

Secret of Burton's Popularity Mystery to Fellow Supervisors

Newest Member Of County Board Keeping Eye On Budget

Burton Means Controversy

(Editor's note — This is the first in a series of personality articles on Santa Cruz county's five supervisors. The first two articles deal with always controversial Robert Burton, newest member of the board. Other articles will examine the good, bad and neutral points of supervisors Hulda McLean, Lewis Nelson, Vincent Locatelli and Francis Silliman.

By Ron Miller

It's a fair gamble that County Supervisor Robert Burton can make more enemies in a given day than any other 73-year-old could hope to round up in a lifetime of cantankerous behavior.

But it's also a good bet the sometimes stubborn supervisor could corral at least an equal number of supporters in the same period of time without breaking a sweat.

"I don't know how he does it," a fellow supervisor said the other day. "It's enigmatic."

"It's a sad commentary on the mental health of the community," a more outspoken critic added.

What puzzles them is Burton's ability to gather wide public support for ideas that quite often fall into great disfavor with the majority of his fellow supervisors and county department heads. He has even been known to turn such political unpopularity into political advantage.

For example, when Burton was a city councilman seeking election to the board of supervisors, he became highly critical of closed sessions of the council that were being held before public meetings. His acid comments caused the council to censure him a scant week before election day.

"Something like that could have wrecked another candidate," a supervisor said. "But the public felt Burton was being picked on and took up his cause at the polls."

Burton buried opponent Walter

G. Merrill under 771 votes for the leadership of the Branciforte district, the largest of the five districts. When they filed statements of their total campaign costs with the county clerk, incumbent Merrill disclosed a total bill of \$1409 while Burton's amounted to only \$419.

After Burton took office as a supervisor, he began to challenge fellow supervisor Vincent Locatelli's record for "no" votes on money matters. He soon outdistanced Locatelli — then the board's "watchdog" on budgets — and established himself as the county's arch-conservative on governmental spending.

In so doing, Burton has kept the biggest promise he made to the voters who elected him a year ago last June: to keep an eagle-eye on "unnecessary" county spending.

Though Burton's numerous votes against spending have garnered him generous applause from some quarters, the large number of his efforts have been in vain.

His bid to trim the \$90,000-plus planning department budget this year was fruitless. He claimed the huge budget was "too much of a good thing," but was voted down 4-1.

When Locatelli jokingly voted to do away with the budget for sheriff's deputies' uniforms, Burton thought it was a fine move and voted for it. It was defeated at a 3-2 vote.

Burton has made it clear he is not very favorable to construction of a new juvenile hall. A few weeks ago he asked the board to place the hall proposal on the June ballot just to see if the public liked the idea of using building funds for the project. He was voted down.

"We can't put every decision we have to make on the ballot," Chairman Lewis Nelson told Burton. "That's what the public elected us for — to make these decisions."

When the supervisors met as a board of equalization several months ago, Burton was praised loudly by a pair of property owners for coming to their defense in matters of taxation.

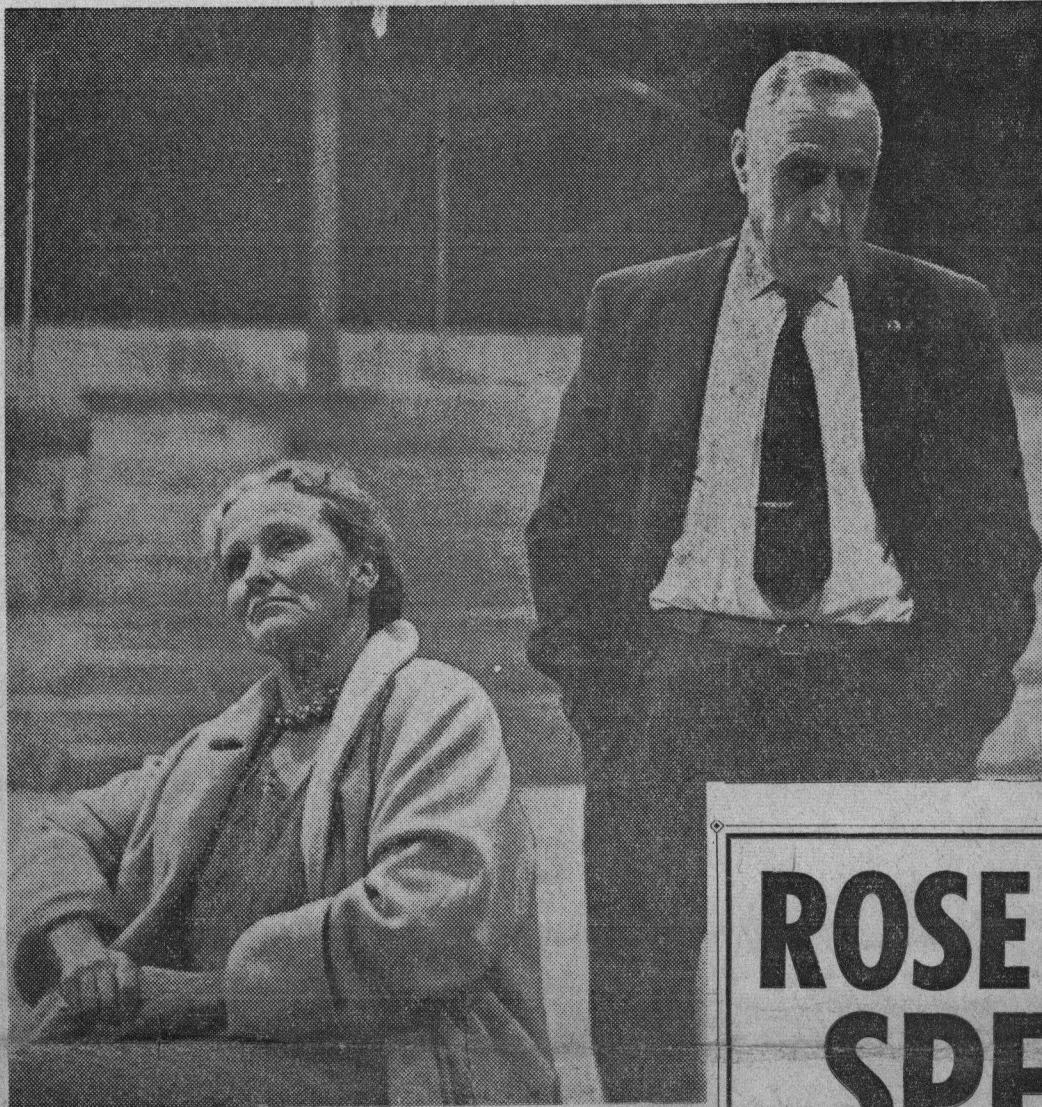
"You have done more for the people in your district than any other supervisor before you," Anthony Elzer of Scotts Valley told Burton in front of his fellow board members.

Another taxpayer, R. B. Bernard of Santa Cruz, accused his supervisor of "slitting my throat and hanging me up to bleed" in tax matters. His protest, like Elzer's, was denied by the board.

"I wish you were my supervisor," Bernard told Burton, also in front of his disgruntled fellow supervisors.

But Assessor Harold Kane has a less benevolent attitude toward Burton. The pair erupted into a vicious argument over taxation during the last equalization hearings and had to be quieted down by the chairman. Now whenever Burton's name is mentioned around him, Kane is likely to grumble something and then change the subject.

Burton's penchant for voting



"no" has not been confined to budget matters and taxation, however. He was outvoted on Bonny Doon zoning, establishing the zoning administrator post and allowing the county planning director to send violations of zoning to the district attorney for prosecution.

With Locatelli, Burton unsuccessfully voted against the county-wide general plan and for abolishing the county administrative office.

Yet despite his numerous disagreements with the board on controversial issues and a good deal of bickering over minor financial matters, Burton may well be the most popular supervisor on the board.

"His desire is to please the people who voted him into office," says Mrs. Elmer Lewis, chairman of the Scotts Valley Property Owners association. "We are very pleased, very happy."

That type of comment is very typical of people in Burton's district and many think Mrs. Lewis has pinpointed the key to Burton's success.

"But who knows?" a county official said the other day. "I doubt if Burton himself does."

(Next: Burton analyzes himself.)

County Supervisor Hulda McLean doesn't seem to be showing much enthusiasm for fellow board member Robert Burton's views as he addresses members of the audience during the recent Scotts Valley public hearing on the county-wide general plan. Burton voted "no" on adoption of the plan and was defeated by the majority of his fellow supervisors. Always in the center of controversy, Burton often impresses the public more than he does his fellow board members.

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