

High Country Conservation Center honors former commissioner for lifelong dedication to sustainability

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Karn Stiegelmeier is pictured Wednesday, March 9, 2022. The High Country Conservation Center honored Stiegelmeier with its 2022 Tim McClure Lifetime Achievement award.

Joel Wexler/For the Summit Daily News

A message scribbled on a sandwich board more than 50 years ago, during a march to commemorate the first-ever Earth Day, spearheaded Karn Stiegelmeier's activism career.

"There's something in the air that shouldn't be there," the makeshift sign read, as she held it above a crowd of teenage environmentalists. It was around the same time that President Richard Nixon formed the Environmental Protection Agency. Stiegelmeier felt called to enact change.

"From that moment on, I just have felt committed to the environment," Stiegelmeier said.

On Friday, March 4, the High Country Conservation Center honored Stiegelmeier's lifelong commitment to the environment with the Tim McClure Lifetime Achievement Award. The recognition was part of the center's annual Green Scene awards during the Party for the Planet fundraiser.

Since that day in high school, Stiegelmeier went on to infuse her love for the environment in everything she did. In college, she was among the first class of students to receive a degree in environmental conservation from the University of Colorado in 1976. She spent some time in Northern California, where she participated in environmental education programs, before moving back to Colorado.

After landing in Summit County, her passion for environmental activism took off. She served as the director of Friends of the Lower Blue River, chair of the Blue River Group of the Sierra Club, a board member of the Continental Divide Land Trust and the mountain representative on the I-70 Corridor Collaborative Effort Team, all before landing her spot on the Summit Board of County Commissioners in 2009, where she championed a foundational water rights agreement.

"When we're looking for the recipient of that award, we're really looking for that big picture leadership," said Rachel Zerowin, community programs director for the nonprofit. "When you look at Karn's track record, she fits the bill perfectly."

Although Stiegelmeier has spent her career dedicated to environmental issues across the board, she took a special interest in the protection of Colorado's rivers and lakes during her time as commissioner.

An avid kayaker, Stiegelmeier wanted to know what she could do to preserve Colorado rivers.



An old photo shows Karn Stiegelmeier during one of many kayaking trips. Stiegelmeier's passion for Colorado waterways helped her spearhead the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement.

High Country Conservation Center/Courtesy photo

As commissioner, she spearheaded [the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement](#), which solved long standing disputes over water territory between Denver Water and the Clinton Ditch Reservoir & Co., which ultimately meant more water for Summit County and the Colorado River Basin.

“Karn has lived and worked by the principle that water is the lifeblood of our community,” Commissioner Josh Blanchard said in a video that was played during the Green Scene awards ceremony.

Throughout her term as commissioner, which ended in 2021, Stiegelmeier said she’s learned a lot about what creates change. However, the most valuable lesson is in the power of collaboration.

“You can’t just do it on your own,” she said. “The only way to really get things done is to collaborate with others.”



Stiegelmeier was one of five Green Scene award recipients, who were recognized for their commitment to sustainability and protecting the environment.

The nonprofit awarded Patti Bowers and Joy Klein, two Frisco Elementary School teachers, with the Outstanding Community Advocates recognition. Bowers and Klein helped establish the Green Team at the school, which has students participating in activities that promote environmental sustainability every week.

The Pad, a new boutique hotel and hostel in Silverthorne, received one of two Sustainable Business Champion awards for its commitment to sustainability throughout the business's development. Hostel owners Lynn and Rob Baer worked to divert as many materials from the existing structures on The Pad property from being sent to the landfill.

The nonprofit also awarded Ken Hilt, fleet manager for the town of Breckenridge, with the Sustainable Business Champion recognition. Hilt has dedicated his time to create an electrification plan for the town's vehicle fleet.

"These awards celebrate the fact that people can have big influence and make big change within their network," Zerowin said.

Stiegelmeier hopes people are inspired to continue fighting climate change after hearing about her work and that of the other recipients.

"We all need to work hard now," she said.

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