



Art Agnos sizes up SF politics over matzo ball soup

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Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez, The Chronicle

Former San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos sizes up SF politics over matzo ball soup.



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something so infectiously upbeat about the man, even at the darkest times. So I relished my lunch with Agnos the other day at Max's Opera Cafe, sitting at a window seat with his old, domed office building looming in the distance. We both ordered Max's trademark matzo ball soup and a half chicken salad sandwich — nothing to stir the juices of San Francisco foodies, but deeply soothing on a rainy, chilly day.

There didn't seem much to celebrate for a progressive warhorse like Agnos. A man who represents everything Agnos opposes now occupies the White House. Donald Trump's victory, said Agnos, "bothered me more than my own defeat" for re-election as mayor in 1991. And he had just come from a memorial service across the street at City Hall for Aileen Clarke Hernandez, the legendary feminist, civil rights and labor activist whose death seemed like one more requiem for the heroic liberation movements of the past.

And yet Agnos, at 78, seems as energetic as ever, after successful heart surgery to fix an aortic aneurysm in November 2015. He continues to play an active role in city politics as a progressive power broker. His clout was felt in the successful 2013 ballot battle to block the "wall on the waterfront" — the proposed luxury condominium high-rise building on the Embarcadero. The same leadership team — Agnos, former City Attorney Louise Renne, political organizer Jon Golinger, and Aaron Peskin (in between stints on the Board of Supervisors) — reassembled in 2014 to lead the landslide victory for Proposition B, the landmark San Francisco measure that gave voters the right to decide on big development proposals along the city's precious waterfront.

The Prop. B victory represented a "revolutionary change" in San Francisco, said Agnos — the democratization of a planning process that has long been controlled by developers and their political allies. "Now, if you want to build something on the waterfront, you don't go down to City Hall and make a contribution to a politician's favorite charity. You have to go to the people for their support." Agnos would like to see the Prop. B concept extended from the waterfront throughout the city.

As a result of Prop. B, developer Forest City offered the city a model plan for its

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residential and commercial project at Pier 70, including renting 30 percent of the 2,000 housing units at affordable rates and creating a park and promenade that will be given to the city for public use. The Giants went even further with their proposed development near the ballpark, promising to offer 40 percent of its housing units at below-market rates — at a time when the city was mandating only 12 percent. Unlike the defeated 8 Washington “wall on the waterfront,” the Pier 70 and Giants projects won by overwhelming margins, racking up well over 70 percent of the vote.



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“There’s nothing magical about this,” said Agnos. “These two developers simply realized if they wanted their projects to succeed, they had to cut in the community, not just City Hall.”

Agnos finds the political establishment to be woefully behind the electorate when it comes to deciding the city’s future. He’s particularly critical of another former mayor, Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom, who campaigned for 8 Washington and — as chairman of the State Lands Commission — is suing the city to overturn Prop. B. “This is supposedly Mr. ‘Citizenville,’” said Agnos, referring to Newsom’s book that touted the expansion of participatory democracy in the digital age. “And he’s suing the city he once led, saying the citizens shouldn’t decide.

“I call Gavin the greatest one-night stand in politics. He looks great, he talks great. But you wake up the next morning and you ask yourself, ‘What was that all about?’”

As for the current mayor, Agnos thinks Ed Lee is too “passive.” Lee and his Planning Commission allow developers to control the city’s land use agenda, waiting for them to propose projects, instead of presenting a vision of what the city needs to the real estate industry.

“Ed was an outstanding bureaucrat when I was mayor. He listened carefully to instructions and he brought back solid and measurable results. But as mayor those bureaucratic skills

are not enough. He's not a leader, he's passive."

Lee's press office took sharp exception to Agnos' critique, stating: "The mayor's consensus building style speaks for itself. Mayor Lee has reduced unemployment from 10 percent to below 3 percent, invested in Muni so it has the highest approval ratings since 2010, and has built more housing than any other mayor. That's leadership. The voters are the ultimate judge of leadership and with all due respect to Mayor Agnos and his single term, Mayor Lee was re-elected to a second term in 2015."

What does Agnos think of the crop of potential future San Francisco mayors? Former state Sen. Mark Leno is trying to project an aura of inevitability as the progressive choice in the 2019 mayoral race. But Agnos thinks it's far too soon to fall in line behind Leno. "I like Mark — he's a nice guy. But anything can happen."

Agnos's own pick is Supervisor Peskin. "He's the whole package — the best I've seen in this city since Phil Burton" — high praise considering Agnos' respect for the late congressman and Democratic Party power broker.

"When I used to go into housing projects as a social worker, the people who lived there would say, 'If you got a problem, you go see Phil Burton.' I thought someday I'd like people to say that about me."

Many people do these days, when they feel threatened by developers and public officials who don't care about their precarious hold on the city where they live and work and play. A wide variety of San Franciscans come to Agnos for political advice — from the operators and employees of the San Francisco Flower Mart and Design Center to the members of Bay Club SF Tennis. He works for them free of charge.

"I do it strictly as a volunteer. When I speak in front of a community group, I don't want anyone to say, 'You're doing this because you're getting paid.' No, I'm doing this because I love this city.

"I came here on a Greyhound bus in 1966 with no friends or family here. I got a job with the Housing Authority and found a place to rent on Potrero Hill — a two-bedroom house for \$152 a month. I later bought it, and my wife Sherry and I raised our two sons there, and she and I still live there. Ten years after I arrived in San Francisco, I was elected to the state Assembly. And a decade after that, I was the mayor.

“I want the next person getting off the bus to have the opportunity I had. That’s what drives me.”

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