

MARDI WORMHOUDT: 1937-2009

Wormhoudt leaves lasting mark on environment, women's rights

Former mayor, supervisor successfully fought development

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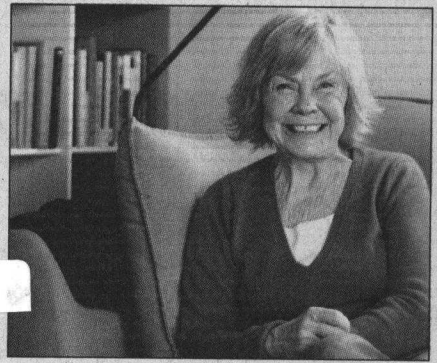
In the 1970s, Santa Cruz County was on the brink of some major developments.

The North Coast, where Wilder Ranch State Park now stands, was being eyed for a 50,000-person sister city to Santa Cruz. Near Davenport, PG&E had its sights on a nuclear power plant. In the greenbelt that today surrounds Santa Cruz, a San

Francisco developer was plotting the future of what's now Pogonip. And at Lighthouse Field, a conference center was being discussed.

The proposals would serve as a rallying cry for a then-budding environmental community, and the slow defeat of each would galvanize a movement that put Santa Cruz on the map as a bastion of activism and a hub of progressive thinking.

It was in these politics that Mardi Wormhoudt immersed herself when



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Mardi Wormhoudt relaxes at home in 2005.

she and her young family moved from Southern California to Santa Cruz in the mid-1970s. The mother of four and soon-to-be councilwoman, who quickly became an activist in her Westside

SEE WORMHOUDT ON A2

WORMHOUDT

Continued from A1

neighborhood, would eventually come to lead and help shape the powerful progressive agenda.

Wormhoudt died Wednesday of melanoma at age 72. She leaves behind a legacy of bringing women's and civil rights to the fore of local politics as well as maintaining the community's long-standing environmental tradition.

At the same time, critics, and there were many, blamed her for stifling economic opportunity, not dealing with transportation and traffic problems and not allowing reasonable development.

"When she got elected to council, we were still in this mode of we've got to stop San Jose from taking over Santa Cruz," said Mike Rotkin, a longtime councilman, who served with Wormhoudt when she first entered city politics in 1981. "It was hard to live in the county back then and not think growth was the major issue."

During her nine years on the council, Wormhoudt harbored tough stands against development. She wrestled with the university over its early expansion plans. She wrote a successful 1985 ballot measure that limited the oil industry in the city. And she supported the city's push for a greenbelt through Pogonip, an open-space corridor she'd later seek to expand north of the city.

"Without Mardi, there would have

been the opportunity for more development," said Dan Haifley, director of environmental advocacy group O'Neill Sea Odyssey. "She was very, very strong on the environment."

Her crowning environmental achievement would come later, during her 12 years on the county Board of Supervisors, when she fought to save two slivers of coastal land, which had escaped earlier protection. The 7,500-acre Coast Dairies was spared from a 139-home planned community and the 2,300-acre Gray Whale Ranch avoided a 73-home subdivision.

Public acquisition of both, which Wormhoudt orchestrated, meant the rural North Coast would remain free of development.

Her wariness toward growth, however, was not a position enjoyed by all. Wormhoudt often locked heads with business leaders and advocates of commerce, many in South County, who criticized her policies as hostile to economic growth and a hindrance to affordable housing development.

"There's no doubt that she was slow-growth and she was very forthright in her comments," said Katherine Beiers, a councilwoman. "People saw her as anti-business."

A truce between her and the business community took hold after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake when, as mayor of Santa Cruz, she led city efforts to rebuild. But it didn't last.

Even in Wormhoudt's retirement from politics in 2006, she remained a vocal critic of freeway widening and university growth. And her foes never

changed their minds about the community being shorted by her lifelong opposition.

In her 21 years of elected office, Wormhoudt's greatest accomplishments, by her own admission, came in her fights for social justice.

Before her run for City Council, her push for a Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women put her in the limelight and undoubtedly helped her to win record numbers of votes in the forthcoming election. The commission still works to this day.

"She just had such a strong sense of right and wrong," said friend and onetime campaign manager Cathy Calfo. "She always said to me, 'You know your problem, Cathy; you think life is fair and it's not.' Mardi came at things from that point of view, that life wasn't fair and it was her pursuit to make things right."

A major initiative she led as a county supervisor was to reform the juvenile justice system. And today, the social services community credits her with helping reduce the need for incarceration and putting in place a successful rehab program.

She also helped launch Gemma, a program to help incarcerated women with their transition to better lives.

"The progressive tradition is really what do we want to do, as a community ... not what's best as individuals," said Gary Patton, whom Wormhoudt succeeded on the Board of Supervisors. "Mardi really understood at a fundamental level what government was supposed to do, and she made government work."