

Being the 'gay mayor'

It isn't
a big deal
any more

By KATHY SALAMON
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Five years ago, when John Laird began his one-year stint as mayor of Santa Cruz, he found himself splashed on the front pages of newspapers around the country.

As the first openly gay mayor of Santa Cruz and one of three gay mayors in the country at the time, Laird became the subject of national media attention.

But a lot can change in five years.

Laird rotated out of the mayor's seat and served as a council member for four years. Last November, the council re-elected him mayor again. He is still one of only three openly gay mayors in the country, but this time, as to his sexual preference, not a mention appeared in the local press and not a peep was heard from anyone.

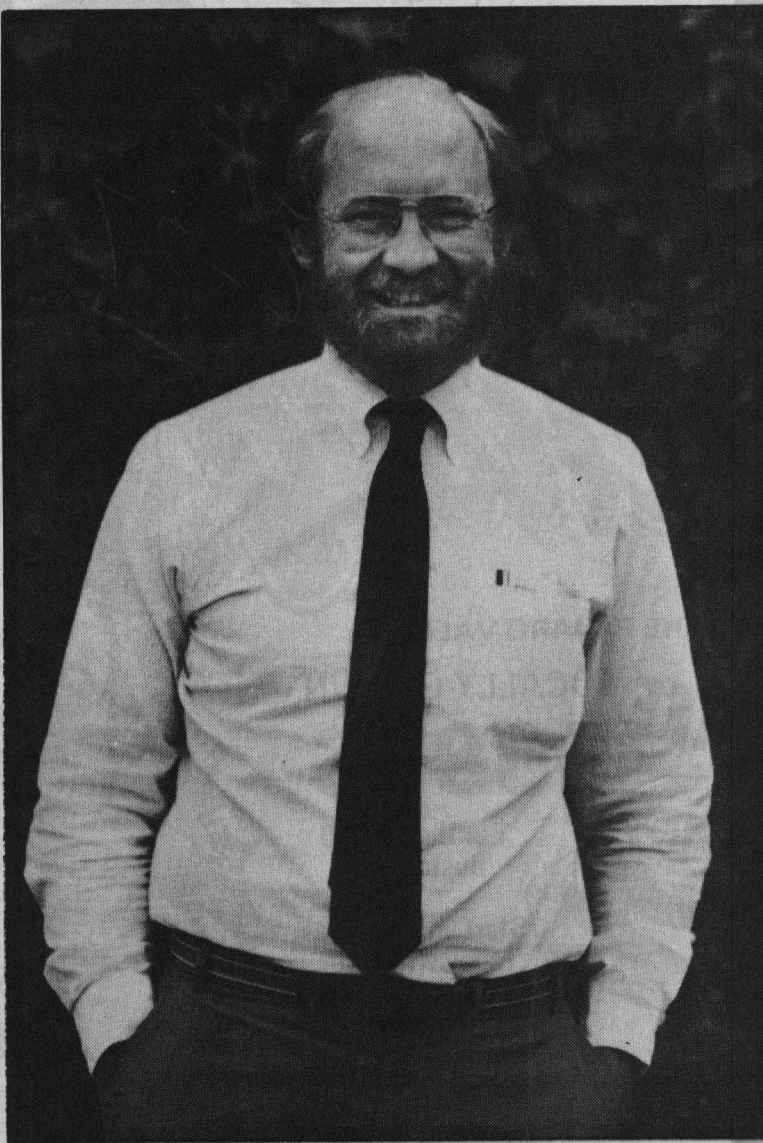
Yesterday, he marched in the Gay Freedom Day parade in San Francisco and introduced Mayor Art Agnos as the first San Francisco mayor who has ever participated in a Gay Freedom Day parade and rally.

"Dianne Feinstein never participated," Laird said of Agnos' predecessor. "I think she was afraid a transvestite would grab her and give her a kiss. I guess she was afraid a photo of that would live through the rest of her political life."

Laird, 38, knows firsthand how the press can blow something meaningless into full-scale coverage. But he also knows the publicity is short-lived.

To many in Santa Cruz, Laird symbolizes a liberal element in the town that began growing with the opening of UC-Santa Cruz in 1965. Laird, in fact, arrived in Santa Cruz in the late 1960s as a UCSC student. Like many other former students, he never left the area. He now works part-time as an analyst for the county.

When Laird first ran for the Santa Cruz City Council in 1981, an alternative news-weekly wrote that he would



Laird: 'I always considered myself open about being gay.'

probably be a single-issue candidate because he was gay.

That didn't happen. In fact, none of the daily newspapers or other mainstream media in the area picked up on it.

"I always considered myself open about being gay," Laird said. "It was not something I ever wanted to call a press conference about because it's not something you would hear straight politicians talking about."

Laird, who has an easy laugh and a strawberry-blond growth of hair on his chin, can recall the day before he was first elected mayor in 1983 when a reporter asked him point-blank if he was gay. Laird said yes.

"He paused and looked surprised," Laird said, recalling the reporter's response. "Then he asked me how it felt to be the first gay mayor of Santa Cruz. I said, 'You mean the first openly gay mayor.'"

"He immediately asked

who the non-openly gay mayors were, and I told him he was on his own for that one."

In the next few days, Laird fielded questions from 40 to 50 reporters from around the country while the story was hot.

"After two days, it calmed down," he said, "and people started asking me about the potholes on their streets, getting abandoned vehicles towed and what are we going to do about the water supply."

After that, Laird's homosexuality never became an issue in Santa Cruz again.

"In the end, I think I was able to benefit from the furor," Laird said. "My parents (who live in Pleasanton) were not thrilled to see it on the front pages of their daily newspaper, but it turned out to be a growing experience for them. They received lots of letters from other parents who wrote they were proud of their gay children."