

# Rift among progressives tears apart city council

*City Council*  
■ **Santa Cruz:** Battles over building now focus on a proposal for the beach area.

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The liberal "progressives" who have run Santa Cruz for nearly two decades have turned on each other in a feud over its future that some say threatens their control of City Hall.

Squabbling over issues from homeless rights to commercial development has exploded into a political war whose current battlefield is the plan to redevelop the

beach area, which the city council will consider tonight. Onetime allies now publicly browbeat one another. Former friends no longer speak.

"It's reached proportions that are completely out of control," said Councilman Mike Rotkin, one of the founders of Santa Cruz's progressive coalition and self-described socialist-feminist who fears the movement is self-destructing.

"They're undoing a coalition," Rotkin

said. "The risk I'm concerned about is that I spent years building a progressive coalition, and they really are creating conditions that could allow the right to return. We won't be the first town where the progressives implode. It happened in Berkeley, in Ann Arbor, in Santa Monica."

Progressives have defined the city's character since rising to power in the early 1980s on a platform of open-space preservation and social welfare. Now they are fractured into camps as environmentalists and socialists, activists and pragmatists.

A city council that would seemingly be any liberal's dream is sharply divided. The

majority is under fire from movement leaders outside City Hall who have endorsed candidates for the November council election who oppose council policies they see as overly pro-business.

Rotkin and three other council members — Scott Kennedy, Cynthia Mathews and Michael Hernandez — are under fire from former allies for supporting commercial and residential growth in the past decade and, more recently, redevelopment of the rundown beach district.

But Rotkin and his council majority consider themselves progressive pragmatists.  
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**Rotkin**  
He fears for the future of the progressive coalition.



**Wormhoudt**  
She says the constituents are not well-served.



# Santa Cruz battles over beach proposal

## ■ RIFT

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tists who are simply trying to balance social good with the economic needs of their city.

Council member Katherine Beiers and Mayor Celia Scott are joined by progressives outside City Hall who feel the council majority has abandoned its progressive goals.

The progressives say they feel betrayed by many of their elected leaders, former allies who they say have lost their way:

"There's just been a variety of things where constituents who felt they shared a vision with the council have not felt well-served," said county Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, a former Santa Cruz mayor.

But council members such as Rotkin and their supporters say dogmatic idealism has blinded their critics to the practical realities of running a city.

"If you are ignorant enough about land use to think the city can just take land from people, if you think the council gets to choose who goes into commercial spaces downtown, if you think the city doesn't have to come up with money, then you think, 'Gee, the council has lost its bearings,'" Rotkin said.

The progressives' rise to power was a long and hard-fought struggle dating to the 1960s. Four decades ago, Santa Cruz was dominated by conservative retirees, yacht-clubbers and tourist-industry magnates not necessarily opposed to more highways, industry and development.

Today, Santa Cruz is among the most liberal towns in the nation, a place where Democrats outnumber Republicans nearly four to one. Its pedestrians bear the tell-tale signs of its political bent with a colorful array of tie-dye, sandals, ponytails, tattoos and body-piercings. Downtown shops sell incense, chai tea and recycled goods while street musicians on every corner strum ballads of the 1960s.

The city's transformation began when the University of California-Santa Cruz opened in the mid-1960s, drawing free-thinking teachers and students to town. The progressive movement coalesced as rampant growth in what is now called Silicon Valley threatened to spill over the hill to Santa Cruz.

Progressives banded together to defeat plans for a convention center at Lighthouse Field, which is now a state park. They swatted down proposals for subdivisions, superhighways, offshore oil wells and nuclear power. They passed an initiative for a "greenbelt" of open space delineating the urban boundary.

## Social programs

By 1981, the progressives had gained a majority on the seven-member council and ushered in a host of social programs. A homeless person in Santa Cruz today has access to a bed, shower, hot meal, locker, mailbox, phone, computer, laundry room and multilingual counseling. City leaders boast that Santa Cruz spends more per capita on its homeless than any other city its size.

Today's Santa Cruz council is stacked with liberals, including a professional peace activist, an environmental lawyer and a Planned Parenthood official. The council's most conservative member is a Democratic schoolteacher. Five council members are onetime endorsees of the progressive movement's political arm, the Santa Cruz Action Network, or SCAN. Four of those were endorsed by SCAN in their last election.

The rift among progressives is rooted in the city's recovery from the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

With downtown in ruins, city and business leaders were forced to cooperate to rebuild. But as the earthquake recovery neared completion a few years ago, many progressives began to chafe at the continued hand-holding between city and business leaders.

The first signs of stress among progressives came with a proposal for laws to curb loitering and panhandling downtown. Business leaders and some council members feared a derelict atmosphere was threatening the district's economic recovery. But many progressives in the community balked at what they saw as a government attack on the poor.

## Building spree

As the post-quake building spree spread beyond downtown, progressives grew even more alarmed, this time about the spread of development. First came council approval of a big-box strip mall on the outskirts of downtown, the soon-to-open Gateway shopping center near Highway 1. Then came indications of council interest in proposed residential subdivisions at Terrace Point and the Bombay property, open-space properties on the city's Westside.

And today, there is the pending

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—Darrell Darling, progressive

plan for redeveloping the city's run-down beach district, set for hearings tonight and Thursday. The plan would raze crumbling apartments and allow for a new shopping center and amusement park expansion in exchange for assistance building new subsidized housing.

Many progressives see it as a public giveaway that will force poor immigrants from their homes to benefit the business interests of the Santa Cruz Seaside Co., which owns the Boardwalk.

"People are concerned about excessive development," said Mayor Scott, a beach-plan critic in the minority on the council. "We are at a point where we have recovered from the earthquake, when there was a sense that we had to do these things. Some people say, 'Let's catch our breath here before we plunge ahead.' We are going to have to seriously think about how much we can absorb into Santa Cruz and still maintain our quality of life."

The beach plan has proven so divisive that eight former mayors last week publicly denounced it. Seven of them are progressives: Wormhoudt, Bruce Van Allen, Jane Yokoyama, Sally Di Girolamo, Bert Muhly, Jane Weed and John Laird. The eighth was Lorette Wood.

The progressive bickering has as much to do with public process as policy. The movement was founded upon a spirit of openness and consensus-building, something each side accuses the other of subverting.

Many progressives, for instance, were irked that council members touted development proposals for the beach and the Bombay land that were hashed out in committee meetings or closed-door talks with land owners. They note with pique that a council majority — Rotkin, Kenne-

dy, Mathews and Hernandez — lent their names to a recently circulated promotional mailer for the beach plan. And they were outraged that those council members considered blocking the traditional rotation of Scott to the mayor's seat a year ago.

"Top-down planning has never worked in Santa Cruz," Wormhoudt said. "Many people have felt shut out of the process. It makes a lot of people feel like what's the use, they've already made up their mind."

But council leaders and their supporters say their progressive critics have also tried to shut out voices of dissent. They point to a recent SCAN candidate forum in which the endorsees — all of whom oppose the beach plan — were treated to a practice session with SCAN leaders to which other council hopefuls were not invited.

"That's outrageous," Rotkin said. "They select a group and put the fix in. It's particularly outrageous when there are no conservatives in the race and the farthest-right candidate is a Democrat supporting Gray Davis for governor."

Progressives on both sides of the rift concede the movement has had difficulty adjusting from political opposition to political leadership. Many accuse their peers of failing to accept reasonable compromise and work toward creative solutions.

"A lot of us come from a lifetime of activist politics, the politics of protest," said Darrell Darling, a longtime local leader in progressive and Democratic circles. "We've learned very well how to exercise some decisive noes. We need to have some creative yeses."

But others say the council leadership has simply failed to live up to progressive expectations.

"It's not easy being an elected progressive," said SCAN co-chairman Skip Spitzer. "There are financial constraints, there are expectations to do things in traditional ways. Nonetheless, there are more progressive and less progressive ways of dealing with those constraints."

"City council people with unpopular ideas have marginalized themselves. The more progressive ones take the problem to the community and say, 'Here are the constraints, what should we do?' The city ought to be involved in finding out what public opinion is rather than trying to create it."

## Purity vs. compromise

"We can't be purists if we want to govern," Darling said. "The reality is that there are compromises among the things we want. It's ludicrous to paint with a conservative brush people like Cynthia Mathews, who's on the cutting edge of reproductive rights, or Mike Rotkin, who was elected as Santa Cruz's communist."

Others see it as a struggle to regain the progressive movement's political compass. "I think this election will be pivotal," Wormhoudt said. "In the '80s, there were certainly disagreements, but I can't remember a time when constituents felt so shut out. A fair number of people believe the issues right now take us back to what progressive politics have always been."

"If the progressive candidates win, it will be a plebiscite on this council. . . . It's just too bad it's come to this."

## IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Because of widespread interest, the Santa Cruz City Council will consider public comment on the Beach and South of Laurel Street Comprehensive Area Plan at 7 p.m. today at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St., across from City Hall.