

A TALE OF TWO MAYORS

DOES STYLE GET THINGS DONE?

MARK KASS

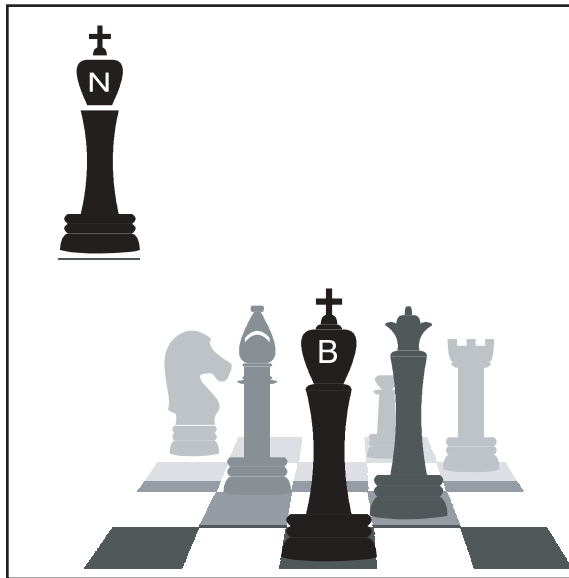
There are a lot of differences between John Norquist and Tom Barrett, the two men who have occupied Milwaukee mayor's office for the past eighteen years.

But the biggest difference can be best by shown by the recent battle to get approval for a \$41 million tax incremental financing district for the proposed PabstCity development in downtown Milwaukee.

Barrett and his staff led the push to try and get the controversial proposal approved, but it was surprisingly rejected by the Milwaukee Common Council on a 9-6 vote in late July. Barrett was stunned at the defeat, as just three weeks before the final vote, he had nine aldermen supporting the project.

After the vote, he lashed out at the project's opponents, which included downtown restaurant and tavern owners, on local talk radio, and in other media.

Yet, several days later, Barrett ran into Milwaukee lobbyist and public relations executive Craig Peterson, who led the fight against PabstCity, at an event and was very cordial, offering his congratulations and vowing to work together on other issues.



"I was shocked to say the least at how nice he was to me," said Peterson. "It was like we had never worked against each other."

In comparison, many political observers said when Norquist would see an opposition leader soon after a battle, he was likely to chew them out about how they had hurt the city and vow revenge on them. This happened even if Norquist won.

Norquist was well-known for cutting city contracts or other political work for any local lobbyist who opposed him on any issue. For example, on several occasions he ordered the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) to end the contract of lobbyist John Tries because Tries had worked with former Common Council President, John Kalwitz, on a pension settlement with city employees.

"He would cut you off at the knees and it would take you a long time to get back in his good graces," said a local lobbyist. "He was a vindictive man and would go out of his way to get revenge."

Added a Milwaukee real estate attorney,
There was a ruthless side to him

Mark L. Kass is editor of The Business Journal Serving Greater Milwaukee.

(Norquist). He loved the power he had and he knew how to use it to his advantage. He knew exactly who had worked with him and against him on almost any issue.

Huge Change

Since Barrett won the election to the mayor's office in April 2004, many political observers have been amazed at the change in the personality of the person running the city.

Norquist ran the city for sixteen years, as he was elected in 1988 following on the heels of twenty-four years of the city being overseen by the late Henry Maier, who was also known for running the city with an iron fist.

"Tom has had a tough act to follow," said Evan Zeppos, a Milwaukee public relations executive. "Henry and John were very intense leaders, who did not hide their emotions. They wanted everyone to know who ran the city."

Norquist, who spent time in the Wisconsin legislature, is characterized by many as a savvy politician, who knew how to get things accomplished. Many people point to the positive accomplishments during this long tenure, including the development of the Riverwalk along the Milwaukee River in downtown Milwaukee, the condominium development explosion in downtown and the Historic Third Ward, and limited tax levy increases.

But he was also known for his social awkwardness with aldermen, business executives, and even political supporters. Many supporters tell stories of questionable comments or jokes he would make during private meetings or his reluctance to even talk to people at social events.

He also upset many of his supporters, who felt they were lied to or misled about his affair with a member of his staff, which led to a sexual harassment complaint to be filed against him after he was re-elected in 2000. He eventually ended up not running for re-election in 2004 and leaving office early for a job with an urban planning firm in Chicago.

"A lot of his supporters felt betrayed by the whole scandal," Zeppos said. "That is

where things really changed for him and not for the better."

In comparison, Barrett, who served as a congressman for ten years and in the state legislature for nine years, is known by most "as a nice guy." He is described by supporters as cordial, soft spoken, and a politician who remembers the names and the issues of most of the people he interacts with.

A lobbyist tells the story of how he ran into Barrett at a summer festival after only meeting him once in Washington, D.C. several months earlier. Barrett, who was with his family, saw the lobbyist from across the fair and made a point of coming up to him and asking for an update on his issue.

"He showed that, unlike other politicians, he actually cared about my issue," the lobbyist said.

Barrett's tact is much that of a legislator, learned through his days in Madison and Washington, D.C. He believes that it's always better to build a bridge than to burn one. An opponent on today's issue vote may be an ally tomorrow.

Business executives tell of meetings with Barrett, where he spent most of the time asking them questions about the city and any issues they had, rather than lecturing them on the trials of the city, as Norquist often did.

On the other hand, political observers and many supporters admit that Barrett's wanting to please everyone has made his first months in office lacking of much progress.

They complain that rather than dealing with an issue, Barrett is more likely to set up a task force, as he did on MMSD after several major sewage overflows in the summer of 2004 and on election problems after huge miscues were uncovered in the city voting process during the 2004 presidential election.

"He always wants to make everyone happy, which you can't do in the mayor's office," a political source said. "You have to take a stand. Some people aren't going to like it, but that's what the citizens pay you to do."

In an editorial after Barrett's first year in office, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* said Barrett needed to be more decisive to help improve the economic climate of the city.

"Barrett suffers from a perception that he is too willing to please," the April 17, 2005, editorial stated.

He relies instinctively on his sense of fair play and genuine good nature to resolve disputes.

It's almost impossible to find anyone who doesn't like the mayor and is not impressed with his charm, intelligence and abiding sense of the greater public good. But some still wonder whether he is assertive enough to lead the city on issues such as economic development, poverty and education.

Another complaint about Barrett is his lack of visibility at times on major issues.

"Tom doesn't grandstand nearly as much as Norquist did," Zeppos said. "John was much more aggressive in getting out in front of the cameras on an issue and making sure everyone saw him."

Regional Relations

One of Norquist's biggest weaknesses was dealing with his suburban counterparts, especially municipal leaders in Waukesha County. He was well-known for his verbal fights with suburban leaders and his slide show that ridiculed the development along Blue Mound Road in Brookfield. He showed the slides all over the country, and even once at a Rotary meeting in Brookfield.

But soon after Barrett took office, Waukesha County political leaders noticed a stark change in the willingness of the

Milwaukee mayor to actually talk with them about regional issues.

Former Waukesha County Executive Dan Finley said Barrett and Norquist couldn't be more opposite on the issue of regional cooperation. He immediately noticed a difference at a transportation meeting on the expansion of Milwaukee's regional freeway system shortly after Barrett was elected.

"I leaned over at one point to (Milwaukee County Executive) Scott (Walker) and said these forums wouldn't be as fun as they used to be," Finley said. "We knew we could always say something that would get under Norquist's skin."

But soon after Barrett took office, Waukesha County political leaders noticed a stark change in the willingness of the Milwaukee mayor to actually talk with them about regional issues.

Barrett was even invited by Finley to be the featured speaker at Finley's business awards luncheon in October 2004, a request that had never previously been made by Finley or any other Waukesha leader.

"We have a new team in place and I wanted to get off on the right foot," Finley said.

Tom is open to discussions about issues, while his predecessor was a bit more strident in his views. It is no longer Milwaukee's way or no way. Mayor Barrett will have the best relationship with the suburbs of any Milwaukee mayor in the last 50 years.

Barrett joked at the time that his improved relationship with Finley is similar to the United Nations recognizing a new country.

"I recognize the existence and importance of Waukesha County," he said. "It is extremely important to the region that we have a solid relationship. There will be areas of disagreement, but we just have to work through them."

Ricardo Diaz, executive director of the United Community Center in Milwaukee, said

the improved relations are a result of a different personality in the mayor's office

"So much of what one does in terms of relationships is personality," said Diaz, who worked for Norquist as his commissioner of the Department of City Development and has been a close adviser to Barrett. "He (Barrett) has certainly extended the olive branch. He has taken the approach that we can do more together than we can get done separately."

Diaz said that approach is important to the national reputation of southeastern Wisconsin, especially in terms of recruiting new businesses to the area.

"They don't distinguish between which side of 124th Street a site is in if you are a business person from Chicago or New York City looking at Milwaukee," he said.

Even one of Norquist's frequent opponents in Waukesha County, former Lt. Governor and State Senator Margaret Farrow, speaks highly of Barrett and his approach to regionalism.

"Tom, to his credit, has approached the move towards regionalism in our community with an open mind," she said.

In fact, Farrow even called in to support Barrett on his push for the PabstCity project on a local talk radio show after the council rejected the project. She praised Barrett for his strong push for the project and what it would mean for the economic development of the region.

Farrow was quick to point out if that if the current push by Waukesha County and Milwaukee County leaders for a regional approach on economic development and transportation had been launched while Norquist was still in office, it would likely not even be discussed.

"He (Norquist) would have squelched it right away and told everyone not to even bother coming to the table," she said. "Tom sees that if we work together, we can make a stronger region, which means a stronger city of Milwaukee. He's been a breath of fresh air."

Political Power

Barrett has not used the power of his office nearly as much as Norquist, who was known to hand out political appointments and assignments to supporters. For example, he rewarded many aldermen and supporters, such as his close political confidante Bill Christofferson and City Forester Preston Cole, with a seat on the MMSD board, which paid more than \$11,000 a year and provided free health insurance benefits.

Many of these appointments were made even though the supporters had no experience with the sewerage district or any of the issues the huge agency dealt with.

Barrett recently forced the MMSD Commission to drop the free health insurance benefits for board members.

Norquist also frequently appointed supporters to the city's Plan Commission, Zoning Appeals Board, and other powerful city panels as a reward for their work on his project or proposals.

Barrett finally used the reward of the MMSD board during the recent PabstCity debate, when he declined to reappoint Alderman Michael D'Amato, who was one of the leading opponents to the project on the Common Council. He replaced D'Amato with Alderman Ashanti Hamilton, who supported the project.

D'Amato said that he wanted to stay on the MMSD panel, and that Barrett did not consult with him before announcing his move.

Politicians need "to administer punishment" occasionally to prevail, said Jeff Fleming, a Milwaukee public relations executive and former Norquist aide.

"D'Amato's position on PabstCity was pretty 'in-your-face,' " Fleming said. "It may have reached a point where (Barrett's administration) isn't playing softball any more."

Improving Performance

Many political observers said Barrett was improving as the city's chief executive officer

as he spends more time in the office. He has slowly put together his cabinet and mayoral staff and hasn't stumbled much, except for his appointment of Lisa Artison as elections commissioner. Artison ended up resigning from the position after the problems in the November 2004 election.

Zeppos said Barrett had a tough task when he took over the city after Norquist's sex scandal and his decision to leave office early, turning over the reins of the city to Common Council President Marvin Pratt for three months. Pratt was also a candidate for mayor.

Pratt ended up winning the February 2004 primary, but lost to Barrett in a race that was marred by many race issues. In addition, three aldermen, Jeff Pawlinski, Rosa Cameron, and Paul Henningsen, were indicted by U.S.

Attorney Steven Biskupic, forced to resign and ended up spending time in jail.

"He (Barrett) really had to spend the first year bringing a sense of stability back to the City Hall," Zeppos said. "Now he's been able to concentrate on some of his big issues and I believe is making good progress."

Wauwatosa Mayor Theresa Estness said Barrett has been growing into the job and learning the important issues.

"He has been very good to work with, especially on issues that impact both of our cities," she said. "Rather than fighting over companies or issues, he would rather work together and figure out what's best for everyone. That's an environment where we all can thrive."