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## Our view: Fine job, Mr. Mayor

### Mark Begich leaves the city in better shape than he found it

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MARC LESTER / Daily News Archive 2000 / Sen.-elect Mark Begich

Saturday, Mark Begich ended his second term as Anchorage mayor to become a U.S. senator. He proved to be a highly competent mayor, one of the city's best. He made the city run well, from ensuring its finances are sound to making sure the sidewalks were plowed.

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Begich used the office to improve the quality of our lives in many ways -- staffing up the police department, for example, and making downtown more attractive. He also faced some notable setbacks on quality-of-life issues.

As much as anything, Begich will be remembered as a mayor who liked to make things happen. Frequently that turned out well, but occasionally it didn't.

#### Improved finances

When Begich came into office, the city faced a \$33 million shortfall. He cut expenses, partly by winning concessions from city unions. He went after additional revenue sources, from collecting on delinquent fines, to increasing fees for such services as building permits.

Many grumble about Anchorage's property tax burden. In part, that's because the city budget, and city tax collections, have steadily grown as the city continues to grow.

Tax complaints grew louder when the Begich administration made sure the city tax assessments more closely matched market values, as required by Alaska law. That resulted in a tax increase for some whose houses had been undervalued.

But the critics don't mention that Begich pushed through a property tax exemption for the first \$20,000 of an owner-occupied home's value, which shifted some of the tax burden toward commercial properties and more expensive homes. Begich has also used all of Anchorage's state revenue-sharing funds to reduce property taxes.

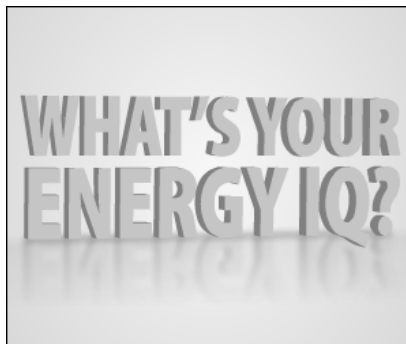
Over time, Begich found ways to save on some city expenses, such as by installing energy-saving and cheaper street lights, and creating an in-house health insurance program for city employees.

During his tenure, residents may have been upset about higher taxes, but they had enough confidence in the city to pass all of the most recent general obligation bond issues.

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**Quality of life**

Begich's crowning achievement was construction of the \$100 million Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center downtown -- a classy building that is a fitting tribute to the original inhabitants of this area. His administration also remodeled E and F Streets, put in some heated sidewalks, and spruced up Town Square Park, though the downtown roadwork has run into snafus.

And, with funding from the Rasmuson Foundation, the city is expanding the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, another \$100 million project.

Begich was not able to persuade the community that the Delaney Park Strip needed refurbishing, which he says he regrets. But he deserves credit for building up many other Anchorage parks. The Anchorage Park Foundation, created under his tenure, has marshalled private and public funds and hundreds of volunteers to dress up parks across the city.

The best park improvement: Cuddy Family Midtown Park next to the Loussac Library. Once a quiet, under-used green space, it re-opened this summer as a city treasure, with trails, a pond, gardens, an outdoor amphitheater and a speedskating oval.

**Setbacks**

His administration made a mighty effort, but was unable to win Assembly, state or federal support for building a south extension of the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, from Kincaid Park to Potter Marsh. It is still a good idea, and the uncontroversial sections of it should be built in the future.

Begich also failed to get the Assembly to finish rewriting the city's anything-goes zoning code. The rewritten code is supposed to implement Anchorage 2020, the comprehensive city development plan approved in 2001. Eleven years from now it will be time to create a new plan, and we haven't even put the last one fully into effect yet. The Assembly has approved pieces of the new code, but has not even taken up the most important section, design standards.

**Safer city**

One of the strongest efforts Begich made to improve residents' lives was to beef up Anchorage's crime-fighting capability.

He inherited a police department that was under-staffed compared with other U.S. cities, in part, because recruitment was a tough job. The department set a goal of adding 93 officers for a total of 431. Begich told the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce recently that 87 new police officers have been added so far.

He reported drunken driving arrests are up and injury accidents are down; fewer domestic violence offenders need to be re-arrested. The city under his watch has been vigilant about identifying and prosecuting gang-related crime.

**Making deals**

One of the hallmarks of Begich's term was his love of making deals, or figuring out creative ways to make things happen. In the case of the convention center, the administration won voter approval of an increase to the hotel bed tax to pay for the construction, after voters defeated a previous attempt. The successful vote was structured so that it required only a simple majority to approve it, instead of the 60 percent required for most tax increases. As part of the package, Begich got the convention center contractors to agree they'd be responsible for cost overruns. His administration worked long and hard to make arrangements to convert an old Eagle River mall into a town center.

Those deals worked out.

One that didn't: The city negotiated a bad lease for downtown parking lot spaces with developer Mark Pfeffer, in which the city lost tens of thousands of dollars. Eventually the lease was renegotiated on better terms. Not his finest moment. He tried to jumpstart development of an expanded resort at Winner Creek in Girdwood, but it did not materialize. He pushed hard to bring a new regional mall to Mountain View, but it is struggling as an even bigger mall gets under way in Muldoon.

Nonetheless, Begich was a highly competent mayor, and his successor will take over a city that is in excellent shape.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Mayor Begich could be a tough act to follow.

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