



# Surviving in Menlo Park



**VETERAN OF 22 YEARS** as Menlo Park's city manager, Mike Bedwell finds a sense of humor is essential. He has a wall of objects he has collected as souvenirs of good times and bad. The gun with

"bullet holes" in its case is from a taxpayers' revolt, he says. For more Mike Bedwell reminiscences and those of others about him, see Page 17.

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## PEOPLE



MIKE BEDWELL demonstrates the flexibility of one face during an interview with Marion Softky. Photos by Carol Ivie.

# Mike Bedwell is a survivor

Menlo Park city manager's  
22 years run the gamut  
from Venceremos to Prop. 13

BY MARION SOFTKY

When Mike Bedwell interviewed for a job in Menlo Park 27 years ago, he only planned to stay a couple of years.

Now after 22 years in the city's top post, he is the senior city manager in San Mateo County, if not the whole Bay Area.

What is the secret of his survival in a job that breeds controversy and makes him a target in every political upheaval?

"It's probably not taking yourself too serious. This is a serious business, but a lot of people take themselves too seriously. Once you think you know it all, watch out."

Perhaps Mr. Bedwell's chief trademark in office is his ability to say something funny. This talent is often a lifesaver in dreary or hostile meetings; it certainly enlivens almost any kind of private conversation.

Looking like a comfortable teddy bear, Mr. Bedwell is genial, engaging and witty. In his office looking over the lake in Menlo Park Civic Center, he points to what he calls his "fun wall," covered by pictures and memorabilia. Here a small framed pistol sports two bullet holes and a plaque that says, "In case of taxpayers revolt, break glass." Quips Mr. Bedwell, "I added the bullet holes after Prop. 13."

In spite of all the jokes, Mr. Bedwell has kept Menlo Park government working with amazing smoothness through enormous growth of the city, wildly changing city councils, and external upheavals. These ranged from physical threats during the Vietnam War to the taxpayers' revolt and its difficult aftermath.

## A POLITICAL FAMILY

Mike Bedwell grew up with politics in his blood. His mother's mother was the first woman elected as county tax collector-assessor in California. His father was president of the Escondido school board for years. Three of his grandmother's brothers were county supervisors.

"My parents were active in Escondido politics," he

recalls. "In fact they were once called communists for supporting the concept of a junior college." (Palomar Community College is now thriving.)

Long before government meetings were supposed to be held in public, little Mike used to go to sleep to the drone of school board meetings in the living room next to his bedroom.

His grandmother made the biggest impression. Above the computer terminal in his modern office there is a watercolor of Bodie—now a ghost town in the Sierra. Mr. Bedwell points to one of the houses where his grandmother lived and his mother was born. His grandfather had the livery next door—now open as a museum.

After his grandfather died, his grandmother got fed up with being a seamstress in Bodie when it snowed on the Fourth of July. She moved to Bishop and became postmistress.

Mike was a teenager when she was tax collector and assessor. He remembers driving her into the mountains to assess gold mines. "She said she didn't like to drive, but it finally dawned on me why I was there," he says. He was directed to sit in the car with the engine running so he could speed off down the dirt road in case a miner who didn't want to be assessed pulled a shotgun.

Mike's education led him to study public administration at Pomona College and then become a Coro Foundation Fellow in San Francisco. He was hired as assistant city manager of Menlo Park in 1959.

Now divorced, Mike lives with his son Patrick, a professional bicyclist. Mrs. Carleen Bedwell, also a Coro graduate, still lives in Menlo Park and works with Opportunities Industrial Center West. Their son Allan is an interpretive ranger at Yosemite National Park.

## HIGHS AND LOWS

An early high point in Mr. Bedwell's career was being appointed city manager when John Johnson resigned. "I call it April Fool's, but it was really April 16, 1964," he comments.

When asked for other high points in his career, Mr. Bedwell promptly replies, "Garbage." He takes pride in his role in the complex intergovernmental arrangements that allowed the old Marsh Road Dump to turn into a new city park—or a "silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Another satisfaction has been his staff. He is proud of building a force of 150 and of giving them freedom and encouragement to innovate. "It's interesting to have

appointed all the department heads," he comments. "I can never say it's my predecessor's problem."

The '70s brought some unhappy times, both personal and professional. Following the Willow Expressway and other development controversies, Mr. Bedwell for the first time faced a divided council. There was a recall election, troubles in the police department, and an anti-tax movement.

"Those were not very comfortable days," he admits, remembering when his job balanced on a 3 to 2 vote. "Going from a very homogeneous council to one that was at sixes and sevens was a bit of a jolt. It was painful, but I learned a lot about how to deal with some very different people and try to make things still work on a positive basis."

"I think the thing you really have to learn is to have the freedom of thought to make recommendations on what you think is best, but also be able to give it up if it's turned down."

Mr. Bedwell scoffs at occasional charges that the staff runs the city or "manipulates" what happens. "It's just not the case," he retorts. "To be as devious as accused, you could hire yourself out as a high-priced Washington lobbyist or sell arms to emerging countries."

The role of the staff is to let the council and advisory commissions know what needs to be done, he explains. "Part of it is reactive, but part of it is making recommendations."

Not all the threats were political during those days. Protests against the Vietnam War led to physical danger, demonstrations and threats against individuals in the city.

"When people speak of Menlo Park as a quiet little town, I would like them to get the feel of Venceremos," says Mr. Bedwell. This was the organization headed by Bruce and Jane Franklin which was protesting the Vietnam War. (Dr. Franklin is still trying to get reinstated in his job at Stanford through the courts.) "In many ways they were right. It was a rotten war. It was a bummer. But the way they were going about it (protesting) was almost as bad as the war they were blaming."

"We finally found out at council meetings if we were going to get blown away. We figured if they brought their children, it was going to be all show."

Finally the city set a special meeting for Venceremos to air their grievances. Mr. Bedwell still vividly remembers that "scary time in the Burgess Theater."

"The air was so electric. There were enough police behind the curtain that if anybody had made a wrong move, there could have been a lot of blood spilled," he recalls. "Then somebody dropped a gun. That was one of the largest thumps I have ever heard."

After that evening the tension began to ease "when they began to think we weren't going to attack them in their beds."

## Whither Menlo Park? A look at the future

"How do we keep Menlo Park a pleasant place to live with diminishing resources? And not just Menlo Park, but all over," asks Mike Bedwell reflectively. "That's the biggie."

Reflecting on the future, Menlo Park's city manager draws from his experience over the past 22 years. "It's money; it's space; it's the lack of ability to affect what happens in Palo Alto and Redwood City. Whatever they do is going to affect us in several areas—Bayshore, El Camino, air quality—in addition to what we do."

"How do you get people to think in those broader terms?"

Mr. Bedwell has a few ideas. One is to carry out a survey—maybe next year—to see what people really want in the way of service. "I see us getting tighter and tighter on money—and I'm not crying wolf—in the next five or six years," he explains. "We really need to know what we need to do and what's wanted."

Once the current review of the comprehensive plan is complete, Mr. Bedwell also wants to start a "Menlo Park 2000" program to enlist community leaders in thinking about how Menlo Park should face the millenium.

"We know some of the obvious problems like traffic. But we can't do much about it."

The choice lies between extremes: a conscious decision to keep allowing development and accept delays, and resorting to major surgery. He sees a middle route "somewhere between these two points doing a minimum amount of development."

"I don't see us ever building the Willow Expressway

or anything like it or major traffic improvements because they would require radical surgery. I don't think people want the major surgery that would destroy the quality of either the businesses or residences and probably increase the problems. I think that's what people are worried about."

"We don't seem to be able to pry enough money loose to have any kind of transit that's really workable."

Mr. Bedwell sees the biggest challenges in the next 20 years: "How do we handle the information age; and how do we rehabilitate housing? How do we cope with an aging housing stock?"

"We can't have a great increase in density because of traffic. How do you strike that balance so you don't stagnate but you don't go booming ahead so much you stagnate because you can't move."

"The whole concept of recycling land use hasn't been talked about except in very small areas."

"Where are we going to have housing? We have help-wanted signs in a lot of restaurants. How are we going to get people to operate the services that don't pay too well? And where are they going to live?"

"How are we going to handle information in the city government and with our citizens. We're talking Buck Rogers stuff. We haven't even thought very much how we're going to be reporting to our citizenry in 15 to 20 more years."

What does he predict?

Mr. Bedwell just can't stay serious for long. "If I knew that one, I'd be a consultant."

## Former mayors look back

### GERRY ANDEEN

"Mike is an excellent administrator. He always did a good job of reading the council. He made some good choices in personnel."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

### WILLIAM LAWSON

"He's a fine man as well as an efficient administrator. There was never any doubt about his integrity. He writes the most explicit and clear memos."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

### ROBERT STEPHENS

"Mike is a nice guy. It's interesting to see his ability to hang on."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

### IRA BONDE

"Mike is a diplomat. He knows when to stand up and when to run and hide. He gets a lot out of his people and gives them opportunities. He writes wonderful letters."

*"Thirty years is long enough"*

# Mike Bedwell will retire next year

BY MARION SOFTKY

Menlo Park will seem a different place without Mike Bedwell at the helm.

The comfortable, genial and funny city manager, who has led the city staff for 25 years, will retire July 1, 1990 — on his 60th birthday.

"It's time I called curtains. I've been around here for 30 years," he told the *Almanac* last week after the news leaked out.

He has been pondering leaving for some time, he said. He told his former wife, Carleen, on New Year's Eve that he would leave after 30 years; when he came in 1959, he had only planned to stay for three. "You never were very good with zeroes," he quoted her as saying.

He wrote Mayor Jan La Fetra in January and told the city staff at a January retreat in Half Moon Bay. The news first went public in the newsletter of the Menlo Park Republican Caucus — "and I'm a lifelong Democrat," he quipped. Then he inserted his retirement as a very small item in his quarterly report.

"He's been here a long time; I think he's getting tired," said Mayor Jan La Fetra. "He's been a very good city manager. Menlo Park is a great city; it didn't get there by accident."

The council is moving actively to decide what they want in his replacement and how to get the right person to manage city government in the tight-budget times ahead.

In a series of Saturday closed sessions the five councilmembers have been giving the city manager's performance a detailed review. "This will give us a head start in looking for his successor," said Mrs. La Fetra. "We're looking at the city as well as Mike."

"We've got to find ways to make things run more economically," she added. "We have less money all the time; we are going to have to cut corners."

Councilmember Ted Sorensen, who has outspokenly advocated a top-to-bottom review of management, is critical of Mr. Bedwell's "informal, laid-back"



**MIKE BEDWELL**, Menlo Park city manager for 25 years will retire July 1, 1990, after 31 years of service to the city.

management style. "Thirty years is enough," he said. "I like strong management and direction — but I was only one vote."

The new city manager will be on board well before Mr. Bedwell leaves if Mr. Sorensen has his way. Mr. Sorensen has been contacting executive search firms, and the council is about to select a firm, he said. "We hope to get a new man on board sooner than 1990," he added. "We'll keep Mike available as a knowledgeable source."

## UPS AND DOWNS OF 30 YEARS

On City Manager Mike Bedwell's "fun wall" — among the jokes, cartoons, photos and pictures of his old-West background — is a small, framed pistol. It has two bullet holes in the glass, and a plaque that says, "In case of taxpayers revolt, break glass."

Quipped Mr. Bedwell, "I added the bullet holes after Prop 13."

With just such ready wit and a

booming laugh, Mr. Bedwell has led Menlo Park from the growing city of the '60s to the mature but restive community of the '80s.

During the 30 years since he first reported for work Jan. 2, 1959, as assistant to then-city manager John Johnson until now, Menlo Park's operating budget has increased 12 times from \$1 million to more than \$12 million. It has gone from 110 employees to 180.

Mr. Bedwell takes pride in many of the accomplishments during these years. Among his satisfactions are completion of the civic center with an internal park where he just counted 54 ducks enjoyed by a flock of parents with small children.

There was the conversion of the 1200 and 1300 blocks to today's Gateway project for 130 low income families, and the "sow's-ear-into-silk-purse" conversion of the old Marsh Road dump into the city's new Bayfront Park. "But the real highlight was interacting with people to make the process work," he said.

On the down side were much of the '70s when the populace revolted over the Willow Expressway, the taxpayers revolted with Proposition 13, and the city was threatened by anti-Vietnam protests and the radical group Venceremos. And the disastrous experiment with giving the police blazers instead of uniforms.

Mr. Bedwell advises his successor, "Laugh. See the cosmic humor in government. Take the job seriously, not yourself."

What next?

Mr. Bedwell hopes to put some of his amusing experiences into short stories. He may also do some consulting, or

occasionally join the "range riders of the League of California Cities to trouble-shoot for other cities."

Above all, he will "not attend council meetings."

## What the council wants

What are city council members looking for in a new city manager?

Mayor Jan La Fetra: "Like a young Mike, someone who is personable and innovative."

Councilmember Jack Morris: "Someone with experience who understands that Menlo Park is not a new, growing community, but fairly mature, and there are things that citizens expect. He will require quite a bit of flexibility."

Councilmember Gerry Grant: "He's got to have at least a master's degree in public administration and good ethics. He's got to wear well with the population."

Councilmember Cal Jones: "He should be a relatively young man, ambitious and on the way up, with enough experience to handle Menlo Park — someone who won't stay around for 25 years."

Councilmember Ted Sorensen: "Someone with experience in management, an assistant city manager or city manager on the way up. We expect him to stay five to nine years, but not much more."

## 'The Enforcer' eyes Valparaiso speeders

BY MARION SOFTKY

The speed limit will stay the same on Valparaiso Avenue, but police will get tough on enforcing it before children start riding their bicycles to the new middle school at Hillview next September.

Although the transportation commission and many residents wanted the speed limit reduced from 35 to 30 miles per hour now that new bike lanes are in place, a traffic survey failed to justify the lower speed limit.

Under state law the police are not allowed to enforce speeding with radar unless the speed limit is justified by a traffic survey.

On March 7 the Menlo Park City Council backed off from lowering the speed limit, but took several other measures they hope will make the street safer.

The city will post additional speed signs, including 25-mile-per-hour signs in school zones at Menlo School, St. Joseph's and Sacred Heart. These will allow police to enforce the 25-mile-an-hour limit when children are present — before and after school and sometimes during lunch.

"Let's have special enforcement

before school starts so we get people trained," said Mayor Jan La Fetra.

The staff may also make another traffic survey to see whether painting the bike lanes has slowed people down to the point where a 30 mile-per-hour speed limit can be justified.

The council disapproved a new stop sign on the Menlo Park side of Valparaiso at Elena Avenue. Atherton is pushing for stop signs in both directions to allow cars to enter Valparaiso Avenue more easily.

At El Camino Real, Menlo Park hopes to persuade Caltrans to install a crosswalk on the north side of the intersection to make it easier for children going to Hillview to cross.

The council also approved plans for a bike lane to connect the expanded bike ways on Laurel Street to the new lanes along Valparaiso Avenue.

Glenwood Avenue will be widened by about three feet at the Shell station to allow room for the new bike lanes. A parking bay will be constructed by the dialysis center to minimize conflicts between bicyclists and vehicles transporting patients. Parking will be restricted on Glenwood between Laurel Street and the railroad tracks rather than widening the street through that section.

## His most dramatic experience

Mrs. Bedwell was the heroine of one of the most traumatic periods of Menlo Park history.

It was during the Vietnam War and the radical organization Venceremos, headed by Bruce and Jane Franklin, was attacking city government as a convenient target representing the bourgeois establishment.

Mr. Bedwell, the late Vic Cizankas, then police chief, and others in city government were afraid for their lives and for their families' lives. When they brought their children to council meetings, city officials were relieved. "We figured, if they brought their children, it was going to be all show," he said.

The first "scary" climax came when the city council set a special meeting at Burgess Theater to air their grievances. "The air was electric," Mr. Bedwell recalled. "There were enough police behind the curtain that if anybody had

made a wrong move, there could have been a lot of blood spilled.

"Then somebody dropped a gun. That was one of the largest thumps I have ever heard."

Fortunately, nothing happened, and shortly thereafter, Mrs. Bedwell invited Jane Franklin over for coffee. "I almost had apoplexy," said Mr. Bedwell.

The two women chatted, Mrs. Bedwell told Mrs. Franklin the city staff were afraid they would be massacred. Mrs. Franklin told Mrs. Bedwell they feared for their lives; they feared the police would be gunning for them.

"That meeting opened up a dialogue," Mr. Bedwell said. Later he and Chief Cizankas met the Franklins. They told them they had no plans to assassinate the Venceremos, but they would fully enforce the laws.

"You could feel the tension going out of the room," he said.