

1982: First Shot for New Coalition

Bob Johnson

In the 1970s a formidable new political coalition grew in the City of Santa Cruz. Tenants, neighborhood activists, students, women, unionists and environmentalists slowly came together to form an overwhelming electoral majority.

When John Laird and Mardi Wormhoudt joined Mike Rotkin and Bruce Van Allen on the City Council late in 1981, that coalition finally took control of City Hall.

Considerable publicity has been given to the fact that Rotkin and Van Allen are the first two Santa Cruz mayors to refer to themselves as "socialist-feminists." Although the label question has made for some interesting news stories, it will not matter much when control of the Council is on the ballot again next November. Most of the people who elected the majority don't care a whole lot about it.

1982 was the first year in memory that a progressive majority had control of Santa Cruz City Hall. The longevity of that new majority will depend on how effective the four Councilmembers are in using the powers of office to further the goals of the rag tag coalition that put them there.

A Public Whipping

There was a hidden agenda item in the election that put Mardi Wormhoudt and John Laird into office. It was not on the ballot and candidates spent fairly little time talking about it, but rent control was a decisive issue in recruiting people and money for the November 1981 city election.

Landlords contributed more than half the \$49,000 used in the campaign of Spiro Mellis, Larry Edler and Betty Davis. Bernie Walp, a youthful political technician for landlord causes, ran that campaign.

On the other side, tenant activists did not lose sight of the fact that a Laird-Wormhoudt victory would mean four people who favored rent control on the seven member Council. That message was clearly stated in a campaign flyer mailed to 5000 tenants in the city.

When the new majority took office, it was already faced with its most difficult political

question yet. The housing crisis was growing worse for many tenants who already could not afford rental units—units which were not available anyway. Four people on the Council had already said they believe rent control is an important part of a solution to the housing problem. But voters in Santa Cruz had already rejected rent control twice and landlords were clearly ready for a third campaign on the issue.

From its first day in control, the new Council majority was faced with the decision of whether to enact rent control, put it on the ballot or stall for a while until the foursome had established a little respectability. That question led to a months-long public spectacle that all four of the Council majority would rather not repeat.

Landlords came to every meeting where the issue might be discussed. And they came in large numbers, with a hostile attitude and



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John Laird and Parents

a willingness to be vocal about it.

The new Council was indecisive, and at times looked inept in finding a solution to the rent control question. Eventually the majority was backed into a political corner where it was charged with being heavy-handed while taking the cautious route of placing rent control on the ballot for the voters to decide.

Landlords ran the most expensive and



Mardi Wormhoudt

technically sophisticated campaign in city history when rent control was on the ballot in June. Coupled with effective use of the charge that the Council had botched the process of putting the issue on the ballot, that campaign beat rent control by more than 2000 votes.

That election gave the new Council a sound whipping on a major issue. And it presented the progressive majority with what remains its most serious political problem.

In the middle 1970s, the turnout at Santa Cruz City Council elections was low. Tenants were conspicuous among those who stayed away from the polls in droves. The hope for rent control had a major effect in bringing out tenants who voted for Rotkin, Van Allen, Wormhoudt and Laird in the last two elections. Will they show up again when Rotkin and Van Allen run for re-election this November?

Although the new majority has strengthened the child discrimination law, funded legal advocacy for renters and initiated a housing task force, the defeat of rent control a third time could reinforce the feeling of many tenants that City Hall doesn't have much to do with things that matter.

Small Things, Big Difference

While rent control has been the most publicized and controversial question in 1982 Santa Cruz City politics, the business of the Council has gone on every two weeks all year. In a series of fairly undramatic decisions, the new majority has done many small things that could make a big difference in convincing the coalition that city politics makes a difference.

During the budget hearings last June, the new majority approved a number of items that would have had little chance in days past. Among them were:

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- \$40,000 for program development through the Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women
- Legal Aid help for tenants and staff time for the Housing Task Force
- Health, daycare and minorities programs
- More support for parks and recreational programs.

The Council has also managed to follow through on a number of other campaign issues with relatively little fanfare.

For years the Zayante Dam has been the major water issue in town and has, at times, symbolized the question of how much we should grow. The Environmental Impact Report, and the dam itself, have been tabled without much controversy.

Until this year, individuals have been allowed to make unlimited financial contributions to the campaigns of City Council candidates. The new majority enacted a law limiting those contributions to \$75.

The Downtown Neighbors have been pushing for a Livable Streets program for years. When the issue came up before the Council last Spring, large crowds turned out to debate the program on both sides. Although changes were made, the most notable



Mike Rotkin and Bruce Van Allen

removal of a diverter at California and Laurel Streets, most of the Livable Streets program is being done.

The Right Next Time?

In the 1981 election, the conservatives had great trouble getting their act together. Local conservatives had enough trouble that they turned the entire campaign over to a political pro who didn't do the kind of job that gets you hired again.

While 1982 was the first year for a progressive majority at city hall, it also saw the revitalization of a more conservative group of activists. In our next issue (January 13), Dispatches will highlight the development of the opposition that will lead the campaign against Rotkin and Van Allen in November.

12/30/82
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