

Morphing Mike

The mayor's sittin' pretty. But pretty is as pretty does.

By DAN MCGRAW

In the months leading up to the latest Fort Worth City Council elections, most observers expected some big change. Council members Clyde Picht, Jim Lane, Ralph McCloud, and John Stevenson weren't running, and Becky Haskin was going to have a tough run against activist Louis McBee.

Haskin won, but there are still four new council members. So far, however, those new faces haven't brought much change to the council at all —not in the sense of a different philosophy of city government, of balancing the needs of neighborhoods versus downtown business interests. As far as the behind-the-scenes power structure goes, this council is safe, old news.

On the old council, Mayor Mike Moncrief could usually expect to win just about every vote by at least a 5-4 margin. On the new council, Moncrief can pretty much expect votes to run about 6-3 in his favor. The reasons are simple. Sal Espino replaced Lane and will likely support the mayor as Lane did; Jungus Jordan replaces the usual no-vote Picht and appears to generally side with the downtown business interests. Carter Burdette will vote the same as Stevenson. Kathleen Hicks will pay attention to neighborhood issues more than McCloud did, but she won't rock the boat like Picht would.

What all this means is that Moncrief has the power —and with it the responsibility —to make decisions that will affect the quality of life in this city for decades to come. What this city does for its residents —better neighborhoods in a fast-growing city, creative economic development, effective planning for new home construction —now pretty much lands at his feet.

Moncrief is not a strong mayor in the literal form that Dallas voters recently rejected. But he has become one of the most powerful mayors this town has ever had. He has the old-money pedigree and 35 years in politics. This can be good for the city or bad. It all depends on what Mike wants to do.

And the problem many residents point to is that Moncrief does not articulate where he stands on issues. Neighborhood groups in Woodhaven or Meadowbrook feel they have been put at the back of the line while downtown real estate developers get tax breaks. Even the new wealthy residents in the far north near Alliance Airport area feel they can't get decent roads built as their population booms. And let's not get into the trash boondoggle.

This is not to put down Moncrief. He has been in political office since 1970, and he knows how the game is played. In Fort Worth, it is best to keep conflicts quiet and private, saying what neighborhood groups want to hear, but at the same time keeping the real money

flowing to the powerful downtown business interests. That's how you win in Fort Worth.

But maybe the issue is how much Moncrief has changed since moving from state senator to the mayor's chair. Moncrief championed the disenfranchised while in the legislature, winning praise from groups representing the mentally ill, those working against family violence, and health care activists for seniors and the poor. This newspaper once referred to Moncrief as a "rich kid with a conscience."

Since he came into the mayor's office in 2003, however, Moncrief has sort of flipped a bit. Fort Worth is putting its resources into wealthy housing projects, with plenty of tax breaks in a market that doesn't need any. Meanwhile, meaningless lip service is given to affordable housing and economic development in the predominantly African-American Eastside neighborhoods.

Fort Worth is now the 19th largest city in the country, with more than 600,000 people. When cities get this big, the political rules can change. A population this size usually means more factions, and the factions tend to get more powerful. Mayors of big cities have to balance interests better and more publicly. And more than anything, big city mayors need to articulate a vision that reaches out to middle-class and less-affluent voters. You can still cater to the big money interests, but you have to cut them off every once in a while to show the common folks you have their interests at heart as well.

It's hard to know where Moncrief falls on some of these issues. He has become much quieter since becoming mayor, making himself hard for the press to reach and talking only in general terms. He champions the easily supported Trinity River Vision project and the planned Southwest Parkway but stays out of most neighborhood issues. That can be good politics, but it is not always good leadership.

With a little work, though, Moncrief can have both: He can get out in front on some important issues without stepping on many downtown developer toes. If Fort Worth is a progressive city, as everyone likes to tell us, then he should put together a plan that gives meaningful government help to affordable housing. Big cities that work have good public transit systems, and Fort Worth's needs major help. The Trinity River project looks like a good one, but Moncrief can make sure it's not just another expensive condo development that shuts out most of the city's residents.

Moncrief is a smart politician and has shown in the past he can be a well-balanced public servant. But what this city needs now is more than just a caretaker for the downtown money interests. The mayor needs to step up and tell us what he wants to do. He has the votes to get what he wants done. But what is that? What's the Moncrief Trinity Vision?

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