

Split Council

Zelenka and Clark will shape city's future across political divide

Story and photos by Alan Pittman

The Eugene City Council is split down the middle. On many important issues, such as the West Eugene Parkway and urban sprawl, the vote falls 4-4 with the mayor breaking the tie for progressives.

This year two new councilors jumped into that split, splintering left and right. Alan Zelenka from Ward 3 near the UO, an Emerald People's Utility District (EPUD) administrator, counts himself as a proud progressive. Mike Clark from Ward 5 in northwest Eugene is a Republican campaign and commercial marketing consultant who questions global warming. Here's a look at these two new councilors from either side of the political divide who will likely play a leading role in debates on the city's future for years to come.



Alan Zelenka

Alan Zelenka, 46, has two golden retrievers but no kids and has lived in the same house in the Fairmount neighborhood since 1984. That's when he and his wife, Susie Smith, a manager for the local sewage treatment system, moved here after graduating from Berkeley.

At Berkeley Zelenka earned a bachelor's degree in political economy, and at the UO he got a master's in energy and environmental policy, an interdisciplinary program he designed. After the UO he went to work for EPUD, where he does legislative and computer work for the rural public utility. At night through the 1990s, he served as a volunteer on the Eugene Budget Committee.

Over lunch in the EMU courtyard, Zelenka said he's still struggling to balance his day job, personal life and the demands of being a city councilor. "I have two stacks of paper this tall," he said, holding a hand four feet off the ground. His eyes twinkle with humor, and there's a smile beneath the mustache.

Last May, Zelenka beat two opponents for the Ward 3 seat with 69 percent of the vote. Ward 3 surrounds the UO and is the most progressive council ward in Eugene, voting 86 percent for John Kerry in 2004.

Zelenka described his successful campaign platform as sustainability and environmental protection, protecting neighborhood livability and safety and having government speak for the interests of all people, not just special interests.

He's proud that the council has already moved forward with the adoption of sustainability principles and the creation of a sustainability commission. As part of the mayor's Sustainable Business Initiative, the city is looking to hire a sustainability manager and lead by example, becoming carbon neutral and zero waste by 2020. Already, Zelenka said, "the city staff has really done an amazing amount of stuff."

The city will also try to recruit new sustainable businesses and help existing businesses become more green. The approach is more about incentives than regulation, Zelenka said. "It's not about regulating them into submission."

But the initiative will go beyond recycling, conservation and business incentives, Zelenka said. The council has included a component that will require a sustainability analysis for every major new city policy and action. Zelenka said that sort of city mini-environmental impact statement could change the city's pro-parking garage and freeway policies that have drawn fire from environmentalists.

Zelenka was an active member of the Fairmount Neighborhood Association and helped push to make neighborhood protection one of the council's goals. The city is considering bolstering neighborhood associations with more funding and passing new infill standards to protect neighborhood attractiveness and livability.

Zelenka says he's open to real changes including requiring developers who make major development proposals to first make presentations to neighborhood groups or even win their approval. But Zelenka isn't opposed to all development. He says he likes the city's and UO's ideas for redeveloping the Walnut node on Franklin into a higher-density mixed-use area around the EmX stop.

While out campaigning, Zelenka said he heard a lot of neighborhood

complaints about property crime. Zelenka supports a council goal to increase police staffing to focus on property crime and community policing.

Eugene has declining or flat crime rates and about the same number of cops per capita as Salem and more than Springfield. But Zelenka supports the city police department's argument that they need a big increase in staffing.

He does admit that finding all the money needed and making sure there are enough prosecutors and jail beds for the additional arrests will be difficult. "If it's just a revolving door, it isn't a very effective strategy."

Zelenka said he'd also like to see the police come clean on the Magaña/Lara officer sex scandal. The EPD has so far refused to investigate and report on whether any other officers in the department did anything wrong in hiring and supervising the officers. During the six years of sex crimes by the two policemen, more than a dozen women were victimized by the officers while numerous complaints were ignored. "They do owe the community an explanation," Zelenka said about the cop sex scandal. "It's been too long."

Zelenka said he also hopes that EPD will move to reduce its higher rate of stops and searches of minorities. "I don't think the EPD should be race profiling."

A top city priority is fixing the city's \$110 million road maintenance backlog, Zelenka said. "We have to add more money."

Zelenka opposes taking the money out of general fund surpluses. He also criticizes an unpopular proposed road tax (TSMF) that would have charged homeowners a flat fee regardless of how much they drove or could afford.

He said he supports the business side of that tax, which varied by traffic generation. "Businesses absolutely have to pay their fare share."

Zelenka also said he'd like to explore a commuter tax. He cites statistics that half of the people who work in Eugene don't live in Eugene and wouldn't have paid the road tax, he said. "Half! That blew me away," he said. To stick their share of the road tax on residents "is not fair and it's not right."

When it comes to downtown redevelopment, Zelenka is supportive and critical of the city's approach. Downtown needs a "mix of national and local" retailers, he said. "It shouldn't all be in one hand. But there needs to be coordination."

It would be "worth exploring" directing incentives directly to local tenants downtown rather than developers, as some existing renters downtown have proposed, Zelenka said. "You've got to get the people down there."

Zelenka opposed the Whole Foods parking garage. He said it would have been better as an underground garage topped by a park. He also adds that right now it's already "pretty easy to park downtown" without the garage.

At EWEB, Zelenka said whether the utility wants to move "should be driven by EWEB." He said he'd like to see a mix of development and riparian set-back at the site, but he declined to provide a percentage. "I don't necessarily think it should be a giant park."

On tax breaks, Zelenka said the city should renegotiate its enterprise zone rules with the county now that the County Commission may have a more progressive majority. "That's a good idea," he said. "I'd support that."

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The county had earlier forced the city to drop a per-job cap on tax breaks in the zone and stronger pro-labor and environmental requirements. The weaker rules gave potential millions of dollars more in tax breaks to Hynix, which has already received more than \$50 million.

But Zelenka supports giving 10-year residential tax waivers to developers of high-quality apartments and condos downtown and near the UO.

Zelenka said Triad needs to build a hospital to provide "choice of providers and choice" of reproductive services versus the Catholic Sacred Heart. He declined to comment on the Delta Highway site, but Zelenka said the hospital should be in Eugene for the tax revenue it will provide, although the hospital will also cost a lot in city services.

The council plans to discuss its relationship with the manager's city attorney in April at a session entitled, "Who's the Client?"

"I think it's a critical issue to talk about," Zelenka said. He said he's interested in the city hiring an in-house attorney to give the city more control over work done by the outside city attorney firm.

Zelenka said the council takes itself too seriously. Personally, he said, he'd like to "change the tone and bring a little more humor to it." ■