

How a Surfing, Kite-boarding, Civic-minded Anesthesiologist Became Mayor of Seal Beach

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So, how did I become mayor of Seal Beach?

It started with a bike ride and some very noisy, ugly power lines.

In 1994, my wife, kids and I were living in a house in Seal Beach, three blocks from the best kite-boarding beach along the Southern California coast. Behind our house ran high-voltage power lines that would crackle, snap, and even buzz in the moist marine air, adding a very unwelcome auditory cacaphony to the mellifluous tones of crashing waves and fog horns. One day, I climbed onto my bicycle and followed the power lines—which, I discovered, didn't seem to supply any power service at all to our residential beach community. I was more than a little surprised to discover that this noisy intrusion into our quaint little beach town was actually just passing through on its way to another destination. The high-voltage lines (66,000 volts instead of the usual 13,000-volt lines that course through most neighborhoods) started at the power plant on Studebaker near Westminster Boulevard (see map) and ran straight toward the ocean, coming to within a few hundred yards of the beach. Then they made a 270-degree hairpin turn and set off through the residential section, including numerous backyards, to Seal Beach Boulevard, which they followed to their termination at the Rockwell Industrial space and aeronautics facility on the edge of Seal Beach. The high-voltage lines meandered about 5 miles to end up barely 300 yards from the power plant where they began!



Armed with this knowledge, I became a kind of local activist lobbying for the removal of the power lines. One of my neighbors and I started our

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own newsletter, “The Power Line News.” We contacted the City of Seal Beach, Rockwell, Southern California Edison, and anybody who might listen to us. The great breakthrough came about a year later when Rockwell realized that the power lines were really only a backup for its industrial facility, and that Southern California Edison was charging it \$10,000 each month for the use of the line! Rockwell calculated it could transition to diesel generation for backup power at an expense of a mere \$100,000. After 10 months, Rockwell would recoup its investment, and every month thereafter add \$10,000 to its bottom line. Ah, Rockwell and us, we were a match made in heaven. Rockwell told Southern California Edison that they no longer needed the lines, and Edison was stuck with a very high-voltage line and no customer to charge for maintaining it. In 1995 the lines started coming down. Edison was forced to do the right thing, but not because of political pressure, noise, aesthetics or public safety. It was the almighty dollar that tipped the scales our way.

After this success with the power lines, in 1996 the mayor put me on the Planning Commission. My father was a civil engineer, so the concepts of zoning, planning, conditional use permits, and variances were vaguely familiar. The Planning Commission in Seal Beach is a very closely watched, politically charged position. Any developer wanting to change the character of this quaint little beach town must first pass through the Seal Beach Planning Commission. This commission also handles all of the conditional use permits for alcohol sales in the city. In spite of the fact that Seal Beach boasts four Irish bars in one block of Main Street, the commission really does try to limit the number of alcohol-serving establishments, or at least the new ones.

After I had served two years on the Planning Commission, the city council representative for my district, who had served the town well for eight years, ran into term limits and was forced to retire. As her term was winding down, her campaign team asked me if I would consider running for her seat. With an experienced campaign team and a popular incumbent’s backing, running for office seemed like an interesting and inviting idea.

Seal Beach is a small community with a population of 27,000 residents. My political district consists of the Hill area, the northern section of Old Town, the Seal Beach Naval Weapons station, and Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge. With a veteran campaign team, I felt pretty confident about my chances in the election—that is, until I realized against whom I would be running. My opponent was a man who was endorsed by the local newspaper, which stated that he “bleeds Seal Beach.” Born in Seal Beach, he had lived his whole life in town, and to top that off, his father had been both a councilman and mayor of Seal Beach! My opponent coached youth sports and rode in “big” cars in the Christmas Parade. I now was worried. However, he also owned a sports bar/restaurant

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in town and often could be seen wearing a sweatshirt proudly proclaiming the name of his establishment. The fact that the sweatshirt was from the last decade and a little worse for wear didn't seem to faze him; however, I do believe that it was noticed by the voters. I began to feel a little better.

While my opponent was a very visible, successful and popular businessman, he really represented and embodied the business community. I was a resident in town, with a history of removing power lines and making the town a nicer place to live. Although businesses and business owners tend to be visible, the majority of voters are residents, and residents have a different set of interests than those in business. Most of my time during the campaign was spent knocking on doors and getting to know people and their concerns about their community. Because my opponent was well known and liked, I did not want to resort to attacking him, much to the chagrin of my campaign team who wanted to "take no prisoners" and leave a smoldering shell of a man where a candidate once stood. Indeed, I retained control of the direction of my campaign and demanded that it was to focus on the positive things that I had achieved. In the end, we won the election easily by a 2-to-1 margin.

However, on the day of election, I made my first political blunder. Before the votes were even counted, I stuck my big foot in my big mouth! I decided to have a "chat" with the editor of the local paper that had endorsed my opponent. Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, my opponent had a long history of purchasing advertising for his sports bar/restaurant from that newspaper. When the endorsement was announced, the newspaper had mistakenly listed our election as being in Council District #2 instead of the correct District #3. When my 7-year-old read the local paper, she said: "Daddy, I think you win, because it says here that your opponent is running in District #2, and you are in District #3." After chatting with the editor about his endorsement of someone who owns a bar, and who advertises in his paper, I ended the conversation by telling him about my 7-year-old recognizing his error, and I even told him, "If you ever need someone to edit your political copy, my 7-year-old is available." However, the editor got the last laugh: over the next year, he twice put me in diapers in political cartoons. The lesson for this novice politician: try not to antagonize someone who buys their ink by the barrel.

In Seal Beach, the mayor is selected by the five City Council members. When the sitting mayor was elected to a seat on a local college board, he was forced to vacate his position. He endorsed me to fulfill the remaining nine months of his mayoral term. A majority of the other Council Members agreed, and, lo and behold, in January of 1999, I became the mayor of Seal Beach! I was mayor again in 2000 and 2005 and then, having served the maximum number of terms allowed, I retired from Seal Beach City politics in 2006.