



HR0377

LRB096 12699 KXB 26682 r

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HOUSE RESOLUTION

2           WHEREAS, The members of the Illinois House of  
3 Representatives are saddened to learn of the death of former  
4 Chicago Alderman Leon Despres, who passed away May 6, 2009; and

5           WHEREAS, He was born Leon Mathis Despres on February 2,  
6 1908, the son of Samuel and Henrietta Rubovitz Despres; the  
7 family moved from the South Side to Hyde Park when Mr. Despres  
8 was three; he started at Hyde Park High School, but his mother  
9 decided he wasn't working hard enough, so she sent him to  
10 boarding school in Rome and then Paris; Mr. Despres returned to  
11 Hyde Park to attend the University of Chicago, where he was Phi  
12 Beta Kappa; he received his undergraduate degree in 1927 and  
13 his law degree in 1929; and

14           WHEREAS, On September 10, 1931, he married Marian  
15 Alschuler; from 1935 to 1937, he was a trial examiner for the  
16 National Labor Relations Board; he also became a socialist, and  
17 visited exiled Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky in Mexico, a trip  
18 that saw him escorting legendary artist Frida Kahlo to the  
19 movies while her husband, Diego Rivera, painted a portrait of  
20 Despres' wife; and

21           WHEREAS, Mr. Despres acted as general counsel for the  
22 American Civil Liberties Union, Illinois division, from 1948 to

1 1955; he was elected to the City Council in 1955, replacing  
2 Robert E. Merriam; Mr. Despres would tour his ward on his  
3 bicycle meeting constituents; one of those constituents shot  
4 him, twice in the leg, the day after Christmas 1967, Mr.  
5 Despres stayed in the hospital 11 days, and later two teenagers  
6 confessed it had been a holdup attempt; he used the opportunity  
7 to speak out for stricter gun laws and against "poverty, bad  
8 housing, bad schools, bad jobs"; and

9 WHEREAS, He fought bitter election battles in 1955 and  
10 1959; in 1966, he was the only aldermanic candidate endorsed by  
11 both Democrats and Republicans; though he easily could have  
12 been re-elected, Mr. Despres decided not to run in 1975; a  
13 citizens committee in his ward collected 5,000 signatures as a  
14 show of support; and

15 WHEREAS, Mr. Despres was the alderman representing the  
16 South Side neighborhood's 5th Ward from 1955 to 1975; in  
17 retirement, he remained active and was involved in fighting a  
18 high-rise condo in his neighborhood; and

19 WHEREAS, Mr. Despres, alone, voted against the council's  
20 ban on the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s open-occupancy  
21 marches in August 1966; when Mr. Despres opposed the  
22 construction of new Chicago Housing Authority high-rise  
23 buildings, just one alderman sided with him; the buildings

1 would become a monumental failure, sinkholes of crime and  
2 despair that plagued the city for decades; Mr. Despres fought  
3 against discrimination in hospital staff appointments,  
4 cemeteries, and housing; and

5 WHEREAS, Mr. Despres was the first to raise an alarm about  
6 the dangers of lead paint; he drafted the city's first  
7 ordinance establishing a landmarks preservation commission,  
8 and led the fight to save Frank Lloyd Wright's extraordinary  
9 Robie House after the Chicago Theological Seminary announced  
10 plans to demolish the peerless architectural treasure to build  
11 a new dorm; along with Alderman Charles Chew (17th), Mr.  
12 Despres chartered two airplanes to take 184 people to Alabama  
13 to participate in King's famous voting rights march from Selma  
14 to Montgomery in March 1965; he fought official artistic  
15 censorship, once a notorious Chicago hallmark; when the City  
16 Council voted its "unqualified condemnation" of Wright Junior  
17 College for putting James Baldwin's *Another Country* on the  
18 required reading list of a contemporary literature class, Mr.  
19 Despres called the resolution the "most degrading kind of  
20 censorship...this body will make Chicago the laughingstock of  
21 the country by lynching a book,"; only two other aldermen voted  
22 with him; and

23 WHEREAS, The same year, he tried to end funding to the city  
24 panel in charge of determining which movies could be shown in

1 Chicago; he also fought to abolish the police department's  
2 secret spying unit; on a variety of issues, Mr. Despres  
3 expressed a vision approaching prescience; in 1965, he urged  
4 the Chicago Housing Authority to consider low-rise,  
5 scattered-site housing; and

6 WHEREAS, Mr. Despres served as council parliamentarian  
7 from 1979 to 1987, quitting after the all-night session naming  
8 Eugene Sawyer as mayor; he also served on the Chicago Plan  
9 Commission during the same period; and

10 WHEREAS, Over the last decade, he returned to private  
11 practice; his memoirs, *Challenging the Daley Machine: A Chicago*  
12 *Alderman's Memoir*, written with Kenan Heise, were published in  
13 2005 by Northwestern University Press; and

14 WHEREAS, He is survived by his children, Linda and Robert;  
15 therefore, be it

16 RESOLVED, BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE  
17 NINETY-SIXTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, that we  
18 mourn, along with his family and friends, the passing of former  
19 Chicago Alderman Leon Despres; and be it further

20 RESOLVED, That a suitable copy of this resolution be  
21 presented to the family of Leon Despres as a symbol of our

1 respect and sincere sympathy.