

# SC's new top planner: Resident involvement key

By SHANNA MCCORD  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

*Employees - City*  
SANTA CRUZ — A couple of months ago Greg Larson was traveling the state to help his college buddy, state Controller Steve Westly, campaign to become the next governor.

Now, he walks less than a half-mile from home to work

in his new job as city planning director.

Larson, 51, replaces Gene Arner, who retired and moved to Boise, Idaho, in October.

The planning director, a position that pays \$145,500 a year, is chiefly responsible for reviewing land-use decisions in the city and overseeing all new housing and busi-

See **PLANNER** on **PAGE A4**

Greg Larson ran Steve Westly's campaign for the Democratic nomination for governor before taking over as the city's planning director.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel



## Planner

Continued from Page A1

ness projects that come to town.

"My early read on Santa Cruz is that there are two dominant issues," Larson said during lunch Thursday. "One is the environmental blessings that must be enhanced and preserved. Two is jobs for this diverse population."

Larson, a member of the Sierra Club, said he is an advocate for careful long-term planning and managing new developments. He also is a strong believer in asking the community to get involved in sensitive decisions like proposals to bring big-box stores to Santa Cruz.

Larson has lived in Santa Cruz since 1999. He had just left his position as city manager of Milpitas when he moved here.

After some time off, Larson went to work as president of non-profit United Way Silicon Valley until Westly called in 2002 seeking help in getting elected state controller.

Larson and Westly met when they were classmates at Stanford in the mid-1970s. They started their political careers together as

co-presidents of the student body at Stanford and remain close today. Larson served as Westly's chief of staff and chief deputy controller before accepting the planning job here.

Larson said even if Westly had won the Democratic primary against state Treasurer Phil Angelides in June, he would still have taken the job in Santa Cruz because this is where he wants to raise his family and retire.

"Greg is one of the most talented people I know in state and local government," Westly said Thursday. "He's always had a balanced perspective and a track record of being progressive and understanding the community's needs."

"Santa Cruz is very lucky."

Larson, whose experiences in local government include stints with the city of Scottsdale, Ariz., and San Jose, drew the praise of county Treasurer Fred Keeley. The two met after Westly took office in 2003, and Keeley, a former state assemblyman, was running the Planning and Conservation League in Sacramento.

Keeley said the planning director's job in Santa Cruz is one of the most important in terms of shaping the city's future.

"Everything that goes through the Planning Department is scrutinized to a very, very significant degree by people who are directly, indirectly and very indirectly involved," Keeley said. "It takes a mature grown-up to deal with all the competing interests and voices that want to be heard and should be heard."

Larson is also up against ongoing budget shortfalls in the city. The Planning Department was hit last year with \$223,000 in budget cuts and was forced to scale back its public counter hours. More cuts could be on the way as the city faces a \$1.5 million deficit that will be addressed in October.

First on his to-do list in the new

job is to ensure the city's latest General Plan — a state-mandated blueprint and set of guidelines for how the city will look 15 years from now — is developed according to the environmental, economical and social needs of the community.

The new General Plan, effective in 2008, is currently being drafted by a coalition of city officials and community members.

"Every decision is driven by the general plan," Larson said. "There will be some tough issues, but the general plan can help the community achieve a common vision."

Contact Shanna McCord  
at [smccord@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:smccord@santacruzsentinel.com).