

Watsonville did a flip-flop in 1979

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

1979 was the year City Hall turned topsy-turvy.

The year began solemnly as the death certificate of the proposed Freedom annexation was signed by the county clerk, after a blizzard of protest signatures quickly crushed the plan.

By the end of January, the council — which had traditionally made its decisions in relative solitude and with few repercussions — found itself the focus of community interest.

The first big issue of the year involved a proposed squid plant on Second Street. The city Planning Commission had inked out the proposal, but the council voted 4-2 to allow squid mogul Gaspare Aliotti to build the plant on a vacant lot near the western end of the street.

Council members maintained they were "only following the law" since the street was zoned industrial. But residents of the area lamented that their neighborhood would be destroyed. "Fish, fish, fish — that's all we'll smell," shouted one resident.

When the council finally approved the plant, a sense of outrage permeated the community. Although the council majority emphasized that the issue was strictly a legal one, critics portrayed the local lawmakers as a heartless bunch, insensitive to the needs of common folk. (Aliotti later decided not to build the

Second Street plant, saying he didn't mean to cause the residents there such anguish.)

Soon after the Battle of the Squid Plant, a controversial decision made in 1977 came back to haunt the council. The council had OK'd a 44-unit apartment complex on Pennsylvania Drive near Main Street, despite strident complaints from Town and Country district residents, who feared that their single-family homes would drown in a sea of apartments.

When construction finally began last winter, neighbors threw epithets at the project, calling it "Stalag 13" and "slum row." What made architectural matters worse was the prison-like gray paint that was first applied to the exterior. Also, the apartments were located right at the northern gateway to the city, for all Watsonville residents and visitors to see.

The project quickly became a symbol of shabby growth, and was used to illustrate City Hall's "slipshod" system for approving new housing projects.

"I wish people would at least wait until the apartments are finished before they start complaining," said Mayor Bill Johnston a week before the May municipal election.

A few days before the election, workers began painting the 44 units brown, making them less stark. But the new color was too little too late.

Two long-time members of the council, Rex Clark (president of the League of California Cities and the Chamber of Commerce's Man of the Year) and Don Santi (a long-time civic leader who had helped bring the Antique Airplane Fly-In to Watsonville) went down to defeat. Elected were retired school principal Ann Soldo, Planning Commissioner Betty Murphy and cold storage plant manager Vido Deretich. Deretich became interested in the council seat after he fought to keep the squid plant off Second Street.

Although Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Soldo ran low-key campaigns that stressed "quality growth," Deretich campaigned with a vengeance. He passed out campaign brochures that contained a picture of him with an ax (to grind, of course). During campaign forums, he asserted that he'd "refer high-powered developers to Santa Cruz County Superior Court" if they give the city any trouble. "The problem with the City Council," he said flatly, "is that you're dealing with the board of realtors."

It was the most colorful city election in years, and over 50 percent of Watsonville's registered voters — a high turnout compared to past city elections — turned out at the polls.

The only incumbent to survive the election was Mayor Bill Johnston, who captured 51 percent of the vote. A 26-

year-old political neophyte, Bruce Diamond, won a respectable 43 percent, with Carlos Cervantes (who left town for the last two weeks of the campaign) pulling in 5 percent.

Since May, the new council members have carried through on their promises to rein in growth. Immediately after the election, the new council imposed a six-month freeze on new building applications until it could "get a handle" on the ramifications of the building boom. (In late December, the council extended the freeze.)

The council also set in motion plans to implement architectural review of building projects when it appointed a committee to draft an ordinance to regulate design.

In addition, the council tried to show it was more "people-oriented" by rezoning Second Street from industrial to single-family residential.

The philosophy of a carefully controlled growth was also supported by members of the "old" council. Even Mayor Johnston seemed to have tempered his enthusiasm for growth, conceding after the election that Watsonville residents were interested in quality construction — not quantity.

Just eight months ago, the City Council was considered the most "pro-growth" governmental body in Santa Cruz County. But now it's singing the opposite tune.