

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Lompoc Mayor DeWees dead at 61

Longtime politician wasn't afraid to roll up sleeves when the going got tough

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Dick DeWees is pictured in 2006.
RAFAEL MALDONADO/NEWS-PRESS



Lompoc City Administrator Laurel Barcelona, center, discusses the passing of Mayor Dick DeWees on Friday at Lompoc City Hall. From left are council member Mike Siminski, Mayor Pro Tem Ann Ruhge, and council members Bob Lingl and Cecilia Martner.

NORA K. WALLACE/NEWS-PRESS

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The community of Lompoc and political colleagues around the county are mourning the loss of six-term Mayor Dick DeWees, who died Thursday night at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital.

Mr. DeWees, 61, was hospitalized for a few days in June with cardiomyopathy, and a decade ago was hospitalized with a blocked artery. He returned to the hospital last Sunday and was being treated for congestive heart failure when he died, according to a friend.

A lanky, silver-haired man with a booming radio broadcaster's voice, Mr. DeWees had a jovial manner, with an easy laugh. He often interjected humorous quips into council deliberations and as master of ceremonies at countless gatherings would make personal comments about attendees.

"He was a friend to all and very supportive of our city staff," said a subdued Laurel Barcelona, city administrator, Friday morning. "He was very involved in the community. He loved Lompoc and he did all he could to further the interests of Lompoc."

Surrounded by Mayor Pro Tem Ann Ruhge and councilmembers Mike Siminski, Bob Lingl and Cecilia Martner, Ms. Barcelona said the city staff had been told of the mayor's death during a meeting early in the morning.

"It was always a pleasure to work with Mayor DeWees," said Ms. Barcelona, who was up all night following the mayor's death. "He always had a smile, a positive outlook. He loved this community. . . He was a joy. He was an upbeat, positive mayor."

Bernie Federman, pastor of Lompoc Foursquare Church, gave a short invocation during a press conference.

"Our city has not only lost a mayor, it has lost a great friend," Pastor Federman said.

The mayor's lighthearted nature was called "goofy" by more than one person during the gathering in council chambers. Mrs. Ruhge spoke about how her colleague would purposefully bump her chair on the council dais as he walked past, so she'd be knocked akimbo. He was, she said, her mentor. Whenever she felt particularly dismayed at press coverage or comments about her, she said he "would always lift me up, always. I'm going to miss him."

Though he presented a joking front, Mr. Siminski said the mayor was hard-working, dedicated



Longtime Lompoc Mayor Dick DeWees is pictured at a meeting in 2002.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS



and prepared to do his job.

"He rewrote the job description of mayor," said Mr. Siminski, choking up with emotion at times. "He had a strong commitment to the community and his job."

"He gave his all."

Though he and the late mayor sometimes disagreed on major issues, Mr. Siminski said "afterward we were still the best of friends."

Lompoc's council will have to vote within the next 30 days whether to appoint a replacement or hold a special election, which would cost more than \$100,000.

In November 2008, Mr. DeWees narrowly won his sixth term, earning 38 percent of the vote compared to challengers John Linn with 37.5 percent and Dulcie Sinn, who took 24 percent.

The person chosen -- either by the council or the voters -- would serve as Mr. DeWees' replacement until the end of 2010.

Originally from Michigan, Mr. DeWees moved to Santa Barbara County in 1974, and lived in Santa Barbara and Goleta. He worked as a country music radio broadcaster and advertising salesman.

After moving to Lompoc in 1987, he started an advertising company, DeWees and Co. Media Services. His deep, distinctive voice was frequently heard on radio commercials.

Before entering politics, Mr. DeWees was president of the Lompoc Chamber of Commerce and active with the city's museum, library and Mural Society.

While mayor, he served on the Santa Barbara County Local Agency Formation Commission, was chairman of Santa Barbara County's Mayors-City Managers meetings, vice-chairman of Santa Barbara County Association of Governments and was an associate faculty member of Allan Hancock College, teaching public speaking at the Lompoc Valley Center of the college.

Fourth District Supervisor Joni Gray was elected in 1998 to the Board of Supervisors -- the same year Mr. DeWees became mayor, and they were instant friends.

"He was so wonderful," Ms. Gray said. "He had a big smile, he was happy to see you. He knew everybody; he cared about everybody. He truly, truly made Lompoc proud."

His presence in the community was ubiquitous, and he enjoyed speaking with people of all ages, she said.

"I am absolutely convinced that there will be some young people who will go into politics because they once knew Dick DeWees," Ms. Gray said. "That's fabulous as far as I'm concerned."

Former Lompoc City Councilman DeWayne Holmdahl served alongside the mayor for nine years. The strain of the past year -- with budget issues and staff salary negotiations -- was tough on Mr. DeWees, Mr. Holmdahl said.

Nonetheless, he added, "He sure represented Lompoc. He was selling Lompoc wherever he went, making sure Lompoc was included."

Mr. DeWees was married for 33 years to his wife, Jane. They have a daughter, Anna, and son, Nathan, and one granddaughter, Emma.

In his mayoral welcome on the city's Web site, Mr. DeWees spoke about the town's business-friendly atmosphere and its natural and cultural amenities.

"The greatest asset of the city of Lompoc is its citizens," he wrote. "The people who live here are wonderful. Visitors will find our citizens to be extremely friendly and helpful. You will find that Lompoc is a city without pretense, and that our welcome mat is always out to you."

Flags throughout the city of Lompoc were at half-staff Friday in his memory.

Throughout the day, accolades poured in from elected officials about Mr. DeWees.

"Lompoc Mayor Dick DeWees was more than a legislative colleague, he was an ally and personal friend," said Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley. "The relationship we built over the years greatly benefited our mutual constituencies. My heart goes out to his family. I will miss his leadership and friendship."

Carpinteria City Councilman Joe Armendariz said he was shocked and saddened to learn of Mr. DeWees' death.

"Dick was a dedicated husband and father as well as a fine public servant with a great sense of humor," he said. "He loved the city of Lompoc and represented the people of Lompoc exceptionally well as their elected mayor. Dick was also a sensible and effective voice on (Santa Barbara County Association of Governments) and (Local Agency Formation Commission) and made the meetings an enjoyable time for all of us. He will be greatly missed."

Santa Barbara Mayor Marty Blum served on SBCAG with Mr. DeWees for six years.

"We are all saddened by the loss of Mayor DeWees," she said. "He was a true public servant who served his city and SBCAG well. He took his job seriously, did his homework and gave thoughtful answers to issues before SBCAG. I will miss his hearty laugh and his common sense comments. Our condolences to his family, to the city staff and to the people of Lompoc."

Santa Maria Mayor Larry Lavagnino said in a statement that he was "tremendously saddened by the passing of my friend and colleague Dick DeWees. He was one of my closest, dearest friends for many, many years. We shared the same zest for life, love of family, and dedication to getting things done with common sense."

Mr. Lavagnino went on to say that Mr. DeWees "knew how to roll up his sleeves and get things done. He also relished celebrations and contributed mightily to the successful Mayor's Ball hosted by the United Way."

"The community of Lompoc has lost a great leader and a good friend," he said.

Bob Hatch, president of the Santa Maria Chamber of Commerce called Mr. DeWees a "great friend."

"I last saw him several weeks ago and despite the fact he was experiencing some health issues he was in his usual good spirits and his quick laugh was still present," said Mr. Hatch, who previously worked at the chamber in Lompoc. "A great supporter of education, the military and his friends, he will be missed tremendously by the community he loved so much."

The governing board of Bringing Our Community Home expressed its gratitude for Mr. DeWees' "deep commitment to solving homelessness in the community and in the county."

"Mayor DeWees' involvement with the 10 Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness began in 2005 when he served on the leadership council responsible for drafting the plan," according to the governing board chairwoman Jeanette Duncan and Executive Director John Buttny. "Mayor DeWees then agreed to serve on the Governing Board and has done so since September of 2007. Mayor DeWees understood the needs of individuals and families without housing, and was making significant contributions to creating solutions, as demonstrated by his dedication to the implementation of Bringing Our Community Home."

Tuesday's city council meeting has been cancelled. The council will next meet on Aug. 18.

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