

'GOOD SOLDIER' MOVES FORWARD



Steve Yeater/Special to the Sentinel

Former Assemblyman Fred Keeley talks with Legislative Analyst Elizabeth Hill outside the Capitol in Sacramento.

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Democratic Party loyalist chastened, ready for change

By JEANENE HARLICK

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Fred Keeley gets tough with local law enforcement in November 1993 during supervisors' hearings on CAMP raids.

Fred Keeley is a private man who weighs words as a jeweler does precious stones.

Most questions are met with lengthy pauses as he carefully constructs tight webs of words through which no personal details escape.

Called "coldly unemotional" by some, the former Santa Cruz County supervisor rose to the height of leadership in the California Democratic Party by taking on some of the state's toughest battles. But in the end, his political future was spoiled by the party he loyally served.

Perhaps that accounts, in part, for the personal armor. But every now and then, chinks appear.

On a recent Saturday, talking on his cell phone with a reporter, his attention was momentarily diverted.

"Oh, look at that — a sign for a lost dog — a golden retriever," he said, bringing the picture inside his Sacramento apartment to memorize. "Boy, I am such a sap."

Glimpses into Keeley's thought process suggest a complex man. He compares a Renaissance-era architectural triumph to the energy crisis, for example, linking politics to art and revealing some of the mental tactics he adopted to address the state's most vexing problems.

He tells of a renegade architect who took a leap of faith on an unlikely cupola. Plunging into the construction of a cathedral dome before he knew how to pull it off, Filippo Brunelleschi braved fear to build an engineering feat, the dome of cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence.

Reading the book "Brunelleschi's Dome" recently, Keeley realized he employed similar methods during his stint as the state Assembly's second-in-command.

"I lost all fear of failure — it probably started during the energy crisis," he said. "If there was any consideration about whether we would succeed or fail, if we let that fear seep in, we couldn't have got the job done. That willingness to surrender a

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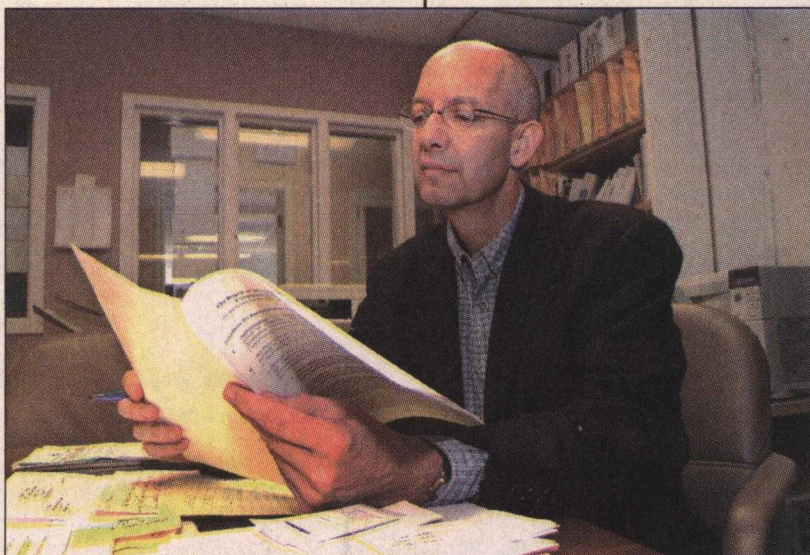
DAN WALTERS,
POLITICAL COLUMNIST

'The old system rewarded patience and loyalty. Term limits rewards creativity and initiative.'

FRED KEELEY

'Fred Keeley is not about show. He's about getting real things done and moving the ball.'

DARRELL STEINBERG,
ASSEMBLYMAN



Steve Yeater/Special to the Sentinel

Former Assemblyman Fred Keeley works in his new office at the Planning and Conservation League in Sacramento on Tuesday.

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Keeley

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notion of fear was probably the most important thing I learned."

Keeley's don't-look-before-you-leap approach paid off. After six years in state office, he left the Assembly in December as one of the Legislature's most respected leaders. Named legislator of the year in July by the California Journal, Keeley was singled out as having "the greatest overall impact on (last year's) legislative session" and praised for his "dedication to public life for the sake of public service."

Speaker pro tem his last three years, Keeley became his party's go-to-guy, the man leadership turned to when a new and complex problem appeared. Manned with 22 staffers, Keeley's office was at the center of virtually every important issue facing the Legislature. Walking into the office every morning, staff never knew what fresh puzzle they'd be hit with by the day's close.

The party's "good soldier," Keeley led efforts to uncover corruption in the state Insurance Commissioner's Office, unearth a solution to the energy crisis and bridge a \$26 billion budget deficit. On the way, he built a reputation as someone adept at distilling complex matters to their simplest forms, someone respectful of all, regardless of party or station.

"The consensus at the Capitol was Fred was one of the brighter members of the Legislature, someone who brought an incisive, analytical, almost coldly unemotional approach to the job," said the Sacramento Bee's Dan Walters, the dean of state political columnists.

"He became one of the movers around the Capitol because (he could) cut through stuff and get to the essence of a thing."

Forced out of the Assembly by term limits, Keeley is now embarking on a second life of sorts.

"I decided to follow my heart," he said recently when it was announced he would become executive director of the Planning and Conservation League instead of state finance director, a job he says Gov. Gray Davis offered him.

But others say the choice wasn't all "heart," and was in part foisted on him by a convergence of circumstances.

An 'effective' politician

Ask Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg how he'd describe Keeley if he had just one word, and you get this answer: "Effective."

Ask Keeley and you get a far different response, one that deflects attention from his talents: "Interested."

Legislators return calls quickly when the subject is Keeley. Falling over themselves in their haste to praise him, the abundant praise

ism that understands what's do-able and what's not.

"He had a very realism-driven sort of attitude, which is unusual in the Capitol," Walters said. "Rather than coming at something from an ideological agenda, he came from a this-is-what-it-is agenda. He was a liberal Democrat, but he didn't let that stand in the way of approaching things realistically."

The past year saw some of Keeley's greatest legislative success. Of the 19 bills he sent to the governor, 18 were signed into law. Those included:

- Bringing the Castro Adobe in South County into the state parks system.

- Bringing Hatton Canyon in Monterey County, originally earmarked as a freeway, into the state parks system while simultaneously solving the local transportation problem. The area includes one of the only remaining pristine Monterey pine forests.

- Securing a \$3 million grant to complete funding to turn the old train depot site in Santa Cruz into a park.

- Barring Ward Valley in Southern California as a future dump for radioactive waste.

- Extending inheritance rights to the state's registered domestic partners.

- Giving mobile-home park residents the first right of refusal to collectively buy their parks.

The year also saw the groundbreaking for a new Pajaro Valley high school, the end result of a complicated deal Keeley brokered between environmental and education interests. The deal blocked future development of land west of Highway 1 near Watsonville.

Detractors

Despite abundant praise by colleagues, Keeley has his detractors.

Some began to question Keeley after what they saw as an about-face during last year's hearings regarding a questionable software contract the state had with the Oracle Corp.

Chief prosecutor of the administration during Quackenbush hearings, Keeley was suddenly the governor's chief defender. Now commonly referred to as the "Tuesday Night Massacre," Keeley was brought in to replace Assemblyman Dean Florez, who was leading an investigation highly critical of Davis.

The turnaround came not long after Senate redistricting threw Keeley's political future into question. He had planned on running for the 15th District Senate seat, now held by Santa Cruz Republican Bruce McPherson. But the district was dismembered, apparently after Keeley crossed swords with Senate President Pro Tem John Burton.

Keeley refused to run against McPherson in 2000 after Burton offered \$1.5 million in campaign funds.

Keeley paid a huge political price,

morning and early afternoon were spent on legislation Keeley sponsored. Lunch brought no reprieve.

"He'd forget to eat, so we'd have to make sure and remind him to do that," said Bonny Hawley, his chief of staff. "He had exactly the same thing for lunch every day: a turkey sandwich, baked potato chips, and a Snapple. We'd just make sure that appeared on his desk."

In the afternoon, Keeley would put on his leadership hat and take on issues assigned by the Assembly speaker. Dinner would be ordered in, with the day often ending as late as midnight, particularly when budget hearings were under way.

Added to this were Keeley's house and committee responsibilities. Mondays and Thursdays were interspersed with presiding over the Assembly; Tuesdays and Wednesdays were spent dashing to committee meetings — to present bills or fulfill membership duties. Oftentimes, meetings overlapped, resulting in a magical act oft performed by state legislators, Keeley said — being in more than one place at one time.

"The pressure is hard to describe," he said of daily Capitol life. "The state Capitol environment of the world's fifth largest economy is very fast-paced and very challenging. It stretches and tests the limits of the people who (serve there), and there's no place to hide."

Keeley said he still managed to get back to his Boulder Creek home most weekends, but not to rest — the days were booked solid with district activities.

Keeley's outlet is his running. A veteran half-marathoner, Keeley can't start a day without a long run. The exercise not only clears his mind but gives him the energy to get through each day, he said.

"It didn't matter if he'd been up until 2 in the morning working on energy," Hawley said. "It just floored the staff. People who were half his age couldn't keep up with him."

Fighting cynicism

After six years in the underbelly of state politics, Keeley could be forgiven for a cynical streak. But Keeley called cynicism an "intellectual cancer" that destroys creativity, and said he refuses to partake of it.

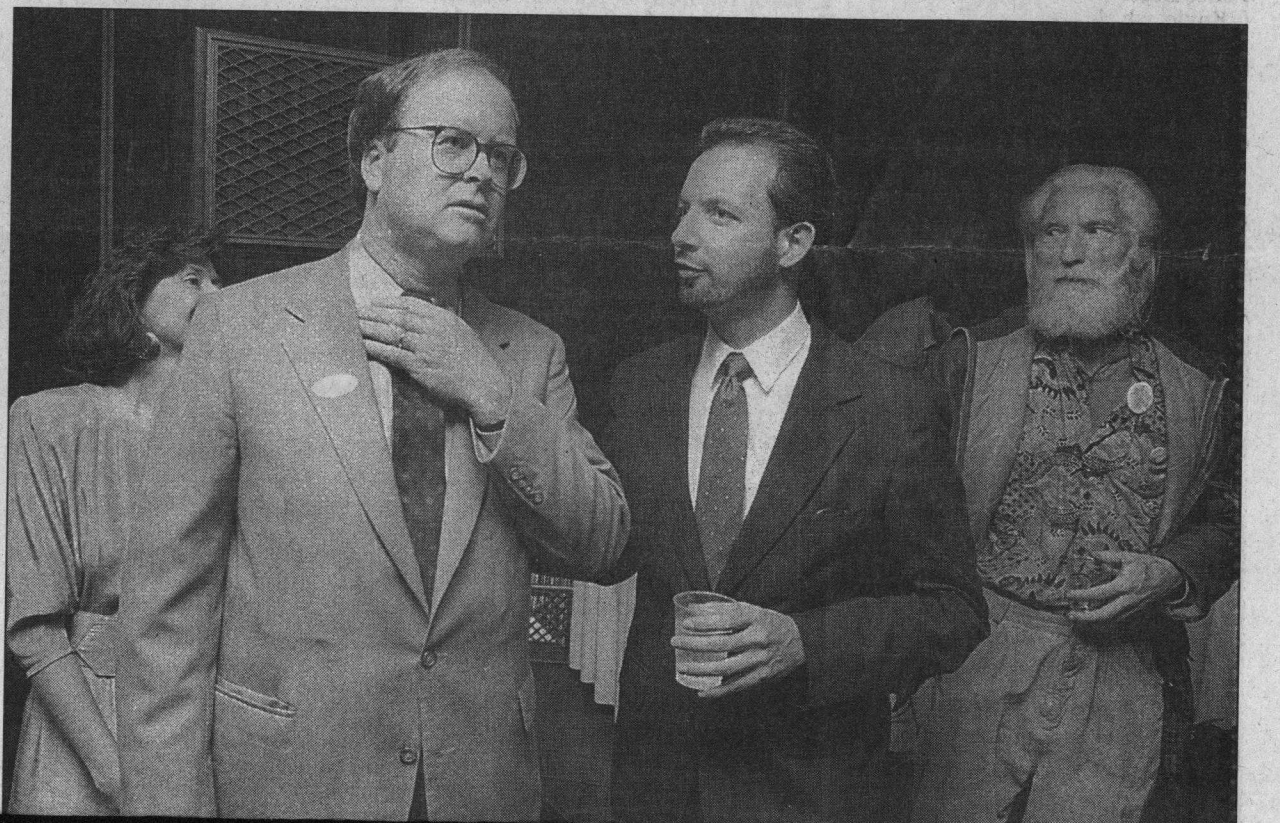
"I think it's important in this line of work to have a healthy streak of skepticism ... but cynicism, to me, is surrendering. It's saying the system can't be made to work and so you give up."

Keeley's accomplishments during 22 years of political office make a good case the system can work. A product of the social movements sweeping the country in the late '60s, Keeley's baptism into politics came while stumping for Robert Kennedy during his 1968 presidential bid. After earning a degree in social science from San Jose



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file photos

Fred Keeley reflecting at a candidate forum on March 16, 1988. Other candidates included Robley Levy, Dave Tunno, Jan Beautz, Bob Taren, Dan Forbus, Jeff Bosshard, Laurence Frommhagen, Jack Gordon, Mitchell Azus, Gerald Larrabee and Akihiro Hane.



"Fred Keeley is not about show. He's about getting real things done and moving the ball," said Steinberg, a Sacramento Democrat. "He was willing to put in the 'butt time,' as we refer to it. He wasn't one of those guys to fly in and out of meetings. He was the guy who would sit down and often leave the Capitol after midnight or later."

Steinberg recalled Keeley's leadership two years ago during the investigation into state Insurance Commissioner Charles Quackenbush, accused of misusing his office for political gain. Keeley's persistent questioning uncovered a series of damaging details that ultimately forced Quackenbush to resign. Keeley worked the corridors between Democrats and Republicans to make the investigation bipartisan, rather than try to embarrass the competition.

Ironically, Keeley's work in sealing Quackenbush's downfall was what launched him into leadership.

"Longtime observers commented they had never seen hearings so organized and deliberative," Steinberg said. "I think it was really a high moment for the Legislature."

Keeley's next turn in the spotlight came with the energy crisis, when Speaker Robert Hertzberg turned to him after blackouts started. Keeley learned difficult industry jargon and became Hertzberg's negotiator, spokesman and point man for all things energy-related.

Keeley's grasp of an elephantine and diverse body of knowledge, combined with being a "quick study," are two reasons he's so effective, legislators said.

But it may be his equal respect for high-ranking official, staffer and janitor that brought Keeley such success as the state's referee. Time and time again, that characteristic stood out in the minds of his colleagues.

"He's very respectful of other people, even if he disagrees with them," said Assemblywoman Hannah-Beth Jackson, a Democrat who represents Santa Barbara and Ventura. "He's a gentleman."

Taking advantage

Problem-solving was not Keeley's only strength. He used his position in the inner circle to his advantage, bringing legislation to the table that might otherwise have gotten lost.

He wrote some of the most successful environmental policy in the state's history. The landmark Marine Life Management Act of 1998, which bolstered fisheries in state waters by focusing on whole marine environments rather than species, was penned by Keeley. He also won voter approval of the two largest park and environmental bonds in the nation's history, earmarking \$4.7 billion for the protection of natural resources in just two years. The feat stands as one of Keeley's proudest achievements.

Some credit his success on the legislative front to a pragmatic liberal-

good reason.

"I think Sen. McPherson is a good senator who does a good job. There's more to life than crawling over the bodies of good people to get ahead," he said.

Keeley also had just been appointed speaker pro tem, and wanted to see that through. At that time, he had no reason to doubt he'd be able to run for McPherson's seat in four years, when McPherson was termed out.

But the new 15th District was redrawn in favor of a Central Valley Democrat, and now includes the southern half of Santa Cruz County attached to a sprawling area stretching south to San Luis Obispo, putting it firmly in Republican hands. The upper half of Santa Cruz went to the 11th district, an area dominated by the Silicon Valley, where Keeley is largely unknown.

Keeley didn't go down without a fight. He filed an appeal with the U.S. Department of Justice, contending the new boundaries, by splitting the county, muffled the voices of county residents, as well as the Central Coast's emerging Latino community. The Justice Department upheld the boundaries.

Keeley was in political limbo.

"He needed that state Senate district," Walters said.

Some say Keeley changed his tune after the blow.

"There's a group of people around the Capitol who dislike Fred very much," Walters said. "Once he got screwed out of the Senate seat, they feel he became very political and conniving. ... (Oracle) struck many people as a strange turnaround, which fueled belief he was angling for a job in the administration."

Bipartisan support

A gesture made during Keeley's last days in office suggests his detractors are in the minority. Two days before the end of the session, a dozen Republican staffers paid a visit to Keeley's office. They bore a framed card thanking him for his work. While they might not have agreed with him on issues, Keeley always treated them and their bosses with respect, the staffers wrote.

That, more than any award or honor nailed to the wall, demonstrates the level of respect Keeley had, said Clyde Macdonald, his legislative director.

"It's something that just doesn't happen around here," added Harry Ermoian, Keeley's deputy legislative director.

Keeley's staff says he was an easy-going boss who mentored employees and delegated responsibility so staffers could perform at their highest level. All put in long hours, but no one minded.

"It was a phenomenal experience," Ermoian said. "No two days were alike."

A typical day started at 8 a.m. with a working breakfast among policy staff at Keeley's desk. Most of the

private sector, working as a financial manager for Transamerica Corp.

That didn't last long. In 1981, he decided to dedicate his life to public service, taking a 50 percent pay cut to work for then-county Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, who represented the San Lorenzo Valley. That was followed by five years as then-Assemblyman Sam Farr's chief of staff.

Keeley was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1989, replacing Cucchiara and joining such progressive vanguards as Gary Patton. Focusing on environmental protection and growth management, he put together the agreement that saved the South Ridge in Felton, home to environmentally sensitive sand parkland habitat. Keeley also led the effort to create the Central Coast Alliance, a Medi-Cal HMO that dramatically increased access to health care for low-income residents.

In 1996, Keeley defeated a Monterey County prosecutor for the 27th Assembly District seat. Within two hours of being sworn in, he fired off a letter to then-speaker Cruz Bustamante, calling for removal of four Republican appointees to the Coastal Commission.

While not cynical after his long political career, Keeley does have his frustrations — but not the typical sort. He feels fortunate for the work his position as speaker pro tem allowed him to do, but says the job also gave him a bird's-eye view of the state's condition.

"The job put me in a position to see how many large and vexing problems there are facing the state," he said. "As hard as we worked, there were still more mountains of hard, vexing work to tackle."

Keeley is also somewhat skeptical of term limits. On the one hand, he likely couldn't have served without them, he said. They've also greatly increased the diversity of Assembly members, he said. But his experience working for Farr — before term limits were enacted — allowed him to see how limits have influenced state political dynamics.

"Term limits have completely changed the reward and value system of the Legislature," he said. "The old system rewarded patience and loyalty. Term limits rewards creativity and initiative."

Assembly members no longer have the institutional memory of their predecessors. That memory is now confined to staff, lobbyists, and civil servants, whose power has increased, Keeley said.

Also increased is the power of the other two branches of government, whose stability is now much greater than the Legislature's, Keeley said.

"One consequence of term limits will probably be that the Legislature has to fight for relevance with the other two branches," he said.

A new chapter

Colleagues and observers say Kee-

ley's move to take the helm of the Planning and Conservation League, the state's premiere environmental lobbying organization, is a good fit.

"It's a pretty good slot for him," Walters said. "The Planning and Conservation League has become a very big player in state environmental politics. It's a high-profile job."

The job — which began Jan. 2 — gives Keeley an opportunity to carve policy in an area close to his heart, while doing so in a less intense atmosphere.

But Keeley hasn't ruled out a future run for political office — not necessarily because he's angling for it. After the surprising turn of events of the past two years, Keeley's learned one can never be sure what the future holds.

"I still consider myself relatively young and with plenty of professional opportunity in front of me," he said.

Whether opportunity will arise is hard to say. It's unlikely Keeley could win a Senate bid, and his chances of securing a statewide office are equally dim, Walters said.

"There's no place for him really to go," he said. "There's theoretical possibilities, but I don't see much there."

That could be for the better. Keeley's dogged dedication to state politics has taken a toll. After working 80-hour weeks for three years, Keeley is worn, perhaps accounting for a two-week hospital stay in November that left him several sizes thinner. (Keeley declined to comment on the nature of his illness. He would only say he is now in good health and undergoing treatment, and that the illness is not life-threatening).

The long hours apparently have taken a personal toll, too. Keeley is living in Sacramento full time, away from his wife of 27 years, Maria Rodriguez-Keeley. The couple reportedly has separated. Keeley declined to comment on his marriage.

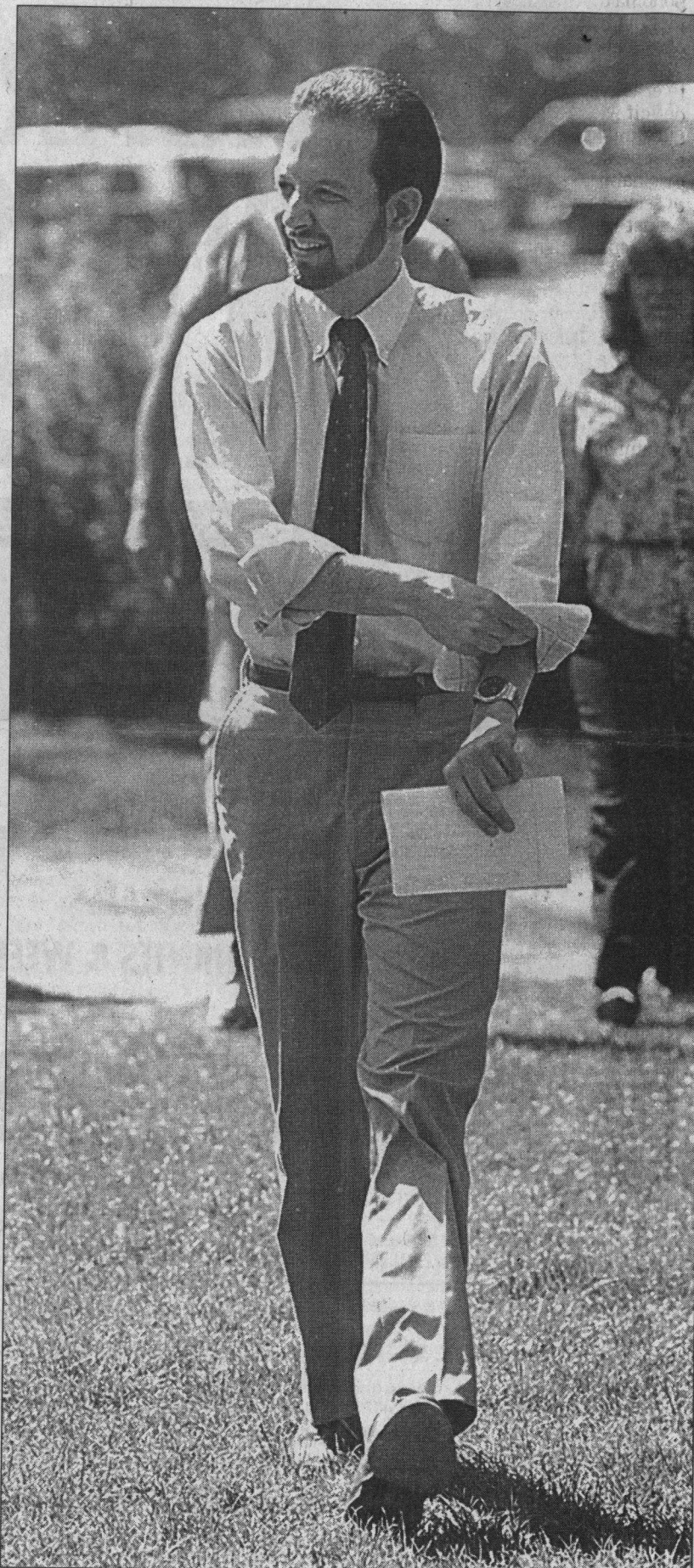
In past Sentinel articles, Keeley often has spoken of the vital support and love his wife and in-laws have provided. Keeley's parents died at relatively young ages, and his family is small.

Separation also means leaving a mountaintop home in Boulder Creek Keeley was known to love.

Whatever the status of his personal affairs, Keeley said he has emerged chastened from their neglect, and with a resolution to change.

"I was in direct public service for 22 years and I am proud of my record, but it comes at a price," he said. "Frankly, the last six years, I put my career ahead of everything. I think that I want to live a more balanced life."

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Fred Keeley gets down to business March 14, 1988, when he announces his candidacy for county supervisor.