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## Gordon Huether reflects on 20 years with the Napa city Planning Commission

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**F**or 20 years, the artist and newly retired Napa City Planning Commissioner Gordon Huether felt a call to take action on the dais.



Gordon Huether recently retired from the Napa City Planning Commission after 20 years. His last meeting was Dec. 19.

Courtesy of Gordon Huether

The well-known public art creator liked having a say in “juicy” development projects that made their way into the City Council chamber. He took joy in helping shape the future of Napa, and the \$100 per meeting that came with it.

“I would just cash the check,” he said. “It’s kinda nice having a couple extra Benjamins in your pocket when you’re walking around.”

Juicy projects aside, Huether emphasized in an interview this week that he enjoyed bringing levity to the commission. He felt 20 years of service was a good number to end on.

“I want to be remembered as somebody who really gave a (expletive) and leaned into it,” he said.

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Dec. 19 marked Huether's final meeting as a planning commissioner. Planning Commission chair Beverly Shotwell gave Huether her throne, where he led his final 45-minute meeting, and members of the community gave their thanks to Huether for his tenure.

Commissioner Alexander Myers expressed his gratitude to Huether, citing him as a role model.

"You taught me that it is important to have a dedicated mission up here and not to waiver from it, even if perhaps it is not popular. I hope we can carry that mantle on," Myers said.

Huether's departure is the last in a line of drastic changes to the governing body this year.

Earlier this year, Huether's fellow commissioner **Bob Massaro died of a heart attack**. Massaro was well known as a sustainable building advocate.

Their **fellow commissioner Paul Kelley decided to retire earlier in December**, after being on the body for 11 years, marking another big shift. In an interview this week, Kelley said those changes will make a large impact on the board, particularly losing someone as outspoken as Huether.

"Sometimes he's rough on applicants," Kelley said. "But I think that his intention has always been to bring the strongest design elements to Napa and to projects. He's the person with the foot on the gas."

Huether said he hopes he and his fellow commissioners set a tone for developers in Napa, to make clear that builders can't just build for the sake of development. Huether sat in on countless projects over the years, from the Westin Verasa hotel to more recent debates on child care centers in Napa and a glamping campground project that incensed many neighbors.

During his service, Huether said he tried to prioritize an eye for quality in a project, from the building materials to the architecture. He recalled when the Westin hotel first surfaced at commission meetings in 2006.

"When that first came online, it looked like a gigantic Taco Bell," he said. "I was able to get them (the developers) to pivot in design."

In reflecting on the direction of development in Napa, he's noticed an uptick in what he described as NIMBYism from new residents who move to the city expecting things to remain stagnant.

"They haven't been here for very long and signed up for what they thought was a certain lifestyle. People don't like change, even though it's the one constant you can count on," he said.

Huether foresees a continuing trend of residents waging legal battles to halt projects they don't agree with.

“Everybody kind of forgets that wherever they live, anywhere they’re living in Napa, before there was a house there, there was deer or quail or boulders,” he said. “They’re just as guilty as everybody else for disrupting the status quo.”

Huether began his time on the commission in 2004 at age 45. He continued reapplying for the role every two years because he believed Napa was in a boom time for development, and he had a particular disdain for urban sprawl.

“The urban landscape is super important to me. Everywhere I turn my head, I want it to be beautiful,” he said. “I don’t want to see ugly buildings. I don’t want to see shuttered buildings.”

At the time, Huether felt he was a refreshing pick for the governing body, which he said had a stoic quality to it before he arrived. Huether saw the planning commission as a way to take action, and preserve the Napa he fell in love with when his family moved from Germany to the United States in the 1960s.

Huether describes himself as sentimental and partial to the familiar. After doing a brief stint with his family in San Francisco during his teens, he soon realized city life wasn’t for him. As an artist, he sometimes thinks that moving to a bigger city would have yielded more success, but believes that one’s environment is everything.

“As an artist, you’re also just inspired by your environment,” he said. “I don’t find being in the middle of Manhattan inspiring at all. Your environment affects your output and your outcome.”

When he came back to Napa, Huether saw the damage done during a period when many American cities tore down historic buildings for the sake of creating something new. It flipped a switch for him.

“I just started kind of watching the world around me like I still do today, and you could feel the winds changing, and something was coming on,” he recalled.

Huether’s impact is felt all around Napa in planning decisions and public art installations. His work blends with Napa’s downtown landscape, from the 9/11 Memorial Garden in downtown to the Historic Napa Mill gateway off Main Street.

As Huether looks toward the future of development in Napa, he warns of making impulsive development decisions. His two greatest concerns are keeping with the trend of beautiful architecture in Napa as well as creating attractive, affordable housing.

“The thing that I’m really concerned about is this kind of constant pressure to build housing and almost like a panic,” he said. “When people panic, when municipalities panic, we make rash decisions.”

Meanwhile, Huether is optimistic about the direction of the commission, maintaining that change is a permanent fixture in life.

He still plans on remaining involved as he serves on different bodies, including the board of the Napa County Historical Society.

“I’m gonna stay informed on what’s coming up for council and what’s coming up for planning commission,” he said. “If there’s something that I’m concerned about, I will make some noise.”

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