



Jim Flaherty's dedication to disabled people lives on at Abilities Centre

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Jim Flaherty had a tear in his eye when the first shovels of earth were turned to start construction of the Abilities Centre in his town of Whitby, Ont.

The former finance minister had been working for years to create a place where people of all ages and abilities could take part in community events – from wheelchair basketball and Taekwondo to music and drama.



video

[Video: Flaherty moved by special needs children](#)

Mr. Flaherty “was the main architect. This was his idea, this was his concept,” Leo Plue, executive director of the centre, said in a telephone interview Monday.

On Tuesday, members of the public are invited to the same Abilities Centre, which opened in 2012, to pay their respects to Mr. Flaherty in advance of a state funeral at a downtown Toronto church on Wednesday. He died of a heart attack last Thursday at age 64, a month after stepping down from cabinet in anticipation of returning to the private sector.

“We’re getting ready for huge crowds,” said Mr. Plue, who is married to the sister of Mr. Flaherty’s wife, Christine Elliott, a provincial politician and member of the Abilities Centre’s board. “The community loved Jim Flaherty and they will come out in droves.”

Mr. Flaherty took a very personal interest in helping the disabled. His son John, one of three triplet boys born in 1991, has a mental disability and other health challenges he developed as an infant when he was stung by an insect and contracted encephalitis.

The former finance minister fought back tears in 2011 when he announced a review of his government’s Registered Disability Savings Plan, which helps parents of special-needs children put savings aside to care for their kids after the mother and father die.

A dozen years before that, he brought together a group of folks in Whitby, including Mr. Plue who was then a high-school principal, and told them about his vision for a recreation centre that would be accepting of children like John.

“He wanted a place where people would feel welcome and feel a part of the community,” Mr. Plue said. “And it’s become everything that Jim and his wife, Christine, wanted it to be and believed it should be.”

Mr. Flaherty prompted opposition suspicions in 2008 when he announced that the government was creating a \$45-million fund to improve accessibility for the disabled. That fund seemed tailor-made for the Abilities Centre in his own riding, which received a third of the money.

Mr. Flaherty recused himself from discussions about the fund at the cabinet table – but the money was clearly helpful to the centre’s construction, as was another \$3-million he obtained from the Ontario government in 2002 when he was the provincial finance minister.

He saw the need for a place where young people, elderly people and people with challenges could enjoy each other’s company while learning new skills and taking part in physical activities, said Whitby Mayor Pat Perkins. “Such a place exists now and it’s just unbelievable,” Ms. Perkins said.

Mr. Flaherty loved the Abilities Centre, Mr. Plue said. “And not in a boastful way, prideful way – but he was very much proud of what it was and what the staff are doing, and proud of the fact that it was in his community and that he had some part to play in it.”

Mr. Plue said he spoke often with Mr. Flaherty about his political life and the job he was doing in Ottawa. “I said, ‘Other people can do budgets. You did this centre. This is going to be your legacy.’ And he agreed.”



Video

[Video: Remembering Jim Flaherty, the politician, the advocate, the father](#)



Video

[Video: Jim Flaherty was a controversial but cordial finance minister: Ibbitson](#)