

City Council

The accidental councilman

John Mahaney's long ride comes to respected end

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JOHAN MAHANEY NEVER planned to be on the City Council.

"I said, 'Hey, take someone else, I don't need this,' " he recalls.

This week, after 14 years in office and two terms as mayor, Mahaney admits he got hooked.

"It's really crazy. It gets in your blood," he said.

The 65-year-old orthopedic surgeon's most visible legacy is neighborhood parks that dot the city, but in the past four years his efforts have focused on earthquake recovery and rebuilding downtown.

"The most important contribution I or any present council member would be proud of is rebuilding the heart of an earthquake-devastated city," said Mahaney.

City Councilman Louis Rittenhouse, who was elected two years ago, says he will miss serving with Mahaney.

"John's just a wonderful man, and he's really been an incredible resource for me," said Rittenhouse.

He said Mahaney brought continuity to the council, and



Dr. John Mahaney and his wife, Billie, stroll through his favorite city park at Frederick Street.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

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always held the welfare of the community as his most important priority.

Mahaney first gained his seat on the council by appointment in November 1973, succeeding Al Castagnola. Castagnola had quit after a stormy hearing on a proposed Lighthouse Point Convention Center.

AT THE TIME, Mahaney was considered "acceptable to both the "liberal" and "conservative" sides of the council, which were philosophically split 3-3 at the time.

"They thought I was neutral," he laughs, because in recent years he has been dubbed a conservative, although he calls himself moderate.

"I think John has been a dedicated representative of the more conservative tendency in Santa Cruz," said Bert Muhly, a progressive former mayor who once went to Mahaney to get a broken shoulder fixed.

Times have changed since Mahaney joined the council. The work that used to take less than an hour a day, now consumes more than 20 hours a week for the token pay of \$500 a month.

"My income certainly suffered, but that's not why you do this," he said.

Mahaney's votes were usually with the majority when he first came on the council. He was elected twice more before 1983, when he decided to take a break from politics. Four years later he successfully re-entered the fray, but this time the lifelong Republican found himself a minority on a liberal council.

"This last term has definitely been the most frustrating," he says. "I don't think there has been the give and take we used to have."

He decided to not seek another term earlier this year, saying it was time for someone else to do the job. He plans to continue work on his 100-year-old home, participate in community events and spend time with his family.

EVEN THOUGH Mahaney won't regularly attend weekly City Council meetings after this Tuesday, his commitment to the city is clear when he talks about what he hopes his successors will do.

He is vitally concerned about the lack of new water sources, thinks it is of utmost importance that an eastern access road to the university be built, and is eager to see the hotel and conference center that is currently being discussed.

Coast Commercial Bank president Harvey Nickelson says Mahaney's views have helped businesses.

"John Mahaney has been very supportive of the creation of jobs in our community," Nickelson said. "He's been very supportive of those projects that would bring jobs and economic stability to our community."

His early achievements include getting local roads and sidewalks paved, and supporting the transit system and working to control

growth at UC Santa Cruz. But his primary focus when he first joined the council was developing parks throughout the city.

"Frederick Street Park was one of my proudest achievements," he says, describing how the owner had hoped to build 300 to 600 housing units on the site, but the council, with Mahaney's support, took over the property by eminent domain.

THAT FIRST skateboard ramp was awesome," he laughs. "I was healing a lot of broken arms that first week, before we dug it up and built it safer. I kind of worried about a possible conflict of interest."

During his recent term, Mahaney was placed on less prominent committees — including the library and the wharf — and his opinion on major issues rarely prevailed.

He opposed the anti-bias law, which was subsequently passed, and has voted in favor of several developments which were rejected by the majority of the council.

Despite his minority votes, Mahaney failed to draw substantial wrath from the

progressive community.

"I think that John's a very nice man, even though he didn't quite understand a lot of the reality of what we all have to deal with," said lesbian activist Merrie Schaller, a proponent of the anti-bias law. "As a straight, white man of his age, that's to be expected, and I'm actually sorry to see him go."

BILLIE MAHANEY, a nurse who works part time at UC Santa Cruz and the Boardwalk, has been at her husband's side throughout his political career.

"He has really included me," she said. "He tells me what he's doing and I tell him what I'm doing — we're just yacking all the time."

Both Mahaneys say perks of the job have included traveling and making friends from sister cities around the world.

There was the time they took the Dalai Lama, and his entourage of robe-clad monks, to the Boardwalk.

"These monks were riding around on the bumper cars with their shaved heads and orange robes," said Billie Mahaney. "The Dalai Lama didn't go on any

rides, but he still got a kick out of it."

Born in Owosso, Mich., Mahaney and his brothers were raised by their mother. His father, a doctor, died when Mahaney was 2 years old.

He worked his way through college and medical school, studying at Michigan State University, George Washington University School of Medicine, Washington, D.C., the U.S. Public Health Service hospitals in San Francisco and New York, and Shriners' Hospital for Crippled Children in Salt Lake City.

MAHANEY CAME to Santa Cruz in 1960, when he joined the fledgling staff at the Santa Cruz Medical Center as an orthopedist. He retired from the clinic in March, and there are few in town who haven't either sought his medical expertise, or his assistance as an elected official.

"I think John probably holds the record for years in office, but you have to be a masochist to really aspire to such a record," said Muhly, Mahaney's former political rival.