984.

Mr. Van De Voorde, who was born in Clinton, Ind., died Tuesday, March 7, in his home of complications from cancer.

A resident of Elgin for nearly 70 years, he served as mayor for two terms from 1987 to 1995 and as a City Council member in 1985 and 1986.

"He was a very kind, caring person," said Clay Pearson, director of community relations and organizational development in the Elgin city manager's office. "His only touchstone for making decisions was what was best for Elgin. He wasn't seeking personal gain. He was self-deprecating."

Mr. Van De Voorde was instrumental in obtaining a riverboat gaming license for Elgin in 1993.

"A lot of people credit him with making the pitch to the (Illinois) Gaming Commission that awarded the 10th and final gaming license in the state to Elgin," Pearson said. "There was an advantage in him knowing Elgin so well. He understood the value of downtown and he made bold investments in infrastructure that is driving our growth today."

"He loved the city and he loved the citizens," said Fire Capt. Craig Eadler, acting deputy fire chief for Elgin. "He loved being a fireman. That was his first love. He always wanted to be called chief, not mayor."

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Mr. Van De Voorde attended Grant Elementary School in Elgin during the 1930s. He graduated from Elgin High School in 1943 and served in the Army Air Forces during World War II and was stationed in Texas. He joined the Elgin Fire Department in 1947, was named chief in 1967 and was responsible for bringing paramedics to the department in 1974.

“He started the EMS program in Elgin,” said Eadler, who served as one of the first paramedics. “He was quite a leader. He was a fireman’s chief who always responded to fires himself. He was always concerned about the welfare of his men. He was well-respected and very well-liked.”

Mr. Van De Voorde was elected to the City Council after retiring from the Fire Department.

“My father had a very strong sense of family and community,” his daughter Pamela Rehberg said. “He was a man of integrity, honesty and commitment. He worked very hard. He felt strongly about doing the right thing. He had a strong sense of duty to help his peers, co-workers and friends. He told me a long time ago that he thought there would be another Depression and he thought the firefighter’s job is a secure one.”

Other survivors include his wife of more than 53 years, Marjorie; another daughter, Sally Lee; two sons, George and Steven; nine grandchildren; and one great-grandson.

The Elgin Heritage Commission awards the Elgin Mayor’s Awards for Preservation. These annual awards honor outstanding contributions to Elgin’s heritage and educate the general public of the value of our unique architecture, neighborhoods, and history. The awards further the Heritage Commission’s goals of neighborhood and downtown revitalization to benefit the entire city of Elgin. Three awards are honors of distinction: The **Mayor George Van De Voorde Award**, The William Stickling Award and The Artisan Award. Winners are selected by members of the Elgin Heritage Commission, and are honored at the annual Mayor’s Awards for Preservation event.

The special dedication and open house, although scheduled to showcase improvements in the 113-year-old Franklin School, was also in memory of the late **Mayor George Van De Voorde**. Crisis Center Director Gretchen Vapnar credited Peter Simon of the Grand Victoria Foundation not only for a capital donation, but also for championing the naming of the center in memory of Mayor Van De Voorde. "For many years," Vapnar recalled, "our mayor -if he had any campaign money left over --he would bring it to the crisis center, hand it to me in an envelope, and say 'just put this where you need it' - we had a very good friend in George Van De Voorde."

The Fire Fighter Memorial Park and firefighter museum at 533 Saint Charles St., is also named for **George Van De Voorde**.