

Progressive highway commissioner unseated by pro-development Republicans

Transportation Reform

by Gary Richardson

Can \$125,000 buy a local, “nonpartisan” election? As we say in Idaho, the most Republican state in the nation, “You bet!”

In November 1996, I won a two-year term on the three-member Ada County Highway District Commission. I received nearly 60 percent in a county-wide election, which was a surprise to almost everyone. My opponent, a retired Army general, received strong support from business, real estate and development interests. Because campaign-finance reporting in the nonpartisan race was not required, how much he received or from whom is unknown. I spent \$3,600.

I campaigned for “Moving people”: moving people to get involved in the transportation decisions affecting them; moving people toward a vision of a community learning from transportation mistakes made elsewhere; moving people by providing safe, convenient facilities for the 40 percent of us who walk, bike or ride the bus instead of drive. Pointing to increasing traffic threats to existing neighborhoods and the darkening pall of smog on our horizon, I wanted to help the Treasure Valley avoid the fate of Los Angeles, Phoenix or Denver.

The message came through loud and clear, resonating with voters from all over of the county. They were concerned about growth and development that was out of control and dismayed by a bureaucracy that cared only about accommodating automobile traffic that was growing twice as fast as our population.

Of course, these issues are not confined only to the Boise area, but are being played out all over the West. Most developers prefer no restraint, leading to the urban sprawl that we see virtually everywhere. On the other hand, there is the “smart growth” movement which includes the few developers who see they can

work with others towards a managed growth that provides more housing without riding roughshod over other community needs. There is a small “smart growth” movement in Idaho, but as my experience shows, we are still greatly out-gunned by the forces for development as usual.

My 1996 election coincided with the reelection to the ACHD Commission of Susan Eastlake, a neighborhood leader and friend, who earlier had unseated a retired contractor. I ran at least in part as Susan’s stalking-horse. Calling her a “radical,” the head of the Associated General Contractors wrote a letter urging his members to donate \$30,000 to block her reelection. He accused her of delaying highway projects “in the misguided hope that with time and congestion, project costs will make improvements so expensive that people will opt for bicycles and mass transit instead of autos.” While I knew the charges to be untrue, I found laudable their purported objectives.

When we took our seats in January 1997, there was great concern that Commissioner

Eastlake and I would “clean house.” We did eventually start a search for a new agency head, but the hiring process dragged on and was made an election issue, while members of the staff worked secretly toward my defeat.

Why were some so antagonistic toward me?

Although we approved the largest road-building and highway maintenance expenditures the county has ever seen, we also adopted a policy mandating bike lanes on new thoroughfares and added a bicycle/pedestrian coordinator to the 235-member staff. I thought of the bike mostly as a symbol of alternative transportation, but I was

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amazed at the level of opposition raised in reaction. It was obviously taken as a challenge to the policies which create sprawl—and which force people to cover more territory in their cars for the same degree of access.

Perhaps most troubling to the establishment, however, was that we would not sign off on the first phases of a 3,500-home development until a way to divert traffic from already overloaded Warm Springs Avenue had been devised to preserve the identity and livability of an older, historic neighborhood.

In each of these decisions, we were opposed by the third member of the commission, Sherry Huber, a hydro-power developer. She agreed with city officials that our job was only to provide roads and bridges on demand. Her view, shared with many in the business and development community, was that the costs

of accommodating bicycles was not justified for the small number of users.

In December 1997, the mayors of Ada County's five cities announced that rather than have another election they should appoint the commissioners at ACHD, an agency "out of control." Their proposal met with such public outrage, even from many opposed to our policies, that the mayors quickly backed down.

The developers and their local-government supporters then went to their Republican friends in the legislature. They got a bill passed that enlarged the ACHD commission to five seats, and a key sponsor of the bill was later elected to one of them. The bill also balkanized the county, allowing electors to vote only for the candidate running from their

district, not county-wide as before. And the county commissioners created districts that split established neighborhood associations, weakening the only power base for truly nonpartisan candidates.

In September, the partisans came out of the closet completely, enlisting as candidates three well-known Republicans to join Commissioner Huber in returning the ACHD majority to what one wag has called Automobile-Crazed Hookers for Development. Their well-funded campaign spewed misinformation about me

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bent on forcing people out of their cars. The policies I espoused were portrayed as radical, naive and costly.

I raised \$10,000 but lost my reelection bid. The opposition spent more than \$125,000. While money was not the only reason for my defeat, it certainly played an important role.

On Jan. 6, the new commissioners were sworn in before a crowd that included developers, road builders and many local elected officials. Roger Freudenberg, member of a citizens' transportation advisory committee who ran unsuccessfully for one of the new commission seats, said, "All the things that have been done by the old commission to make Boise a better community as a whole will now be changed. It looks like it's heading toward a mini-Los Angeles."



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