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California Journal of Politics and Policy

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1ch7x1n2>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 2(1)

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Publication Date

2010-06-15

DOI

10.5070/P2PK50

Peer reviewed

**Santa Monica Politics:
The Left in Charge**

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Santa Monica Lookout News

This paper is about what happened when the Left took control of the Santa Monica city government after voters enacted one of California's strictest rent control laws. Its thesis is that once the Left obtained power, progressive politics were turned on their head, and attitudes and policies normally associated with the Right became identified as leftist. Then later, the pendulum swung back.

While this paper is largely about events of the past 30 or so years, since Santa Monica voters enacted rent

control (on the second try) in 1979, to understand those events it is necessary to know something about the politics of Santa Monica's first 100 years. Santa Monica as a city was founded in 1875 by developers who wanted to build the principal port for Los Angeles on the shores of Santa Monica Bay. Before selling any lots on the land they had acquired from Mexican land-grant families, they built a wharf and brought in a railroad from Los Angeles, a railroad they intended to run from Los Angeles up the eastern Sierra to connect with the recently completed (1869) transcontinental railroad.

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For its first century Santa Monica was politically conservative. As in most American towns, business interests dominated local government. Contrary to the laidback, beachfront image the city later acquired, the economy of Santa Monica was largely industrial. By the 1940s the biggest industry was building airplanes at Douglas Aircraft, which attracted related suppliers. By the 1960s there were hundreds of firms, many involved in aerospace and defense work, in an industrial belt that ran along the original 1875 rail line that bisected the city. Merle Norman Cosmetics was a local business, and Papermate built a 200,000 square foot factory in the 1950s. There was a local bank and a local savings and loan, a local department store, and two hospitals. General Telephone (later to become Verizon) had its headquarters in Santa Monica.

The industrialists, business people and property owners who ran Santa Monica were not small-minded. Santa Monica is an independent city today because bond issues were floated for its own water system and to build schools. The city established its own bus line to get workers from Los Angeles to the Douglas plant and shoppers to downtown Santa Monica. There were attempts to merge with Los Angeles, but Santa Monica voters said no. Santa Monicans had, politically and otherwise, a sense of place. Things changed, starting in the 1960s and culminating in

the 1970s. It was not the sense of place that changed but the politics.

The first issue that indicated the changes to come was a classic mid-20th century one: urban renewal and the reaction to it. In the late 1950s, the city of Santa Monica created a redevelopment district along the beach in the Ocean Park neighborhood (the neighborhood south of Pico Boulevard and west of Lincoln Boulevard). To justify urban renewal, cities need to find “blight,” and the blight that the city found and demolished included the homes and apartments of many people, included many elderly people. In place of their homes, the city authorized the building of six high-rise towers with luxury apartments. This served to radicalize many people in Ocean Park. As a result of their protests, only two of the towers were built and others were replaced with lower-profile developments.

The next transformative issue was environmental, and it engaged the whole city. In the early 1970s, the city council approved a plan to build a 25-acre island in Santa Monica Bay. Santa Monicans rose up in a mass movement; the council backed down and reversed itself, but then voted to tear down the beloved Santa Monica Pier. This aroused more opposition, and the council reversed itself again. The agitation over the bay and the pier brought new people into politics, and in the municipal election in April 1973 all three incumbents running for reelection lost their seats.

Without doubt, however, the defining break in Santa Monica's politics came later in the 1970s when voters enacted a strict rent control law. The rent control movement united retired older people and radical young people. The organization they formed, Santa Monicans for Renters Rights (SMRR), proved quite durable: 30 years later, it still dominates local politics.

The movement that brought rent control to Santa Monica has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. The history of the movement is too complex to detail in this paper, but two books that deal with the movement take conflicting positions on its meaning, and those conflicting views are relevant to the theme of this paper. One book is *Middle Class Radicalism in Santa Monica* by Mark Kann, which, as the title suggests, takes the view that the movement essentially expressed the self-interests of middle-class activists. The other is *Community Versus Commodity: Tenants and the American City* by Stella M. Capek and John I. Gilderbloom, who took the view that the movement was more genuinely progressive. The conflict between two agendas—one primarily for the benefit of have-nots, and one that works mostly for those who are already comfortable—has defined politics within the Left in Santa Monica since rent control brought SMRR to power.

How Santa Monica evolved from being a town run as the equivalent of a squirearchy to the “Peoples Republic

of Santa Monica” or “Soviet Monica” (names bestowed on the city by apartment owners after enactment of rent control), involved both changes in the demographics of the city and to the city's connection to the greater metropolis of Los Angeles.

One thing that happens when real estate interests run a city is that homes are built and people move into them. In Santa Monica by the 1950s and 1960s homebuilding meant apartments, because there were few empty lots available for new single-family houses. That meant that more young people and more retired people moved into Santa Monica. By 1974 80 percent of the population of Santa Monica lived in apartments. These new residents—and voters—were not invested in the concerns of the city's traditional leadership.

Meanwhile, the Santa Monica Freeway opened in the 1960s. It tripped through historically minority neighborhoods of Santa Monica, and although the city fathers thought the freeway would help Santa Monica maintain itself as the commercial center for the fast-developing westside of L.A., the consequences were unexpected. The freeway made it easier for commuters to live in Santa Monica and work elsewhere, and easier for Santa Monicans to drive to the new malls to shop. Downtown Santa Monica, which was so busy in the 1950s that the police chief had proposed making all the streets one way, was so dead in the 1960s that the city turned Third Street, the primary shopping

street, into a pedestrian mall, and built six parking structures, in a futile attempt to compete with the malls.

The fundamental political fact was that with all the changes, when rents skyrocketed in the real estate boom of the late 1970s, and when developers were pulling permits to tear down apartments and replace them with condominiums, the voters of Santa Monica were ready to take radical action and approve rent control. That occurred in 1979, and by 1981 SMRR had a majority on the city council. SMRR-endorsed members have dominated the council ever since, having a majority on the council during most of that time.

But no sooner had the Left come to power than conflict within the governing Left began. When SMRR first took over city hall, the leaders of SMRR who defined the Left in Santa Monica were in general optimistic about the future and had a strong belief in the power of government to effect positive change. Along the way, the governing Left was co-opted by people who were uncertain and fearful about the future and distrustful of government. The ruling Left in Santa Monica became characterized by attitudes traditionally associated with the Right. More recently, there has been a return to progressivism and strong government, and I will discuss the causes for that later.

The focus of the conflict within the Left involved the politics of land use and development. While there are many issues that municipal governments deal with, they

have the most power, compared to the state or county government, with respect to land use controls—such as and in particular, zoning. That is one reason why so much of local politics involves conflicts over land use. If Willie Sutton robbed banks because that’s where the money was, local politicians and political activists involve themselves with land use, because that’s where the power is.

When SMRR first came to power in 1981 the new city council immediately enacted a six-month moratorium on construction. As the well-known chronicler of Los Angeles William Fulton wrote in the first chapter of *The Reluctant Metropolis: The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Angeles*, Fulton’s essential book about L.A., with SMRR in control Santa Monica became the first city in southern California to confront the fabled “Growth Machine” —the oligarchy that had run the region for a century.

Whatever would happen in the future regarding land-use politics in Santa Monica, confronting the Growth Machine was, undoubtedly, a leftist thing to do. Confronting oligarchies of moneyed interests is always going to be radical, and the first major target of SMRR’s campaign to rein in development was a quintessential Growth Machine project: Colorado Place, a self-contained office and hotel development on 15 acres in the industrial corridor that would be the first real estate development by the old-line architectural firm Welton Becket.

But even as SMRR's moratorium had forced Welton Becket to the negotiating table, it is important to note that the SMRR activists did not view economic development itself as something to oppose. On the contrary, they wanted economic development because they wanted to expand social services; to pay for those services, they needed an expanding economy. Their interests were in who would control economic development and how the benefits of it would be divided.

To expand the economy in Santa Monica, SMRR focused initially on tourism. Santa Monica's tourist facilities and downtown Santa Monica were shabby when SMRR took power. The new regime facilitated the building of new hotels, and initiated a process to revitalize what was then called the Third Street Mall, a process that eventually resulted in turning the decrepit pedestrian mall into the phenomenally successful and often-imitated Third Street Promenade. At the same time that SMRR was down-zoning much of the city, it was also encouraging, or at least allowing—provided the city could negotiate a satisfactory package of benefits—office development, particularly on formerly industrial lands.

It is significant to note the broader context. In the 1980s SMRR was acting in an era of skepticism about what government could do, yet SMRR's governmental policies were successful in more ways than one. Reducing the theoretical capacity to develop by lowering zoning

envelopes prevented downtown Santa Monica from developing along the lines of cities like Glendale or Burbank, which became dominated by sterile office developments and malls. Yet at the same time the down-zoning turned out to be hugely beneficial for the local economy, as property values in Santa Monica increased even faster than those of the region as a whole.

Santa Monica, which had been falling into decline much like a post-industrial rust belt city, came roaring back. Hotel occupancy rates, commercial rents, and residential real estate prices became among the highest in the region. The city budget expanded with more social services, and the city has had a Triple-A bond rating for years—a source of pride for the leftists on the city council.

It was, however, over development that SMRR began to split into camps. In the 1980s the city council approved, by way of development agreements, several large suburban-style office parks. This started with Colorado Place, the Welton Becket project that the city council had first opposed when SMRR came to power. The city ultimately made a deal that allowed Colorado Place to be built. In a sign of things to come, three SMRR council members voted for the deal, and one opposed it. SMRR didn't have control over the council when all of the developments of the 1980s were approved, but it was telling that SMRR and the SMRR members on the council were divided over them.

Reaction to these projects, and in particular to the traffic they attracted to the eastern parts of the city, and to the city's aggressive efforts to develop the tourism industry, led to a backlash and the rise of the "no-growth" movement in Santa Monica. This movement was centered among neighborhood associations and ultimately came to dominate SMRR (or at least the endorsements SMRR made of candidates for the city council). The no-growthers also won important votes on initiatives to limit development; one restricted hotel and restaurant development in a coastal zone, another made condominium development more difficult by adding an affordable housing requirement to the city's zoning, and another reversed a city council vote allowing a prominent local restaurateur to develop a beachfront hotel on the site of Marion Davies' former mansion.

There is disagreement in Santa Monica about whether the no-growthers joined SMRR to use it to push their own agenda, or if they became powerful in SMRR after the SMRR leadership brought them into the organization, hoping to use their votes—concentrated in single-family districts like Sunset Park—to solidify SMRR's hold on power. In any event, the result was the same—the no-growth faction supplanted the original progressive, "jobs-housing-education-environment" leadership.

The first two SMRR council members from the no-growth side were elected in 1988 and 1990. The factions

within SMRR jockeyed for control during the 1990s, a decade during which SMRR lost control of the council for two years, in part because of a "law and order" counter-attack against SMRR over city policies dealing with homelessness, and in part because a popular "Old Left" council member dropped out of SMRR and was reelected as an independent.

Over the decade, progressive SMRR council members were gradually replaced by no-growthers, and by 1999, only one of the five SMRR members then on the seven-member council came from the progressive wing; four no-growth advocates, including two Green Party members, constituted the council's first no-growth majority. Over the next year or so this majority replaced the entire planning commission with new, no-growth commissioners, mostly from neighborhood associations.

In the 1990s the furor over rent control died down and was later resolved for all practical (political) purposes with the Costa-Hawkins Act, a state law that implemented vacancy de-control in Santa Monica. Similar, a grand compromise of sorts was reached over the issue of homelessness. With the resolution of these issues, politics in the city became more and more about development. This was ironic because during much of the 1990s there was a recession, and consequently little private development in the city.

The battles over development ranged all over the place. There was a huge fight that split SMRR and pitted progressives against their old ally Tom Hayden, who sided with the no-growth camp over redevelopment of the civic center. The city council, including its two no-growth members, had approved the plan unanimously in 1993; nevertheless, no-growthers, with Hayden's support, collected enough signatures to subject the plan to a referendum. The voters approved the plan with 60 percent of the vote in 1994.

In the Ocean Park neighborhood, no-growthers opposed building a new elementary school. In another case they opposed building apartments for HIV-positive low-income tenants on land the city owned near the Santa Monica Pier. Ironically, since SMRR was founded because of a housing shortage that led to higher rents, there were battles over the zoning for apartments and condominiums. In the case of the condominiums, there was also the issue of the demolishing of apartments to build them, something that all of SMRR opposed. The city was sued over the issue of whether it had adequately accounted in the state-required housing element of the city's general plan for the restrictions the city had placed on building housing, and the city lost.

The issue that the new leadership focused on above all others was traffic congestion, and they blamed development for it. The rhetoric of the no-growthers was different

from that of the "Old SMRR." While the old leadership was interested in economic development and did not categorically damn developers, particularly individuals, the new leaders expressed a generalized antipathy towards developers who were always "greedy," and anyone, such as planning commissioners or planning staff, who worked with them.

They also, in this writer's view, expressed an uncritical and anti-urban environmentalism that was based on and perpetuated the historically false notion that Santa Monica was and had been a "sleepy beach town." Instead of the Left worrying about traditional issues like the problems of Santa Monica's under- and working-classes—homelessness, for instance, or gang violence—the governing Left in Santa Monica became identified most of all with NIMBYism.

The no-growth domination of local politics reached its peak with the city council's 5-2 vote in 2001 to turn down a proposal to build an urban Target department store (one of the chain's first) in Santa Monica's downtown, two blocks from the Third Street Promenade. The five votes against the store included three no-growth council members and the two non-SMRR members whose no votes reflected the interests of the local business community, which feared competition from Target. The arguments against Target included one from a normally pro-business council member who said the traffic the store would generate

would be so great that shoppers would stop coming downtown (an echo of Yogi Berra's famous statement about a restaurant: "Nobody goes there anymore because it's too crowded").

An argument from a no-growth council member was that a Target would mean that "chains" were taking over, and the city had to protect existing department stores, which, he failed to note, were owned by national chains. Notwithstanding that many residents testified that as Santa Monica was gentrifying, residents were losing low-cost stores and would welcome Target, another no-growth council member summarized the discussion with, "It's the traffic, stupid."

One progressive social policy issue came before the city council during the years the no-growth majority was in control: a living wage ordinance for the city's coastal zone, designed to improve the wages of hotel workers. The living wage ordinance was without doubt a "hot" issue in Santa Monica, but the story of the ordinance and its fate is also relevant to conflicts within the Left. The effort to enact the ordinance did not originate within SMRR. Labor activists brought it to Santa Monica in response to an effort to decertify the hotel workers union at what was then Santa Monica's only unionized hotel. For them, the living wage campaign was one tool in a strategy to defeat the decertification and then organize workers in other hotels.

All factions in SMRR united in favor of the ordinance, and the city council approved it. But business interests challenged the ordinance with a referendum in 2002, and the Left in Santa Monica was unable to marshal enough votes to defeat the initiative invalidating the law. The hotels in Santa Monica mounted an expensive and ferocious campaign against the ordinance, but nonetheless the failure of the ordinance to win at the ballot box was indicative of how the focus of SMRR on the interests of their already comfortable constituents had weakened progressive politics in the city. Residents would vote to protect themselves with rent control, or agitate against developments they believed would make traffic worse, but not vote to protect the wages of hotel housekeepers.

Yet, from a left-wing perspective, the policy issues were not what was most surprising about the no-growther takeover of SMRR. What was a shock was how the no-growthers used their issues to attack the government in Santa Monica that was by then largely the creation of SMRR. There is nothing categorically anti-progressive about opposing development, or certainly any particular development, as the original SMRR leadership had done when it came to power and challenged the Growth Machine. It is hard to imagine anyone involved in local politics who is not at some point skeptical about some development. (This writer himself became involved in Santa Monica politics in the early 1990s because he

did not want the city to turn the civic center into another suburban-style office park.)

The no-growthers, however, turned their opposition to development into continuous attacks on the city's staff, particularly the planning department, who were always "in the pocket of developers." The attacks were reminiscent of right-wing attacks on government "bureaucrats." As noted above, after 1999 there was a complete turnover on the planning commission, and the new commissioners, nearly all from neighborhood associations, were especially vociferous in their attacks on planning staff. It is one thing for unhappy residents to call city staff corrupt and beholden to developers, quite another for people in government, who called themselves progressives, to go after civil servants trying to do their jobs. Notwithstanding the attacks on the staff that they did the bidding of developers, Santa Monica had during this time a reputation among developers as perhaps the most difficult city in southern California in which to do business, and there have never been any credible allegations made of corruption among the city's planning staff.

Ultimately the pendulum swung back, and the defining moment involved the planning commission. The first appointment the new no-growth city council majority made to the planning commission in 1999 was Kelly Olsen, a former no-growth city council member (he was elected in 1990, but lost a bid for reelection in 1994) who

was Santa Monica's most vehement no-growth politician. Olsen most often made accusations against planning staff, and not coincidentally he was considered the preeminent champion of the no-growth faction inside SMRR and outside SMRR. Thus, it was a surprise that when Olsen's first term on the commission ended and he came up for reappointment in 2003, one of the no-growth SMRR councilmembers who had voted to appoint him in 1999 switched and voted against him, and Olsen was voted off the commission on a 4-3 vote. The council replaced Olsen with a professional environmentalist. When the next two seats on the commission came open, the council appointed two well-regarded architects, and the tenor on the commission, as well as the commission's stance on development, changed.

Looking back, it was the Target vote in 2001 that signified things to come. Councilmember Ken Genser, who was the original no-growth city councilmember elected in 1988, was one of the two votes in favor of the project. Although Genser came into politics from the no-growth side of SMRR, he prided himself on being more logical than ideological. When he evaluated the Target project, he told the no-growth opposition that he did not see how it would cause the problems they predicted. Genser's analytical bent and the fact that he was the first no-growth council member assured he had a lot of influence, and over time his views began to influence other

councilmembers. What many of the Target opponents had predicted also turned out to be true—downtown Santa Monica lost its two middle-class department stores, which as of the writing of this article have both been closed by their respective chains, to be replaced by a Nordstrom and a Bloomingdales. This forced some of the no-growth politicians to rethink their positions.

The no-growth councilmembers also found that they had to revise their positions over time when confronted with the reality of governing. After the stock market decline of 2000, the city had budget problems (primarily due to heavy pension obligations), and suddenly all the councilmembers were much more interested in things like the needs of Santa Monica's automobile dealerships, which contribute considerable sales tax revenues to the city, for new zoning to allow upgrading and expansion of their facilities.

The councilmembers also began to realize—and Genser was probably the first—that their no-growth constituents could never be satisfied. One down-zoning had to be followed by another. They could never agree on what would constitute a reasonable amount of growth.

As a result, today the politics of the Santa Monica City Council are much more in tune with the politics of the majority of Santa Monicans who are, after all, tolerant and progressive (whether they call themselves liberals or conservatives). They like government and they enjoy

the urban amenities of their town. They regularly pass school bonds and college bonds (even though much of the no-growth community views Santa Monica College as a “bad neighbor”). In 2008 they voted overwhelmingly (77 percent) in favor of a countywide half-cent increase in the sales tax to fund mass transit, and decisively (55.5 percent) against a no-growth measure, the “Residents Initiative to Fight Traffic”—“RIFT,” that would have stripped the city council of much of its control over land use. Only one of the members of the 1999 no-growth council majority supported RIFT. Including in the count the voters in Santa Monica who did not choose to vote on the measure, only 36 percent of Santa Monica voters voted for RIFT.

In conclusion, one might wonder, does the story of how the Left has exercised power in Santa Monica, and the story of the conflicts within the Left when it had power, have broader meaning? I would say, “yes,” especially if one agrees with Tip O’Neill’s famous statement that “All politics are local.” During a period of American and Californian history when at both the national and state levels conservatives had power most of the time, in Santa Monica the Left—mostly represented by Baby Boomers who had come of political age in the Sixties—was in charge.

For the most part, they did a good job governing—Santa Monica, in the view of this writer, represents a good model for how to develop a “post-sprawl, post-industrial”

city, a model that should be increasingly relevant in coming years. But it is quite possible that the story of how the Left exercised that power is not as important as a story of the conflicts within the Left between believers in progress and the “I’ve got mine” faction. That conflict may say something about why the Left was so powerless outside of places like Santa Monica during those decades. There were only a few places where the Left could exercise power and achieve progress; there were many places where people who had little to complain about called themselves leftists and conflated their complaints with a left-wing agenda.