

Watsonville — Gov't + Politics

Watsonville's year of change

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It can be said, without exaggeration, that Watsonville will never be the same after the events of 1989.

In October, an earthquake measuring 7.1 on the Richter scale destroyed many of the town's historic downtown buildings, ruined scores of houses, including blocks of beautiful Victorian homes, cracked Watsonville's hidden housing crisis wide open and thrust the city briefly into the spotlight of the national media.

Less than two months later, the town went through another major upheaval — an election held under a court-ordered district-election system, which changed Watsonville politics overnight.

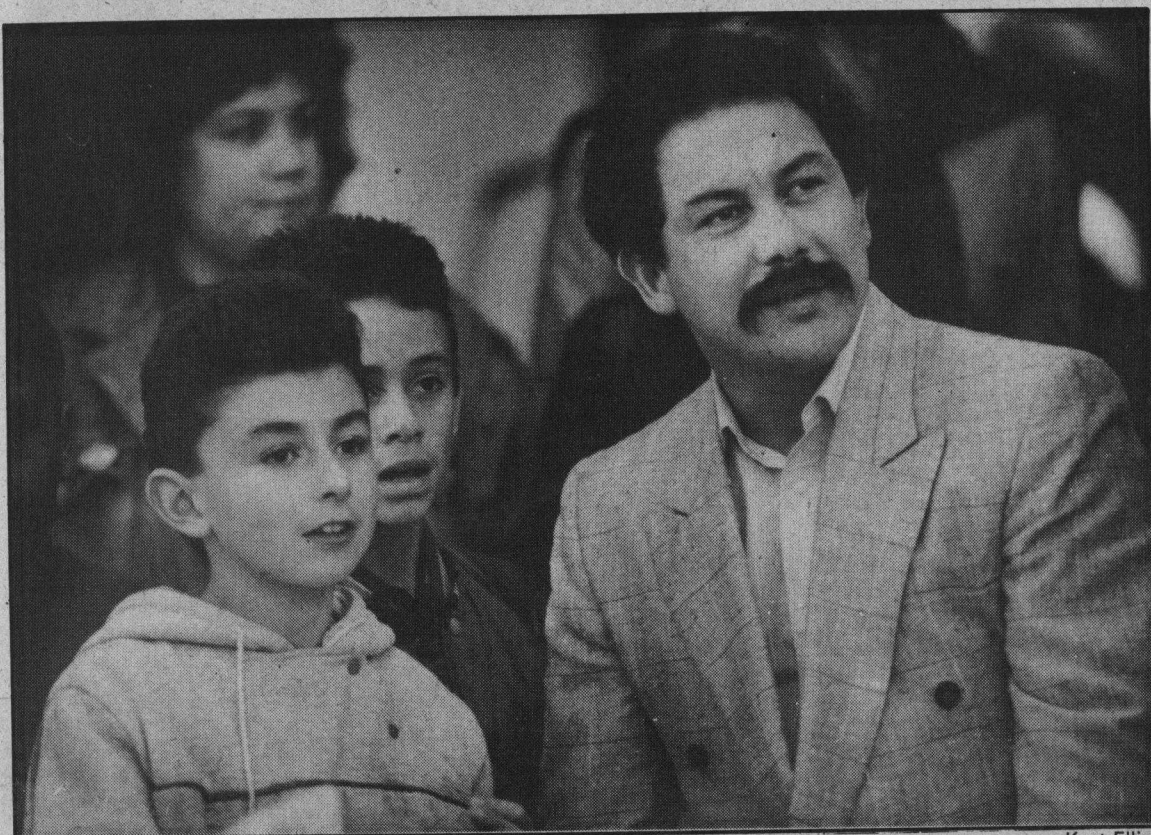
Voters went to the polls Dec. 5 and, for the first time in the city's history, elected a liberal majority to the council. Only one member of the old City Council — Betty Murphy — was re-elected. The election also put into place a mobile-home rent-control ordinance that altered the existing law in favor of the coach-owners.

Unlike the earthquake, which hit the city with no warning, the election and the lawsuit that preceded it were issues the city tangled with most of the year.

In January, the City Council voted to petition the Supreme Court to hear an appeal of a decision on the suit brought against the city by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Earlier, an appellate court judge had found in favor of MALDEF — that the at-large election system discriminated against Latino voters.

Then-City Attorney Don Haile advised the council to make the appeal, telling them that the city's insurance company might refuse to cover court costs if the city didn't exhaust the appeal process.



Kurt Ellison

The election of Oscar Rios symbolized Watsonville's changes.

As it turned out, the company, Republic Insurance, of Texas, has agreed to pay the first \$1 million of court costs. But the city's second insurer, Granite State Insurance, has refused to cover the rest, inspiring yet another lawsuit. The city plans to file suit against Granite at the end of the year, and that'll be a story for 1990.

The council voted 4 to 3 to make the appeal, with Betty Murphy, Joe Marsano, Gwen Carroll and Rex Clark voting to make the appeal, and Vido Deretich, Tony Campos and Dennis Osmer voting against the move.

While Watsonville waited to hear whether the court would review the case, things were proceeding as usual for the city's May election.

A petition drive to put a mobile-home rent-control ordinance on the ballot was started

by coach owners in the city's mobile-home parks. The drive was halted when the city indicated that it would consider passing its own rent-control law.

Two bond issues that would supply \$7 million for the upkeep of city streets and parks were also being readied for the ballot.

Seven candidates announced their plans to run in the at-large election: Cruz Gomez, Floyd Pereira Jr., Rebecca Garcia, Todd McFarren, Luis De La Cruz, Jeffrey Solinas and Gwen Carroll.

Then, on March 20, the election was called off. The U. S. Supreme Court had refused to review the case, letting the appellate court decision stand.

The appellate court order required what MALDEF wanted: Two of the city's seven districts would be 75 percent to 80 percent Hispanic. After negotiations

between the city and MALDEF, the city council agreed to have the mayor selected by the council. In the past, Watsonville's mayor was chosen by the voters, separately from the other council seats.

Also in March, the council passed a mobile-home rent-control ordinance. According to that law's supporters, the final version was arrived at after weeks of negotiations between the city, park owners and home owners. According to its detractors, however, the law was a give-away to park owners. Those who had dropped the earlier petition drive swore to pick it up again and place it on the ballot for the November election.

Some changes in key city offices, however, didn't wait for the elections.

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In February, Terry Medina, then a captain at the Watsonville Police Department, was appointed police chief by City Manager John Radin. Medina took over for Ray Belgard, chief for six years, who retired at the end of 1988.

Medina had come to the Watsonville force from the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office as captain seven years earlier.

City Attorney Don Haile had also announced plans to retire after 17 years with the city in the previous fall. Luis Hernandez, who had been associate city attorney in El Centro, replaced him in June.

A third official, Planning Director Bud Carney, also went out this year.

Unlike Haile and Belgard, Carney hadn't announced plans to retire — he was fired by City Manager John Radin after the two squared off at a City Council meeting in September.

Although Radin refused at the time to comment on why he'd fired Carney, Carney was less hesitant to talk about the situation.

Charging that Radin was "totally out of control as an administrator" and acting in a "bizarre and irresponsible manner," Carney contended that he was fired because he had opposed Radin too many times on planning issues.

Among the last things the two had tangled on was a proposed zoning-change decision on the so-called Landmark Property, west of Main Street. Radin had proposed making the change without an environmental impact report. Carney insisted that one be done.

Also at issue was Radin's decision to eliminate an assistant planning director's position held by Doug Spinelli. Spinelli spent half his time overseeing the city's housing-rehabilitation programs, and Carney said at the time that eliminating Spinelli's position would be a signal to the state and federal governments, which provide money to the city for such programs, that Watsonville wasn't serious about rehab. Radin said he was letting Spinelli go because the funds for his position had run out.

Carney and Spinelli have both threatened to sue the city. Carney said last week that he expects his suit to be filed soon. The filing had been put off because the earthquake had destroyed the offices of his lawyer, Carney said.

Radin's action led then-Councilman Dennis Osmer to call for his resignation.

Osmer accused Radin's administration of failures in downtown redevelopment, expansion of the city dump and meeting wastewater treatment standards. He also said that the planning department had been left in shambles since the firing of Carney and elimination of Spinelli's position.

Radin in turn accused Osmer of political posturing. Osmer had already announced that he wouldn't be running for council in November, because he was planning to run for county supervisor in 1990.

Osmer didn't find support for his move on the council. After the Dec. 5 election, however, Radin

work on getting the city back together. The election was postponed until Dec. 5.

Because of the earthquake, City Clerk Lorraine Washington had predicted a low turnout out — about 30 percent — at the polls.

But interest in the election was high: Forty-five percent of registered voters came to the polls to make history by electing a liberal majority to the council. The rent-control measure and all the charter amendments also passed. The advisory measure on the utility-users' tax was given a thumbs-down by voters.

In District 2, the downtown, one of the two heavily Latino districts,

Then came the quake. With hundreds homeless, many others without heat or electricity, businesses shut down and roads closed, the election suddenly didn't seem so important.

announced that he would be stepping down some time next year.

Meanwhile, 14 measures had made their way onto the November ballot. Among them were 12 amendments to the city charter designed to bring the charter into conformance with the district-elections system and other existing codes. Several of the measures disbanded the city's boards and commissions or increased their size from five to seven members.

The mobile-home rent-control ordinance and an advisory measure on a 4-percent utility-users' tax implemented by the city earlier in the year in an effort to make up a \$900,000 shortfall in the budget were also on the ballot.

A voter-registration drive began in early September, and by late September, campaigning was heating up in each of the districts.

Then came the quake. With hundreds homeless, many others without heat or electricity, businesses shut down and roads closed, the election, which was being watched around the country as a test-case for district elections, suddenly didn't seem quite so important. Polling places were damaged, city staff had been diverted to other duties, and many of the people requesting absentee ballots were no longer living in the same places. Many of the candidates dropped their campaigning to

cannery workers organizer Oscar Rios beat opponents Dan Dodge and Ray Hoffman, becoming the second Latino in the history of Watsonville to be elected to the Council.

In District 1, the West Side, community organizer Cruz Gomez, one of the plaintiffs in the MALDEF suit, lost to frozen-food executive Paul Milladin.

Dodge and Gomez at first leveled charges against Rios, saying that he won the District 2 election in part by registering non-citizens and that they would challenge the votes. Rios denied the charges.

Later, they decided to let the issue drop, but Gomez, who lost to Milladin by 34 votes, asked for a recount in her district. The recount was held Dec. 27 and there was no change in the result.

Making up the council's liberal majority are Rios, Todd McFarren, Parr Eves and Lowell Hurst, although Hurst said he sees himself as an independent.

The conservative bloc is comprised of former mayor Murphy, Milladin and Johnny Kacsmaryk.

At the first meeting of the new City Council, the four installed McFarren as mayor and Rios as vice mayor. The council held a subsequent meeting to appoint new members to the city's boards and commissions, with each council member making one appointment to each body.