

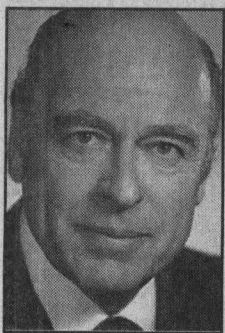
Retired senator dies at 84

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Watsonville
resident never
lost an election

Sentinel staff report

SANTA CRUZ — Retired state Sen. Donald L. Grunsky, whose legislative career representing Santa Cruz County spanned three decades, died Thursday in Santa Cruz. He was 84.

Grunsky began his political career with the reputation of being a boy wonder, joining the California Assembly in 1947 at age 32, fresh out of the Navy. He received both the Republican and Democratic party nominations.



Donald Grunsky

The long-time Republican ran unopposed for reelection in 1948 and 1950 and advanced to the Senate in 1952.

Forced to run in a different district in 1966, he unseated

Democratic incumbent Fred Farr.

The Watsonville resident never lost a political campaign, nor was he seriously challenged. In several elections he ran unopposed.

In the Assembly he became known as one of the "Young Turks," a group of reformers who pressed for — and eventually won — changes in the lower house that freed it from the grips of notorious liquor industry lobbyist Artie Samish.

He was credited as the principal architect of California's Master Plan for Higher Education, was the author of legislation that outlawed loan sharking and established equal pay for equal work, and was the driving force behind the state's no-fault divorce law.

"Divorce is painful enough, but the law made it even worse," Grunsky said in 1970 when his Family

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Grunsky

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Law Act was signed by the governor.

He was an early and staunch supporter of legislation to protect the California coastline and had a bill passed to stop oil drilling in Monterey Bay long before it became politically popular.

While he served six years in the state Assembly and 24 in the Senate before retiring in 1976, Grunsky insisted he was not a politician.

"When people walked into his office, he didn't ask which party they were from. He asked how he could help them," said Monterey-native Leon Panetta, a former congressman, one-time White House chief of staff

under President Clinton, and a friend of Grunsky's. "His basic commitment was not so much politics as it was helping people.

"He set a standard of performance for those of us who followed in politics," said Panetta, who added that Grunsky's name came up often in the Panetta household. "I can remember his name as a kid."

Grunsky turned down opportunities to run for Congress and statewide office because he wanted to remain active in the Watsonville law firm he founded in 1946, Grunsky, Ebey, Farrar & Howell. It is now the county's largest private law firm, and Grunsky continued practicing until 1989.

"Don had an incredible life," said Grunsky's longtime

law partner and friend, Fred Ebey. "He was one of the extremely rare individuals who was able to be an outstanding legislator, outstanding trial lawyer, and have a strong marriage."

A native of San Francisco, Grunsky received a bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley in 1936, and a law degree from Boalt Hall in 1939. He practiced law in the Bay Area for two years before entering the U.S. Navy during World War II. Grunsky was released from the service as a lieutenant commander in 1945.

Grunsky is survived by his wife of 56 years, Mary Lou Grunsky.

Services are pending.

Sentinel wire services contributed to this article.