

Sure, he's a socialist — but he's our socialist

mayors

By PAUL BEATTY
Sentinel Staff Writer

He may be a socialist in tennis shoes, but dammit, he's our socialist.

That old saw sums up an attitude that's grown among city hall employees — with some recent slippage among the police — who work with Santa Cruz Mayor Michael Rotkin, a self-proclaimed socialist.

Few if any of his fellow workers share his leftwing political views, but they say they're sharing and benefiting from his sensitive and intelligent approach to government work.

"He respects our intelligence." "He does what he says he'll do." "He's thorough in checking everything out and he works long hours," say the top officials who work alongside him.

During those long hours, it's not unexpected to see the socialist mayor in tennis shoes standing in front of a network camera, or being interviewed by a major newspaper, such as the Los Angeles Times.

Rotkin will remember the recent LA Times' interview and the resulting news article. That was the one that cost him whatever esteem he had among the police.

As Rotkin remembers it, the reporter asked him if it weren't true that the Santa Cruz police were "a terrible bunch" since six of the 61 member force have been charged with police brutality.

Rotkin claims he told the reporter, "No, they're just like any other group: a third are bums, a third are wonderful and a third are waiting to see which way the wind blows."

The Times correctly reported Rotkin's statistical viewpoint of groups, but reported he was only referring to groups of cops.

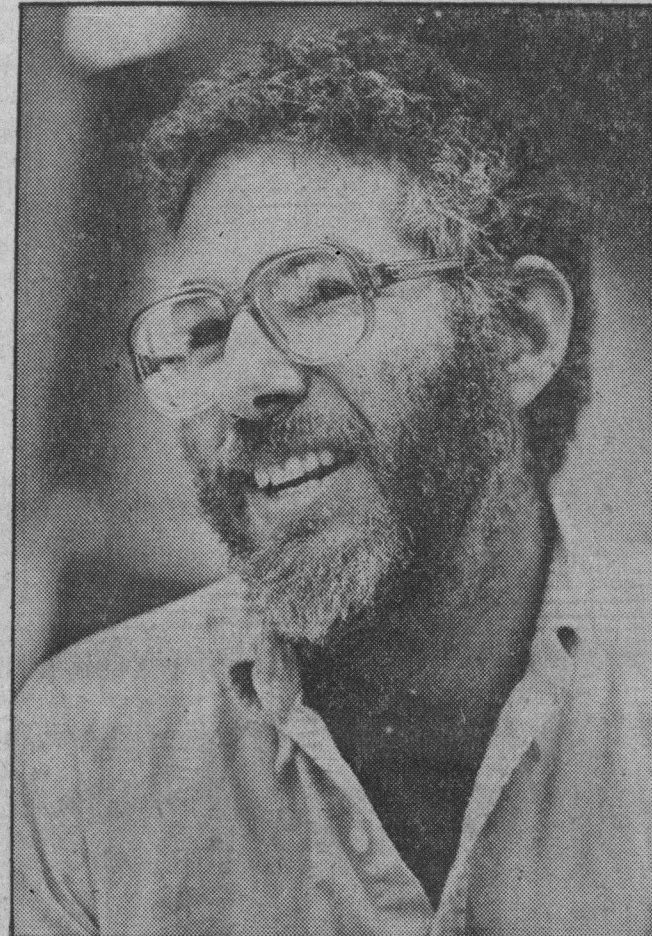
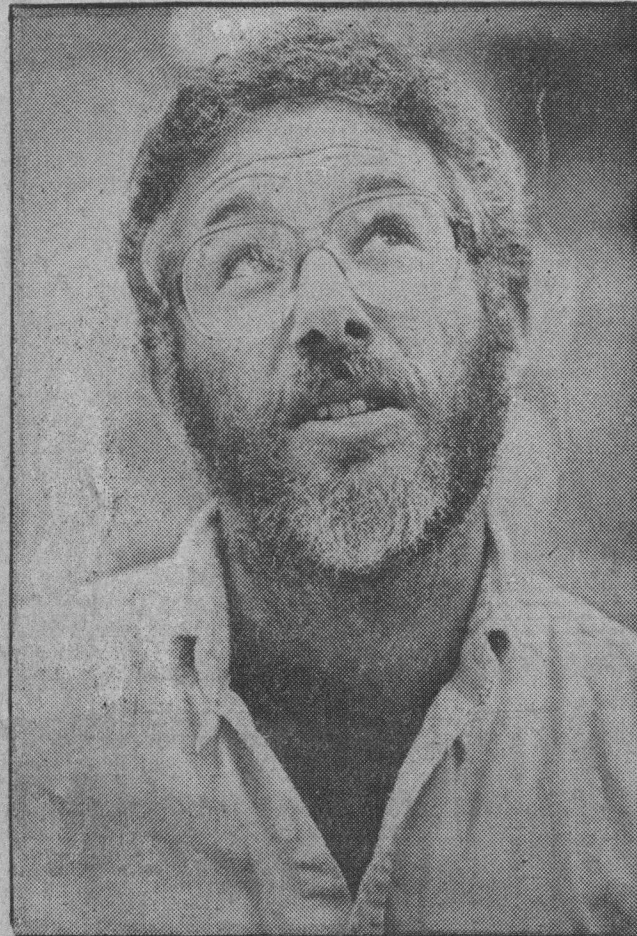
Ever since the police got a look at the article last week, the mayor has been trying to get his tenny out of his mouth and make amends.

Rotkin's been on the City Council for three years and six months and for two years and eight months was a minority member.

He shared that minority position with fellow socialist Bruce Van Allen, and the two of them had to wait until last November before they came into any real power with the election of progressives Mardi Wormhoudt and John Laird.

That combination produced an instant socialist mayor — a rare bird indeed in American politics.

But it produced no dramatic changes for the city.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Although Mayor Michael Rotkin got into a recent flap with police officers, his relationship with city workers is good.

"I'm not disappointed, I think we've done quite well." Rotkin points to this year's budget "where we were able to double our social services expenditures and include child care and senior meal programs, along with \$40,000 for the commission for the prevention of violence."

He admits there have been setbacks.

"We were really creamed," he says of the rent control vote that defeated the issue by a plurality of over 2,000 this spring and the successful petitioning effort that blocked the council's Just Eviction Ordinance before it could go into effect.

"There's been a real impact in local government since last November when a majority was formed that shares my view about the role of government."

His "role of government" is that it should be the instrument to accomplish what the people want and "not an agency that does things to people."

"Socialism for me is not some utopian ideal state that's going to be delivered to people by people in government."

"It's a process of people taking more democratic control over things that effect them, whether it's in the

neighborhood, the government or the place where they work.

"Probably, the difference between socialists and liberals is that it's often the case that liberals will stop short of being willing to take on the power in the private sector — to take on corporations, to help people control resources."

"Often, I feel that liberals don't believe people can run things, that we have to rely on the experts. As a socialist, I believe, I have to work to push beyond where the liberals

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would like to push."

He laments that "socialism as a movement has taken on an anti-democratic image, even a totalitarian image.

"Socialism as a movement has an absolute belief in Democracy and the idea that someone who calls herself or himself a 'socialist' likes what is going on in the Soviet Union — that idea couldn't be further from the truth."

He perceives himself as a catalyst for people to work to use government to achieve their needs. His approach well fits his career as educator at UCSC.

He's maintained a laid-back image, best shown by his footwear: Old tennies for work and new tennies when he puts on a tie for Chamber of Commerce functions.

He says that people shouldn't be victims of landlords, the corporations that control other life necessities and victims of their government.

He's disappointed that his supporters no longer come to meetings in the numbers they did two and three years ago and on the night he was elected mayor. But, he philosophizes, "that seems to be a fact of life of American politics."

Their absence leaves him out on a limb at times. For example, he and his council majority recently were looking out at a nearly empty house on the day they had to eat their Just Eviction Ordinance.

Some other issues have seen a stronger force from those opposing the council majority in attendance at meetings than those who used to fill the chambers and applaud at every winning council vote.

In spite of the losses on major issues and playing to an empty house at times, Rotkin doesn't believe the progressives and socialists have lost anything with the voters.

He says from his activity with the Westside Neighbors and the medical clinic group, that support is very strong.

Where he sees a longterm people's movement in this county is in the area of medical treatment.

He speaks of the movement to get a doctor and nurse practitioner at the newly-leased Westside clinic as a starting point and that it may develop into a neighborhood

insurance system at the clinic.

The mayor says that based on national averages, people of this county are spending around \$200 million a year on medical care.

"You couldn't imagine a worse system for \$200 million than what we have now in health care in Santa Cruz County. I can imagine people organizing a more democratically controlled health care system and I don't think you have to be a socialist to support this, just a rational human being. It's logical."

He compliments the full council on its budget decisions, saying that even with \$750,000 less to work with, the council only had to cut three city employees and it was able to boost social programs.

"City Manager Dick Wilson is to be congratulated for most of that," Wilson, Rotkin explains, has been extremely effective in keeping city government costs down.

Talking about the local press, Rotkin says:

"I guess being on the council's been a learning experience for me. Before that, you tend to have a passive relationship with media — until you get into office. It's sort of there, but since you're not making news, you don't have a good way to measure what is going on.

"In the past, in terms of The Sentinel, I used to read the editorial page only and feel the paper was not doing a good job, that it was not a responsible paper. I wasn't looking at the news stories, or reading them to have a yardstick.

"Since being on the council and reading the news articles, I think I've gotten even handed and fair coverage.

"But I still think the editorials are awful."

For the future, Rotkin indicates he will seek a second term next November "but I won't be firm on that until January or February."

And, he believes that as time goes on his government will become a catalyst so that "more people can have control over their lives.

"I think that can be accomplished now through a local government . . . and I don't think that should require a socialist government to bring it about."