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Outgoing Santa Cruz County Supervisor Ellen Pirie and husband Terry Hancock are both joining the Peace Corps.

Pirie steps down after 12 years

Peace Corps could be next for outgoing supervisor

By JASON HOPPIN

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LA SELVA — When Ellen Pirie first ran for Santa Cruz County supervisor in 2000, she worried people couldn't pronounce her name.

An unknown and unhappy with how that year's field was shaping up, Pirie entered the race late and picked up some key endorsements along the way. She ended up topping the ballot in the June primary, fighting off accusations that she was too liberal for the county's 2nd District and cruised to a November win.

Few would mispronounce the outgoing three-term supervisor's name now. During 12 years, Pirie has established a reputation as a moderate voice, favoring county support for social service programs but also backing road projects such as a Highway 1 expansion while earning broad support from varied constituencies.

"I've approached most things as, 'We have a problem to solve. Let's solve the problem,'" Pirie said.

Pirie's last Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisor's meeting is Tuesday. Though a shoo-in for reelection, Pirie announced last year she was moving on from politics.

ROADS TO RAIL

Rather than bide time, Pirie shepherded several projects to fruition in her last months, including ending the decades-long wait for a new Aptos Village Plan. Her last major vote was to implement a no-shoot zone on upper Eureka Canyon Road, something first floated several years ago.

The year has included several other developments.

Construction of a long-sought Seacliff neighborhood park is under way as part of the Canterbury Park project, and the county's top transportation agency recently completed the \$14.2 million purchase of the

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PIRIE

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Branch Rail Line, something Pirie advocated for.

The bench excavation of the Pajaro River — something that at times seemed like it would stay on the drawing board forever — is also under way. Pirie also helped stop a plan to shutter branch libraries.

And while the widening of Highway 1 — something at the core of her 2000 campaign — never made it to her Aptos-area district, 2013 should see the completion of added lanes between Morrissey Boulevard and Soquel Drive.

But Pirie's post-politics plans could end up being more remarkable than her supervisory career. She and husband Terry Hancock are hoping to join the Peace Corps to

teach English abroad for two years, possibly in Africa.

The two have proceeded deep into the process, with one tentative assignment already scuttled due to safety concerns. Pirie is awaiting Plan B.

The idea has lingered since youth. Pirie said her husband took some convincing while her four children, the youngest of whom is finishing college, are cautiously encouraging.

But she was ready to do something other than a fourth term.

"It was not that I didn't like it anymore. It was just that I'm 62, and there are some other things that I want to do," Pirie said. "Four years is a long commitment when you're 62."

As a lawyer who spent her career helping the disadvantaged, Pirie said the Peace Corps is a way to continue a life of service. When the couple was asked where they were willing to go,

Pirie and Hancock placed no reservations on their next adventure.

"We pretty much said we'd go anywhere," Pirie said.

REMAINING ISSUES

She leaves office a highly respected supervisor with a knack for zooming in on practical questions. She has been attacked by a small but zealous cadre of property rights advocates, but she enjoys support from a broad range of constituencies.

While the district has stayed largely the same — transportation and neighborhood growth issues remain just as prevalent now as they did in 2000 — Pirie said she has changed over the years, including in a way anyone engaged in political debates in Santa Cruz County is familiar with.

"I'm more patient now," Pirie said.

Several issues remain for incoming Supervisor Zach Friend, including the proposed renovation of the Rancho Del Mar Shopping Center and the future of the Poor Clares and Par 3 golf course sites near State Park Drive, both of which are in limbo.

Friend easily won a June election over a crowded field for the seat. A police crime analyst whom Pirie endorsed as a successor, Friend will be sworn in Jan. 8.

"She is the rare political leader that put results over personal accolades and quietly fought every day to improve the district," Friend said. "Ellen did much of the heavy lifting on key transportation and improvement projects such as the Aptos Village Plan that I need to help see through the finish line."

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