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Mayor Mike, Citizen of the Year - diplomacy, patience and grace under pressure

By Pippa Fisher



Mike Anderson Photo Jeff Heyman

This year's Citizen of the Year award goes to Mike Anderson - a name familiar to most Lafayette residents for his 25 years of volunteer civic positions. But if his many, many years of service have been impressive, what people remember most is his calm, welcoming demeanor along with his respectful leadership style.

City Manager Niroop Srivatsa reflects, "Mayor Mike, as he is fondly called by city staff, has taught me diplomacy, patience and how to remain graceful under pressure. His ability to develop consensus between people of opposing viewpoints is legendary as is his keen sense of humor."

The vote for Anderson was unanimous this year in what is the 72nd Lafayette Citizen of the Year (no award was given in 2021).

Anderson was appointed to the Planning Commission in 2000. He served on the Downtown Specific Plan Committee and was elected to the city council in 2004,

serving as mayor for five years, including two back-to-back years when a prior mayor stepped down, before retiring in 2021. He was the 2021 Ann Deny Award recipient.

A graduate of UC Berkeley, Anderson worked for East Bay Regional Park District as Assistant General Manager for Planning/Stewardship and Development. He says that his job with EBRPD, which involved visiting the different cities where they had projects planned or being implemented, led smoothly to his transition into public service. "So I got to see city government in both Alameda and Contra Costa counties." He says he saw all sorts of local government styles, from old-school to Lafayette where everyone had a chance to have a voice. "I got a good feeling for Lafayette."

Fast forward 25 years and another former mayor and previous Citizen of the Year, Don Tatzin has done the math. "At a rate of approximately three meetings per month (and often more), this means he (Anderson) attended over 1,000 meetings on behalf of Lafayette residents and businesses." Tatzin adds that meetings are like icebergs. "What the public sees is participation in a meeting. What they miss, because it is work that council members and commissioners do alone, are the hours of preparation that occur to be ready."

Anderson says he is most proud of how the city handled the COVID crisis, especially in terms of finding support to help small businesses cope, and making sure they had all the information they needed to access the money that was available in grants. "I think we were really out in front of recognizing there was going to be a need there." He credits Cam Burks who was on the council at that time, for helping him understand the seriousness of the situation at an early stage, enabling the city to think and act proactively.

As for the biggest challenge? Anderson says that the Regional Housing Needs Allocation numbers were, and still are, the biggest challenge. "The job is to help people feel comfortable with what we have no control over. We can't not do it," he says referring to state-mandated housing requirements. "And people don't want to hear that. People have a fear of losing the character of the city, and there's some truth to that."

Given that the housing has to happen, Anderson's approach was always to encourage people to weigh in on making development the best it can be, by looking at such things as design. He acknowledges that over time he learned it's impossible to make everyone happy, but you can listen and find common points that are good and at least include those good components in what has to happen.

Tatzin recognizes this gift for listening and finding common ground. "Mike always has a calming demeanor which leads others to adopt a similar disposition, and which goes a long way to reduce the level of vitriol that often occurs in public debate in current times." Tatzin notes that when controversial topics arose, Anderson would listen to all residents and find a way to incorporate their concerns into his decision.

Longtime Chamber of Commerce Board Member Kathy Merchant says that just two words define a perfect facilitator: "Mike Anderson."

Merchant says that Anderson has played a key role in shaping the things that represent the best of Lafayette. "He is patient, smart and intelligent," she says, continuing, "Several years ago, sitting on the

Downtown Strategy Advisory Committee chaired by Mike, I watched him orchestrate a cacophony of views with perfect pitch."

Anderson remains optimistic about the future. He says that while there will be more people living here, as long as people continue to wave to one another, that's what builds community. "It's simple stuff."

Now, with a little more time on his hands, he is certainly keeping busy. He and his wife Courtney walk daily and enjoy greeting people along the way. He continues to grow tomatoes in the summer and brew beer. And he plays golf with a group called the Blind Squirrels. "We're not very good, but even blind squirrels can find an acorn every now and then," he says.

Says Srivatsa, "Thank you for your countless contributions to Lafayette, Mayor Mike!"

The 2023 Citizen of the Year Dinner Honoring Mike Anderson will be held on Friday, March 24 at the Lafayette Park Hotel & Spa. Reception with no host bar from 6 to 7 p.m. Dinner at 7 p.m. Evening ends at 9 p.m. Seating is limited. Tickets can be purchased on the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce website: <https://cca.lafayettechamber.org/EvtListing.aspx?dbid2=CALAF&evtid=82038&class=B>

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

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