

Chamber of Commerce divided over whether to get political

By PAUL BEATTY
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — "Do not go gentle into that 'socialist' night," the retired attorney poetized to the Chamber of Commerce and guests at a Holiday Inn luncheon late in April.

His speech was billed as the "setting of the ideological underpinnings of a campaign to roll back the political left in Santa Cruz."

It was booked by some members who want to prod the chamber into open opposition to the leftwing majority on the City Council and the liberal influence of Supervisor Gary Patton in county politics.

The speaker was Frank O'Connell, an Irish-American with a gift of gab and a career as a labor relations attorney for corporate business behind him. He lives retired in Aptos now.

"It's the job of the chamber to oppose the left and it is fatal for the chamber to mute its criticism."

Rotkin and company in the city and Patton and company in the county are sharing CED's aim and the 'Campaign for Economic Democracy' is 'socialism' by another name," O'Connell told the chamber's Governmental Affairs Committee. CED was founded by Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda to turn government over to the communities.

"And, Energy Future shares CED's aim," O'Connell went on. Energy Future is a local non-profit group that wants to wean the world away from PG&E.

"What we see going on inside the chamber is a little frightening," Michael Rotkin says.

He is one of two socialists on the City Council and along with socialist Mayor Bruce Van Allen is

"It's the job of the chamber to oppose the left and it is fatal for the chamber to mute its criticism."

running for re-election in November.

"It appears that the same kind of attack that's being launched against Energy Future, county Supervisor Gary Patton and us is being launched against the local business leadership in the chamber."

"I expect that leadership will feel as insulted as the rest of us. Perhaps more so, in being lumped in with us," Rotkin said.

The councilman's response was met with near awe by O'Connell, who said, "That's truly Machiavelian. That guy, Rotkin, is a coalition builder from way back."

O'Connell was invited to speak by Tim Morgan, a local attorney and Republican Party worker with clout here and at the state level. Morgan's a member of Gov. George Deukmejian's transition team, which acts as the screening committee for state appointments from this area.

Morgan is chairman of the Governmental Affairs Committee and believes, "The chamber should take a position on local candidate elections because the chamber is a political organization."

"To the same degree that politics is used to bludgeon and shake the market economy, those of us involved in the free market economy must use the political process. The chamber must be political in that sense."

Morgan says his committee "is the political arm of the chamber" and that he's readily using it as a pry bar "to get the chamber off its duff, you might say."

Chamber Executive Officer Lionel Stoloff says he knows "there are people in the chamber who want the chamber to speak out against (left wing) candidates, but from what has transpired so far, it appears they are in the minority."

He says the chamber is energetic in speaking out on the issues to protect free enterprise and local business interests.

"But when has an issue ever run for office," challenges Bob McKenzie, a chamber member who supports Morgan's hardball politics.

He says it comes down to whether the chamber should oppose the left wingers, or continue "to do business with them."

Chamber President Duf Fischer says, "The chamber of commerce represents the business community and the free enterprise system, but it is not a political organization."

He says the chamber is looking into whether it will set up a political action committee to collect and allocate campaign funds.

SEE BACK PAGE

Chamber of Commerce divided

FROM PAGE 1

"The PAC will be completely separate from the chamber and have its own board of directors. There are 25 to 30 chamber PACs in the state and as I understand it they mostly support issues, rather than candidates," Fischer says.

Morgan says the chamber asked his committee to look into PACs and compile the voting records of local politicians and develop a position paper on how well the free enterprise system is working in Santa Cruz.

"It logically follows that what we'll be doing is building a case for free enterprise and the corollary, building a case against the economic direction we have in local politics."

He predicts, "If there is dissension in the chamber (over its political posture) then it will be flushed out when the position paper is considered by the board."

O'Connell's attack on Energy Future wasn't unexpected to John Cohn, one of the group's founders. Already, the conservative government watchdog group, Associates For Good Government, has issued a report critical of the group and O'Connell calls Energy Future's work "error riddled" and its leadership "inept."

Cohn says, "They're viewing this situation in a fashion that is so ideologically narrow that it cripples their ability to see the larger picture."

"They are exuding conspiratorial paranoia about

political influences in this community being channeled through the left when in fact they would do well to look in their own backyard at the outside influence of Westinghouse, Standard Oil and PG&E."

O'Connell told the chamber, "The political agenda in Santa Cruz is that of the left."

"At the state and federal levels, their mechanization is redistribution of wealth. At the local level, their mechanization is redistribution of government power and property rights."

"It is sometimes camouflaged as protecting pristine beauty and sometimes as protecting the environment, but it stems from an implacable hatred of our free enterprise system."

"Socialism means conformity and it cannot tolerate dissent. It hates free enterprise because it can't be controlled, because free enterprise is a planner's nightmare."

"Socialism is wrongheaded; it is destructive of human liberty and the human experience. It leaves 'governing' to the elite. It has always been a failure in everything except trampling on our freedom."

O'Connell's rhetoric isn't going to be that effective in the city of Santa Cruz, says Patton, "because the people aren't that dumb."

"The city of Santa Cruz has been very much interested in finding ways to govern itself in ways that please all the city. All groups are getting involved: the chamber, Westside Neighbors, Energy Future, Downtown Neighbors, Lighthouse Field

activists. It's basic American Democracy in local government."

O'Connell counters, "I put it to you that anyone who says he means to manage and slow down growth and in the next breath says he's not an ideologue either doesn't know what the word means or he's dissembling."

Rotkin says, "It's sort of ironic that O'Connell would accuse us of being dangerous ideologues when that's precisely the kind of label-manufacturing that O'Connell is opening up."

"I think the people who worked on Energy Future and those interested in local control of cable television and those who worked on my campaign for a wide variety of very practical reasons will be deeply insulted by an outsider to the city coming in and suggesting they're mere dupes of some fantastic plot."

O'Connell began his talk to the chamber, saying, "I am indeed an immigrant, but I am not a carpetbagger."

Patton says he is.

"It's very surprising to me that people who live in Aptos — and everyone mentioned in this right wing movement seems to be from mid-county — has such an abiding interest in Santa Cruz."

"What is coming from Aptos is something that is very Aptos: extremist, rightwing ideology."

Of O'Connell's theft of Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night," Patton said, "That is awful. That is awful."