

# Current Santa Cruz Politics

## NEIGHBOR TO THE NORTH

Over the last 15 or 20 years, the face of Santa Cruz politics has changed as dramatically as the contour of the cityscape itself. Once, through the 1950s, Santa Cruz was content as a retirement/resort community with a smattering of surfers who were trying to keep 'surf city' a secret. In recent years, though, as the university saturated the population with students and ex-students, as commuters and others moved in, this once-sleepy community has exploded.

To many, Santa Cruz is now a bastion of "progressive" or "liberal" thinking. Literary magazines in the middle of the United States have even donned the name "Santa Cruz" as a means of creeping spiritually closer to what they consider a mecca of thought.

And if it is any reflection at all, Santa Cruz was one of only seven counties west of the Mississippi to vote a majority for Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election.

To others, this mecca is more of a mess. The streets are jammed with cars, housing prices have skyrocketed, good jobs are scarce, wages are dismal, and the homeless or "street people" make the downtown radius their domain. Unlike the Monterey Peninsula, renting a home in Santa Cruz is a near-impossible nightmare.

Add to this brew the fact that the demographic shift in the United States leans heavily west and that 80 percent of this shift moves to within 30 miles of the coastline. The population of Santa Cruz County, to wit, *doubled* between 1970 and 1980. During that same period, a housing moratorium was put into effect, and building restrictions were tightened. You can smell the trouble a mile away.

In short, the texture of the Santa Cruz experience is becoming more and more complex. The issues are similar to those faced by most communities along the California coast: growth vs. open space, development vs. conservation, federal oil exploration plans vs. local opposition. And while these issues are debated, the

Santa Cruz community has one additional factor to consider: the university.

Now more than ever, the "town/gown" relationship is critical. It's been 20 years since UC Santa Cruz was first established, and the honeymoon is over. Some burdensome issues are now being discussed. The city and the university are none too pleased with one another over many things. Predominant in the ongoing debate are the questions of growth in the student population, housing for those students, and the construction of an eastern access road to the campus which currently suffers from a bottlenecked western entrance which runs through the heart of a dense residential zone.

Eastern access, according to Terry Jones, Vice-Chancellor for Community Relations, could relieve congestion on the crowded west side of town up to 40 percent. Unfortunately, any eastern access road would have to run through Santa Cruz's precious "greenbelt" zone in the Pogonip area. There's nowhere else an eastern road could go.

Opponents claim that a road through the greenbelt would inevitably be followed by development of high priced housing, a charge that Jones, who also sits on the Pogonip Committee, says is unfounded. "We're discussing the possibility of some housing for seniors, and maybe some housing for students," he says. "But the higher priced homes question has never been brought up." And Jones is quick to add, "There are some people on the Committee who don't want any development at all."

The city of Santa Cruz has no jurisdiction over the university, the latter being state-owned property. The recently retired chancellor of UCSC, Robert Sinsheimer, was adamant about this point, particularly as it relates to student growth. The university must "preserve its legal autonomy," he has said, pointing out that the university is supported by "the people of the entire

"I think that if the university is going to grow," says Rotkin, "they should grow at the same rate as the rest of the town, which is a lot slower than they're projecting. Also, the university should provide on-campus housing for every additional new student. We don't have enough housing for people in Santa Cruz now. You can't bring new students here and not have housing for them."

Chancellor Sinsheimer's view is, "It is often unclear which Santa Cruz community should be supported. It (the community) is badly split, even polarized, on many issues, including growth. The community frequently forgets that it specifically invited the university to locate a campus (of 27,500 students) here and promised to provide certain utilities and roads (which have yet to be realized.)"

The UCSC campus population is currently just under 9000. Roughly 1000 new students have been accepted in the past year, with 300 more coming in fall. There is no housing to accommodate the new students either on or off campus, though plans are in place to build additional housing next year.

"We had a 46 percent increase in freshman applicants this year," says Joe Allen, Director of Admissions for UCSC, a staggering figure compared to the 7 percent system-wide increase.

"We're one of the hottest schools right now," says Terry Jones. "We're not growing because it's a sign of our muscle. Our growth is determined by The Plan Of Higher Education for the State of California. This plan says that the UC system will educate California high school graduates who graduate in the top 12½ percent of their class, with appropriate SAT scores. That was fine until the last couple of years, because only about 4 percent of that group were deciding that they wanted a UC education."

"But as private education got more and more expensive," Jones continues, "and as our state population grows and grows, more kids see that you can't beat a UC education, especially for the cost. The whole UC system is straining to meet the commitment."

While most everyone agrees that the university needs to grow, not everyone agrees on the pace of that expansion. The 20-year plan is to grow to accommodate 12,500-15,000 students. No one, neither Sinsheimer, new Chancellor Robert Bocking Stevens, the City Council, nor the community wants a student population of 27,500.

Growth is a problem wrestled with by all parties in Santa Cruz County. "I'm basically against the kind of growth we've had in this county," Rotkin says. "Most people think growth is an act of nature or an act of God; that growth is just the way things are. But the growth we have here is the result of political decisions that have been made by corporations and politicians in Washington. If people could find jobs in industry in Pittsburgh and St. Louis, they would stay there. Their families are there, they've grown up there."

"A small number might come out to *beautiful California*. But the vast majority of people coming out here now are desperate for jobs. They can't find them in the deteriorating economy of the East Coast and the Mississippi River Valley, so they come to where the defense jobs are."

"Nationally we've cut back on the kinds of spending that would keep people in cities: education, housing, street repairs,

by George Fuller

state of California; it must consider their needs as well as local interests."

That argument doesn't fly, according to Santa Cruz City Council member and former mayor Michael Rotkin, who is also a university lecturer. Rotkin calls Sinsheimer's comments "insulting" and "outrageous."

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the things that would give people jobs back east. And we've increased the amount of money we spend on defense, so where are the jobs? People come to San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley looking for jobs. When they get here, they come looking for housing and they want to live someplace nice. So the pressure is on Santa Cruz."

Rotkin continues, "I see most of the growth that's happened here as destructive. We've had difficult decisions to make. For myself, I'm willing to trade open space for low income housing, but I'm not willing to trade open space for \$350,000 homes."

As the texts of these and other questions over the years have unfurled, many people and personalities have emerged. But perhaps none has been so influential in focusing the issues and bringing the "new" community's voice to the fore as has Michael Rotkin.

Mayor of Santa Cruz in 1981-82, Rotkin also served the post in 1986. A political person who describes himself most comfortably as "socialist/feminist," Rotkin claims no aspiration to higher office. "I was never interested in being President of the United States."

"Socialist/feminist" is probably a strange term to Monterey County residents. It undoubtedly represents typically "weird Santa Cruz." But for Michael Rotkin, and for a loyal constituency of Santa Cruzans, it works.

Presenting what he sees as the two most important issues that face our society today, socialism and feminism, Rotkin says, "We live in a society where decisions are made by large corporations and big government. Socialist/feminism is about building community and enhancing the democratic process so that people get to make decisions about the things that affect their lives. This could be in a neighborhood which wants control over the planning process or it could be in the workplace where workers have more control over decisions that are made about how their jobs are going to be done.

"For a woman," he continues, "the feminist part, is having some community involvement in the question of abuse of herself and her children, or the issue of what a woman's rights are in this society. Those are really community issues, things that we all need to be involved in discussions and decisions about."

To achieve this, Rotkin believes that more women need to become involved in the government process, as well as people who believe in neighborhood priorities. "People can be trusted," he emphasizes,

"better than anybody else to make decisions about the things that affect them. So socialist/feminism is really an 'ultra-democracy.' I see the government as a tool that can be used by people. We should think 'we the government,' rather than 'they the government.'"

Rotkin can be found in many places: the university campus as a lecturer, Watsonville Canning as a strike supporter, or protesting against the Miss California pageant which used to be held in Santa Cruz.

**T**he Santa Cruz City Council is currently embroiled in a legal dispute over the legitimacy of Mayor Jane Weed's election. A cluster of 1984 student votes are being challenged on grounds that the students did not actually live within the city limits, but used the university as a residence address to appear eligible.

The Weed/Rotkin slate is very popular on campus. So popular, in fact, that according to Chancellor Sinsheimer, the current progressive majority on the City Council is "in office *only* because of the student vote."

As it now stands, this majority, including Rotkin and Weed, could be a minority soon. At the time of this writing, the State Appeals Court has overturned the 1984 City Council election results, a move which would de-seat Weed and replace her with a conservative candidate. But the California Supreme Court has decided to hear the case, and clarify the election codes regarding residency and domicile.

In any event, Weed's case will probably not be decided before 1988, when another election will be held anyway. Weed's opinion is that, "What started out as a politically motivated effort to change the balance on the City Council from

progressive to conservative is turning out to be a needed review of the election law."

Weed's election debate notwithstanding, there is room for concern amongst the Santa Cruz left. Has the shift of tides, from progressive to conservative, the same shift which has so clearly gripped the rest of the nation, also managed a hold on Santa Cruz?

Not so, according to Rotkin, a participant in the political melee of Santa Cruz since 1969, when he arrived from upstate New York as a graduate student at UCSC.

He explains that in 1981, when he first became mayor, there seemed to be a swelling of political awareness in Santa Cruz. Following the election of Ronald Reagan to the White House, the political left in the country was scared. Organizers, like Rotkin, moved back into action from the lethargy of the '70s, facing and fighting what they saw as the challenges of "the 1984 syndrome."

"That's the irony," Rotkin says, "that the success of the right, the success of the developers, ends up creating an opposition. But I don't think it's so much that something changed dramatically as that people began to do some organizing work in the neighborhoods."

The concerns, he points out, were always there: the police didn't patrol the neighborhoods, the streets were deteriorating while a lot of work was being done to improve the downtown area, the health care needs were being ignored. "I don't think I was elected because I was a socialist," he says, "but in spite of that, because I was concerned about the neighborhoods."

Does the challenge to Jane Weed represent any significant shift in the politics of Santa Cruz? If anything, Rotkin points out, "the silver lining in this cloud is that it has put us in a much better position for the next election." If Weed is de-seated, Rotkin believes, "People will see what happens if these guys (the conservatives) get back in control again, their lack of direction, their inability to make things happen.

"We've been very successful doing things that the other side could probably never get through," Rotkin explains. "We've been able to work out compromises with the business community to see that reasonable development takes place. We've been successful because we've been able to make sure that what gets built is sensitive to the needs of neighborhoods."

Another point of success for *both* sides of the City Council was the 1986 meeting of the minds regarding tourism. Realizing the crucial nature of tourism to the Santa Cruz economy, both conservatives and progressives made concerted efforts to reach acceptable compromises. The City Council, the business community, and the neighborhood groups now speak with a fairly unified voice regarding the

promotion of tourism.

Mayor Weed notes that, "We faced a 'reality check.' We're incredibly dependent on tourism, and we asked ourselves, 'Now what do we do with that?' So what we have now is a greater sense of cooperation." All parties involved seem to want an expansion of the tourist market. "We're interested in packages which would take people to the Monterey Bay Aquarium one day and Long Marine Lab the next," she says.

The relationship between the business community and the progressive City Council is "less adversarial" than it was 10 years ago, according to Weed. "We've come to the realization that we're mutually dependent on each other."

But despite this more benevolent position on tourism and the business community generally, both unthinkable in 1977 Santa Cruz terms, Rotkin doesn't think things have changed that much.

"I don't think the town has shifted politically," he concludes. "If anything, given that we've moved the election to an even year (1988), in November, when many more low income people vote, as well as the students, I think it'll be even harder for them (the conservatives) to beat us in the next election than it's ever been. I think they're going to have a real uphill battle."

But that whole concept misses the point says Tom Breznsy, head of the Santa Cruz Restaurant Association. "I think there's a centrist niche developing in the political fabric. The history of Santa Cruz over the last 10 or 15 years has been one of vacillating between two polar extremes of very progressive and very conservative. Everything has been viewed as either black or white. But I think what is beginning to emerge now is a group of people who find themselves thinking along the same lines: that polarity doesn't work anymore for Santa Cruz.

"I expect to see candidates (in the 1988 City Council election) who are in a centrist mode," Breznsy explains, "people who understand that the biggest problem facing Santa Cruz now is money, the budget deficit. That is what fuels everything else, whether a progressive issue or a conservative issue. We've gotten trapped in this polarity, but now we need to get this middle ground represented adequately."

The deficit to which Breznsy refers is a recently revealed 1 million dollar shortfall in the 1986 Santa Cruz budget. How will the Santa Cruz electorate respond to that dismal news? And is there really a shift toward the center of the political spectrum for this unique city on the north end of the Monterey Bay? Stay tuned in 1988. We'll see.