

Watsonville - Gov 4 & Politics **Conversation with a mayor**

McFarren hopes for changes

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

R.P.

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Watsonville's new mayor said he ran for the City Council with the idea that he could "get some things changed."

Beginning today, Todd McFarren will have the opportunity to see if he can make the changes he has in mind, which range from improving the city's race relations to having better plans for the city's growth and setting a broad-based committee to deal with the city's housing problems.

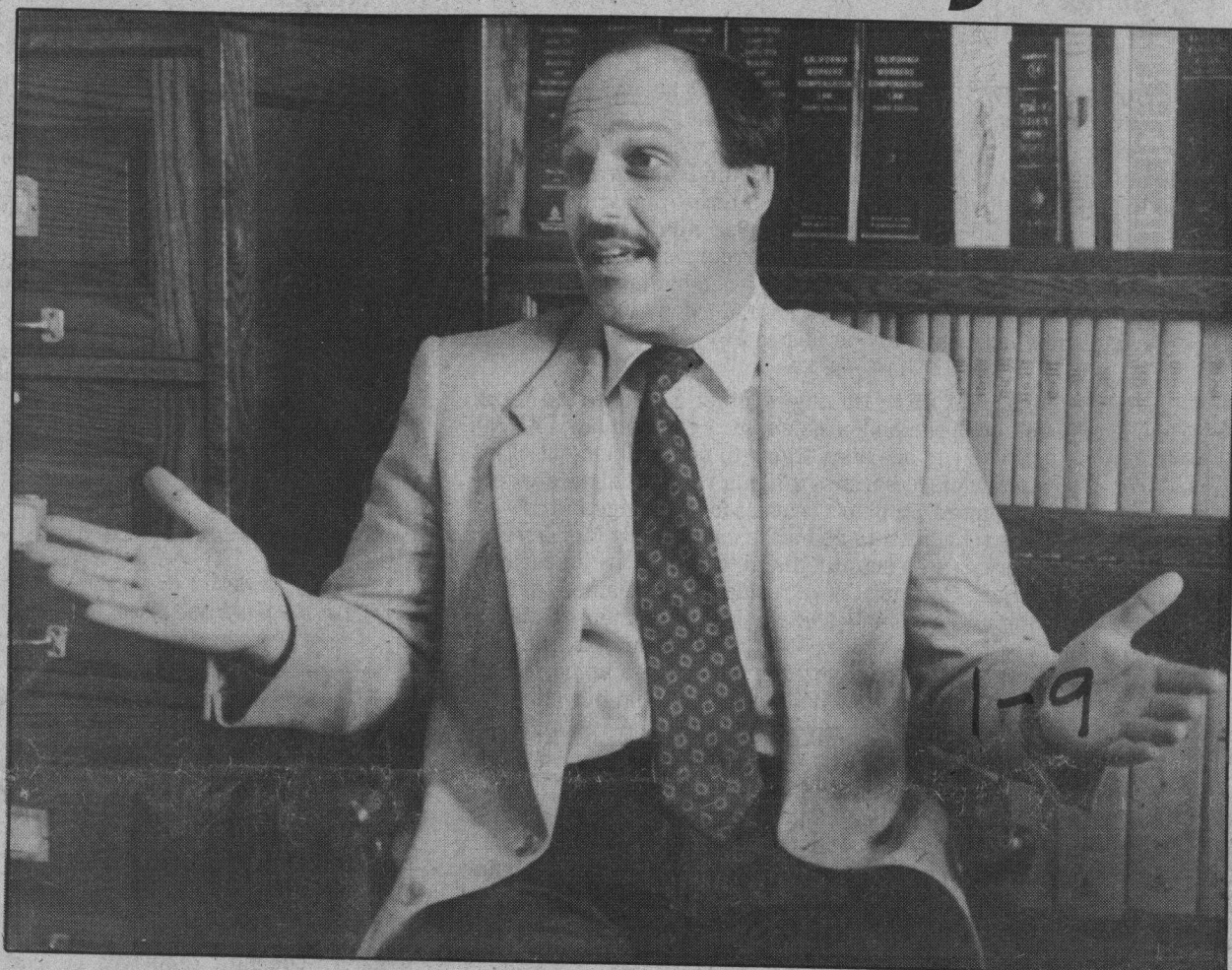
McFarren, a 39-year-old lawyer, was elected to the City Council Dec. 5 and chosen mayor by his fellow council members a week later. Tonight is the first meeting with a full agenda of action for the council members, all elected in the city's new district system. Only former Mayor Betty Murphy remains from the old council.

McFarren is taking over the mayor's spot at a critical time. The city is trying to rebuild from the Oct. 17 earthquake, which caused extensive damage, yet with a tighter budget than in the recent past. It's also a new era politically — the first council chosen under the district system imposed on Watsonville after a successful lawsuit charging the old at-large system diluted the voting power of Latinos.

In an interview at his law office on Freedom Boulevard last week, McFarren said he wanted to get away from the attitude of past councils that government was a simple thing.

"It's an attitude that carried over from the '50s," McFarren said. The council, he said, "is no longer something where you can (simply) go to a meeting twice a month."

City government is becoming more complex, he said, and council members must realize that their decisions have impacts elsewhere, and that decisions in



Todd McFarren doesn't mind the 'liberal' label.

Mike McCollum

On the way to the top job

Watsonville's mayors have generally been longtime residents of the community, and if not conservative, they certainly didn't carry the "liberal" tag.

The new mayor, Todd McFarren is a 39-year-old Ohio native who didn't take an interest in politics until his mid-20s and didn't arrive in the Pajaro Valley until 1983. Political observers usually refer to McFarren as a liberal, and he doesn't dispute the label.

McFarren grew up in Berea,

Ohio, and went into the Marines in 1968, right after high school. At the time, he recalled, he was more interested in sports than books.

McFarren fought in Vietnam and became a sergeant. He sees his Marine duty as a "growth experience," but now feels U.S. involvement in the war was a mistake. He has a permanent record of his Marine service — a tattoo on his right arm — which he laughs about now.

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other areas can affect Watsonville.

In only three weeks on the job, McFarren has found being mayor takes time.

"I've found a lot of people call me about problems," said McFarren, who said he's spent a lot of

time studying the issues he will soon be facing.

McFarren has a half-dozen proposals on today's agenda, including formation of committees on housing and human relations.

"Watsonville has an image of

poor race relations," McFarren said. "To some extent I think it's an unfair image. I didn't see racism in the earthquake-relief effort," although there were allegations by some that it was going on.

McFarren said he wants to see a committee, made up of different segments of the community, that could head off problems before they become major.

Better race relations, McFarren said, "could translate to bucks" if shoppers perceived a better city image. Among the mayor's suggestions for the downtown is a *mercado*, a Mexican market, in the downtown, a concept that's been talked about from time to time for a number of years.

McFarren said he also wants to "get all the players together" in a task force to deal with the city's housing problems, which were exacerbated by the earthquake.

"I want some developers in this

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group," he said. "They're the ones who can actually do it (build housing)."

McFarren said he believes developers have an obligation to provide some affordable housing, but he acknowledges that the builders are entitled to a profit.

"It has to pencil out for these guys," he said.

A number of other cities and counties have "inclusionary" ordinances, which require developers of large projects to make a certain percentage of their units (usually between 15 percent and 25 percent) "affordable." The affordable units are usually not quite as fancy as the other units and are sold to people who meet certain low- or moderate-income standards. Watsonville currently has no set policy on affordable housing.

McFarren also endorses city efforts to get more grants for subsidized housing — apartments for the poor, who pay less than the market rate for rent, with the balance picked up by the state or federal government.

McFarren said he wants to see the developer who builds affordable housing get some financial breaks, as well as some priority.

"If one guy wants to come in and build some \$500,000 homes and another guy wants to build some \$500,000 homes with some affordable housing, the second guy should have priority," he said.

The new mayor said the city's policies on growth need to be better spelled out, so everybody will know the rules.

"We need to make it consistent," he said.

The city is in the process of drawing a new general plan, a sort of blueprint for the city's future development. The final recommendations on the plan should be before the council this year.

Under the new district system, McFarren was chosen mayor by his fellow council members, rather than the mayor running separately, as was done in the old system.

"In a sense I feel a greater responsibility to make the council work well together, because they've chosen me," McFarren said.

His term is for one year, after which he'll be a regular council member for the remainder of his

four-year term. McFarren said he expects the city to face some difficult decisions, especially on financial matters.

Last June, the City Council passed a 4 percent utility tax, but in December, voters recommended that the council drop that tax at the end of the fiscal year in June.

McFarren said it appears the council will either have to impose

a tax of some sort or reduce city staff. The budget, he said, "will be a real crunch for the council."

McFarren, who defeated incumbent Gwen Carroll for the council seat in District 4, the Alta Vista-Arthur Road area, said he didn't expect to win.

"I was pleasantly surprised," McFarren said. "I'm learning the role of mayor. It's a lot of responsibility."

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After the service, McFarren spent two years at a community college, then enrolled at Kent State University in Ohio, where four students were shot to death by National Guardsmen during a 1970 anti-war demonstration. McFarren was in Vietnam at the time.

While at Kent State, McFarren first became involved in politics, working on an unsuccessful effort to prevent construction of a gym on the site where the students had been shot.

After earning a degree in philosophy in 1976, McFarren said he went to Mexico City, "where you could get a job teaching English without knowing Spanish." He said he is now fluent in Spanish, but not fully bilingual.

After a couple of years in Mexico, McFarren moved to San Mateo, where he ran a group home for delinquent boys, which he said was "really rewarding, but ... a burn-out job." He made what he calls a "late choice" to go into law and entered the law school at the University of San Francisco.

At USF, he was active in student politics in the law school and worked on the campaign of Nancy Walker, who won a spot on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

When he graduated in 1983, McFarren decided to start a practice in Watsonville, which he had visited while he was a student. He said he liked the idea that Watsonville was "a working town."

"It reminded me of my home town," he said.

McFarren, who specializes in workers' compensation cases, set up his first practice in the Tuttle Mansion, and "just slowly started meeting people," he said.

"I didn't even have a car at first," he said.

He attended various community meetings and met Yolanda Fernandez, whom he later married, at a session aimed at reducing gang violence.

"I started to get involved in

(local) Democratic party politics," McFarren said. "It wasn't hard to break in."

He worked on Juan Morales's unsuccessful campaign for City Council in 1987. Four years ago, McFarren was nominated to the Metropolitan Transit District board of directors by Gary Patton, a Santa Cruz County supervisor who champions liberal and environmentalist causes.

McFarren said he's heard accusations that he is "in Gary Patton's pocket, which is pretty ridiculous."

"In a way," McFarren said, "it's sort of insulting to me. He's got his constituency in Santa Cruz and I've got mine in Watsonville."

McFarren said he and Patton probably have some similarities on community growth patterns. McFarren said he isn't against growth, as long as it's managed properly.

The mayor said he's a liberal in the sense "that we should expand the political franchise" to get more people involved in the system. Doing that, he said, would make the government more legitimate in the eyes of the people and more effective.

McFarren said he believes in government "letting people do what they want as long as it doesn't affect other people."

While some liberals "want to throw money into social programs," McFarren said government can help to some degree, but can't be expected to fund every program.

The current council appears to be a 4-3 liberal majority, with McFarren, Lowell Hurst, Parr Eves and Oscar Rios in the majority and Johnny Kacsmaryk, Paul Milladin and Betty Murphy in the minority.

McFarren said he didn't think the voting would always go along those lines.

"I think more times than not Betty and I will vote together," he said. "She's kind of a liberal in a way. It's good she's on the council."

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McFarren and his wife live on Claremont Street, just inside the city limits. They have three children, Ian, 3, and Winnie, 10 months, and Erica, 13, Yolanda McFarren's daughter from a previous marriage.