

^{mayors} The year of John Laird: a time of cooperation

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SANTA CRUZ — Politicians are constantly accused of making promises they don't keep.

When John Laird became mayor last November, he promised to bring a spirit of cooperation to the City Council.

That wasn't an easy promise to fill. The council at the time was rocking with political and philosophical differences, and suffering from the fallout of a particularly bitter election campaign.

If there was anyone who would bring a sense of unity or accomplishment to the council, council members felt it was Laird. They selected him as their leader on a unanimous vote.

Somehow — despite controversies over such things as a planned electronics park at UC Santa Cruz, a labor dispute at The Boardwalk, proposed widening of Highway 17, and alleged police brutality of protesters — Laird managed to keep his promise.

Laird's one-year term as mayor expires

Tuesday, although he will continue to serve as a city councilman until next fall, or longer if he makes a successful bid for re-election in the November 1985 election.

Laird will probably be most remembered in the annals of local politics as the city's first gay mayor.

But, for those who sat side-by-side with him through hundreds of hours of council meetings, Laird will also be known as a fair-minded mayor with a sense of humor who had a knack for turning arguments into procedures.

He has been a realistic bureaucrat.

If he couldn't make citizens happy with the system, he at least tried to tell them what step to take next in the system to pursue their happiness.

Or, if they had reached a government cul de sac, he at least told them, "thank you very much" for coming to the council with their concerns.

Even the most caustic comments from citizens at council public hearings were answered with Laird's soft-spoken "thank you very much."

"I really admire the way (Laird) handles a meeting," said Councilman Arnold Levine, a conservative who was often on the opposite side of the vote from the liberal mayor.

"He is very good with people. I admired him."

Added Councilman Spiro Mellis, another conservative: "John has been an excellent mayor. He ran a very tight ship. He did an outstanding job, and if he wanted to do it again, I would vote for him again."

Chances are Laird will not "do it

again," but will be succeeded by Mardi Wormhoudt, a liberal, who is now the vice-mayor.

Wormhoudt commented, "John set breathtaking records for going places, doing things and being everywhere."

"He brought enormous enthusiasm and intelligence to the mayor's office."

Laird doesn't "relish" confrontations, he says, but he is known to take a hard stand on issues.

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Laird

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What he doesn't like about politics is "a lot of times, you don't get to the issues because personalities get in the way."

When he took over as mayor, Laird said he told himself he would step in the middle if there were any personal attacks on council members. "It happened on a few minor occasions," he noted, but meetings mostly progressed in a spirit of cooperation and decorum.

Laird said he felt it was important that all sides be heard on an issue, "so that one group is not screened out of the process."

The result, according to Laird, has been "the people who used to run the community single-handedly are now part of a group that is running the community."

Laird claims council decisions "mirror the community. If the solutions are to stick, they have to be what the community wants. I think people are recognizing that this is a generally progressive community."

One of Laird's first public statements as mayor was to announce the fact that he is gay.

"Yes, it is true what was in the papers. I am gay. I think it is important to get it out in the open," Laird announced on the night of his swearing-in as mayor.

But, with his typical humor, Laird also quipped he was "the first UCSC graduate to be mayor; the first lifelong Chicago Cubs fan to be mayor ... and the second left-handed mayor in a row." (Wormhoudt will be the third, if she is selected.)

Laird says the announcement about his homosexuality has had mostly an "unspoken" impact throughout the year of his mayorship.

He noted how local coverage of gay events increased tremendously after he became mayor.

"It wasn't much of an issue for me, personally," he commented, "but it broke stereotypes."

Laird said his appointment also gave him the opportunity to be a role model for the 10 percent of the community he estimates to be gay or lesbian.

The result has been to draw more gays and lesbians into community organizations, said Laird. "They realize there is nothing that is holding them back."

But Laird also says he hates labels.

And he wants to be remembered for his work, not for his sexual preference.

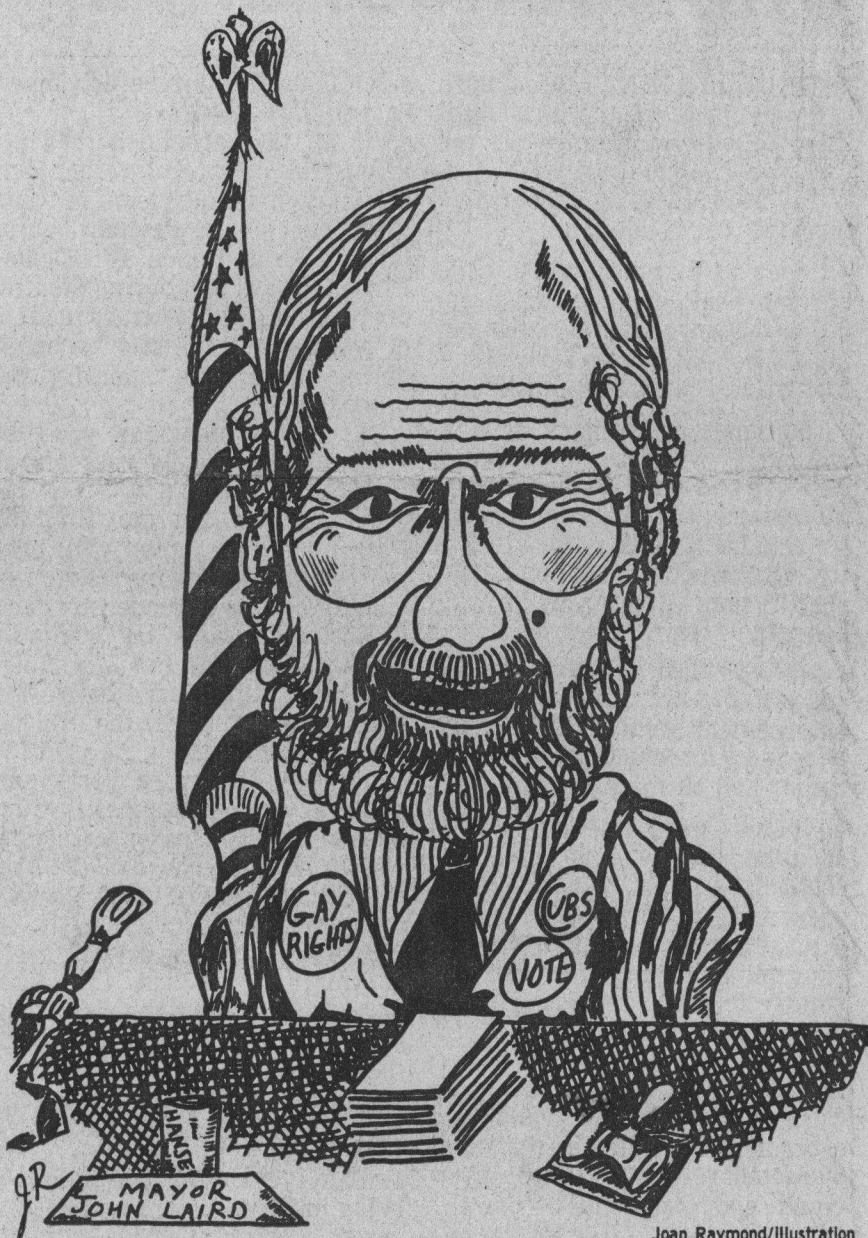
He is hooked on politics. "I really enjoy doing this. I'm really happy with the year as mayor."

The political bug has bitten him deeply enough that he would like to find a way to

be a paid politician. In this county, that means becoming a county supervisor or state legislator.

But Laird is a realist and knows running for those offices would probably mean vying against other politicians in his own liberal camp.

"I'll just have to play it by ear," he said



Joan Raymond/Illustration