

Left-wing leaders pilot Santa Cruz

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SANTA CRUZ — This seaside community, once a magnet for retirees and vacationers who nodded off in the sleepy afternoons to the rhythm of the incoming surf, is in for big changes as a new generation of liberal-left-wing activists takes command at City Hall.

At the head of this exercise in participatory democracy is the kind of leader the Santa Cruz of old would never have made its mayor.

He is Michael Rotkin, an articulate, intense, bearded lecturer in Marxism and Leninism, a socialist, former student anti-war radical and a resident of Santa Cruz only since 1969.

A look at the only California city presided over by a socialist mayor suggests that these are some of the things in store for it:

- Some form of rent control.
- New emphasis on spending for social programs.
- A slowdown, or maybe even abandonment, of long-standing plans to dam Zayante Creek to provide more city water for the 1990s. More water would mean more growth.

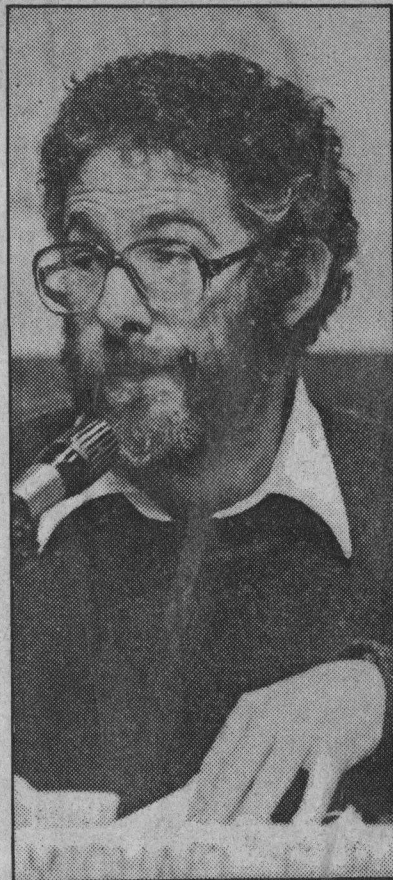
The beginning of the

transformation was signalled in the city election of 1979 when Rotkin and fellow socialist Bruce Van Allen were elected to the city council. It was assured last November when a liberal feminist and a progressive defeated two conservatives to tilt the council to a 4-3 majority in the newcomers' favor.

It was a watershed in city politics, marking the emerging dominance of a new constituency including, but not limited to, students and faculty from UC Santa Cruz, neighborhood organizations, sun-loving counterculturists and a host of other creative free spirits drawn to the city to write, paint, weave, open restaurants, boutiques and coffeeshops, or make surfboards.

Another important element in the new constituency is the renter, a category cutting across age lines and occupations. Over the years, Santa Cruz has become a community of renters. Some 60 percent of its residents now rent, according to Chamber of Commerce manager Lionel Stoloff. Only a few years ago, 60 percent were home owners.

The housing vacancy rate is miniscule and demand is heavy, sending rents skyward and creating a coalition of pro-rent control voters



Sacramento Bee

MICHAEL ROTKIN
— 'Work with realities'

including both retired oldsters and UC undergraduates.

Perhaps the best evidence of a changing community, however, lies

See Santa Cruz, Page A12

Santa Cruz

Continued from Page A1

in the fact that the city now has a foreign policy, one considerably to the left of Secretary of State Haig. By a 2-1 margin last November, voters adopted a resolution opposing U.S. military aid to El Salvador and urging withdrawal of American troops.

The new constituency is beginning to show its presence at City Hall. The council appointed a street musician and a street-wise psychiatrist to the city mall commission, formerly the domain of mall merchants. A tenant activist is now on the housing advisory committee, which had been the province of bankers, landlords and developers.

"The old council perceived the business community as the only interest in town and the neighborhoods be damned," said Rotkin. "The ideology was whatever it takes, if business needs it, wonderful, let's go ahead with it."

Sam McNeely, who came to Santa Cruz as a young Marine in 1943 and stayed to become first mayor under the new city charter in the late 1940s, is apprehensive about the new council.

"I have seen nothing thus far to change my apprehension," McNeely said. "But being fair, I don't think there have been enough issues raised for me to make a judgment."

"Santa Cruz is very polarized at this point," acknowledged Mardi Wormhoudt, 44, design consultant and community activist elected in November. She identifies herself as a feminist rather than a socialist and is an ally of Rotkin on numerous issues. Her campaign was directed by Cathy Calfo, a leader in the local chapter of the Campaign for Economic Democracy, the grassroots political organization created by former student radical Tom Hayden. CED supported Wormhoudt's candidacy.

"The values that Michael and I share," said Wormhoudt, "are a real commitment to grassroots organizing, a commitment to people in government who will say to the community, Hey, we're not here to do it for you but if you can get yourself organized around certain needs and can demonstrate that you have a coherent and articulate constituency, we're here to respond."

"That's the value I think we



Sacramento Bee

From left, Spiro Mellis, Bruce Van Allen, Michael Rotkin, John Laird, Mardi Wormhoudt and Dr. John Mahaney. The seventh council member, Joe Ghio, was not present.

had no program whatsoever. They didn't say we are going to deal with the problems that exist on the mall.

"What they promised to do was to keep government as small and as ineffective as it tends to be"

Rotkin grew up in a liberal family. His father and mother both were active in the Congress of Racial Equality and other civil

minimal things it has to to avoid total revolt and making sure the streets are paved, it's a conception that says involve the staff, the workers in the city and involve the people who live here in the process of making the government function.

"To go back to the early days of SDS ideology, it's a move away from representative democracy

joined us, not because of some vision of socialism but because there's a need for public entities to generate the kind of funds you need to operate the city," said Rotkin.

"Where we tend to part ways with the conservatives is that I am not

worried about stepping on the toes of people making a profit if in fact that is necessary to meet people's needs."

On the other hand, Rotkin argued, a socialist in America of the 1980s can be accommodating to the business community also. He noted he and Van Allen led the move for a huge increase in convention and visitors' bureau funding and in abandoning a street to permit a car dealer to expand.

"We are not wide-eyed idealist socialists in the sense that we think we can impose our vision on people in some totalistic way," said the mayor. "We have to work with the realities that are around us, and the business community is definitely a reality."

Foes of the new majority are fearfully eying at least three major issues: rent control; an end to, or revision of, plans to dam Zayante Creek; and an expansion of city-financed social programs.

After interviews with the principals it appears clear the city will get all three.

Rent Control

"I think we are going to have rent control by ordinance somewhere in the near future," predicted Lionel Stoloff, manager of the Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Our election has led to rent increases all over town," said Councilman Laird. He said one 80-year-old woman got hit with a \$110 a month increase in December as landlords moved to hike rents before the council can impose restraints.

"We're going to be another Carmel or Sausalito over a period of time if we don't do something to protect the diversity of the people who live here."

Laird said "some form" of rent control is necessary. Council member Wormhoudt in a separate interview agreed that "some tenant protections" are needed by ordinance and said she would campaign hard for rent control if it is offered as a ballot measure.

"We've got to have some sort of rent control," agreed Rotkin. And Councilman Van Allen is a leader in the Santa Cruz Housing Action Committee and has long been on record as favoring rent control.

Zayante Dam

The new majority has put the brakes on plans to dam Zayante Creek, seeking to extend the city's water rights for another year before any commitment is made. Pro-growth elements fear the progressive are simply going to love the project to death.

Asked if he believes the delay is designed to kill the water project, Council member Spiro Mellis answered, "I can't help but feel that way. There have been lots of delaying tactics," Declared Chamber Manager Stoloff: "Rotkin keeps saying we ought to do an environmental impact report and yes I want to find out all about it — but he never votes for it."

"I'm probably not as strongly against it as ardi Wormhoudt is," said the mayor, "but I'm not prepared to vote any money for Zayante Dam at this point."

"From a socialist perspective I think there is an issue of whether or not we as a community are simply going to be whipped around by the growth question. We're going to be forced to grow and then build the dam; or even worse, the fear that we're going to have growth going to build the dam and then in order to pay for the dam we encourage growth."

The new majority is eying next year's federal revenue sharing money — if any is forthcoming from Washington — to fund three main problem areas — health care, child care and senior citizens.

Previous councils have used most of the city's federal revenue for fire and police services, giving only comparatively modest amounts to community group projects. This majority is expected to reverse that ratio.

The chamber executive is fearful of what the council will do to the city's finances. The progressives took over at a time when Moody's Investment Service just raised the city's bond rating from A to A-1 because of its low debt level and financial management.

"The city up to this point has been in an excellent, healthy (financial) position, but come now we just don't know," said Stoloff. "We may be heading for some financial crisis these days. It's still to be seen what this liberal council will do."

have a coherent and articulate constituency, we're here to respond.

"That's the value I think we share, but I don't think that it has very much to do with socialism."

Wormhoudt and John Laird, 31, a Santa Cruz County employee who first came to the University of California campus here as an 18-year-old undergraduate in politics, comprise with the mayor and incumbent socialist Councilman Van Allen the four-member council majority.

Laird is a member of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, a group of surviving Norman Thomas-style socialists presided over by author-political scientist Michael Harrington who have a gradualist agenda for change. But Laird, who says he abhors labels, prefers to consider himself a progressive, not a socialist.

"There will be changes," Wormhoudt promised. "It is not my notion that now there will be no developers, bankers or landlords represented on boards and precarious year-to-year contract as lecturer in Marxism-Leninism and community change at UC Santa Cruz, the institution whose dominating presence in the hills above city hall has been an important, if often resented, force for change.

Until last November, Rotkin and cabinetmaker Van Allen comprised the left wing of city government, outnumbered 5-2. Then, thanks to neighborhood and student support, (the UC campus has four polling places of its own) Wormhoudt and Laird defeated two conservative candidates.

Spiro Mellis, a grocery store owner appointed to a council vacancy last term, won election in his own right this time despite dismal support on the campus. Mellis voted for Rotkin for mayor but generally is regarded as allied with the conservative minority, physician John Mahaney and former Mayor Joe Ghio.

As Rotkin analyzes the election, there are clear parallels with 1981 city elections in Chico and Santa Monica where liberal candidates replaced incumbent conservatives.

"One of the reasons we won as big as we did is that the conservative slate, and more significantly the people behind them, simply had not been aware of the kinds of changes that have gone on," Rotkin said in an interview.

"Basically they (the conservatives) promised that if elected they would do nothing. They

Rotkin grew up in a liberal family. His father and mother both were active in the Congress of Racial Equality and other civil rights efforts. "I grew up in Maryland and often was the only kid in my neighborhood who was Jewish; at other times, I was the only kid in the neighborhood who thought there was anything wrong with racial slurs or making comments about black people," Rotkin recalls.

He flunked out of Cornell University after what he called two boring years, then went to work with migrants in Florida as a VISTA volunteer.

After his VISTA tour, Rotkin returned to Cornell and a strange bifurcated existence. Wearing one hat, he was the scholar studying 19th Century English poetry (he graduated summa cum laude). Under the other he was the anti-war, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalism organizer for Students for a Democratic Society.

"I pretty much moved to the left ideologically as SDS did," said Rotkin. "In other words, an organization that began with a participatory democracy theme more and more began to take up questions of imperialism ... it almost leaped over socialism into Marxism-Leninism as a movement, and I pretty much moved with that politically."

As the SDS dissolved into bickering factions and an offshoot called the Weathermen went underground to build bombs and plot terrorism, Rotkin parted company with the disintegrating organization.

"I knew there was something wrong with the Weathermen," he said. "I thought they were nuts, frankly. I don't think apocalyptic politics is very helpful.

"I did not share the feeling that segments of society have to be 'written off.' People basically are part of the (capitalistic) system not because they are stupid, not because they didn't get enough lectures by somebody from SDS, or read enough leaflets, but because alternatives are very, very difficult to construct.

"(As) a socialist mayor ... it's not for me to deliver the answer to everybody's problems, but hopefully to caalyze people to begin figuring out what's going on in their lives. I see it as organizing rather than education.

"It's a different concept of government. Instead of government delivering the goodies from on high, which I think is the liberal tradition, or from the conservative tradition government just doing whatever

"To go back to the early days of SDS ideology, it's a move away from representative democracy where you elect somebody and sit back and hope they'll take care of it right, to the participatory form. And that's for me the definition of socialism."

Rotkin said he can coexist with the conservatives. He noted that it was the two socialists on the council who pushed to double concessionaire rents at the municipal wharf, but the motion carried by a 6-1 vote.

"Certainly some conservatives