

# Setback in Burlington

*Pierre Clavel*

**B**URLINGTON, VERMONT elected socialist Bernie Sanders mayor in 1981; he and his successors developed a progressive regime that ran the city for the next 31 years. The result was a demonstration of what a city could do once the ideological hegemony of business interests was broken and popular participation got serious access to city hall.

But the progressive administration, well developed administratively and with strong support in the city population, and its well elaborated set of nonprofits and supportive business elements, suffered a setback in the 2012 election. This may be the occasion to take stock: what was accomplished, and what are the lessons as far as sustainability of progressive politics?

## Thirty-one Years of Progressive Government

The accomplishments were substantial. Sanders, who was committed to opening up the city's government and to economic development initiatives that would favor the city's poor and working class residents, initially faced fierce resistance from the Aldermen and city departments and commissions. He responded by appointing advisory commissions and taking his program to the people.

Early on, he convinced key business leadership that he supported development, "so long as it was eq-



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uitable." Businesses wanted development, but even more they wanted a stable investment environment. Sanders, they came to realize, could deliver that by creating a balance between business needs and neighborhood needs. As quoted in my book, *The Progressive City*, Downtown business leader Nick Wylie said:

First, he is competent. He is running the city. Second, he is pro-development. He really wants it. He has figured out that it is a cow to be milked. He wants to build his tax base. Previously there was this lurking presence . . . low-income people who could rise up and stop any project. [The previous mayor ] was not dealing with them. Sanders has dealt them in.

In 1982 Sanders, in a key move, got business support for a Community Economic Development Office (CEDO). At the same time, he took the first steps toward Neighborhood Planning Assemblies (NPAs) in each of the city's six wards, signaling that people would have new channels to city hall.

## CEDO

After winning re-election and progressives gaining city council seats, the mayor put the new organization in place by mid-1983. Peter Clavelle, who had been city manager in neighboring Winooski, became the CEDO Director, and soon there were key staff appointments with assistant directors for three main functions.

**Community Development.** Michael Monte, who had been a community organizer, then in the plan-

ning department, moved to CEDO as the Assistant Director for Community Development and took over the two high visibility initiatives. He managed the NPAs, which, at one point, had annual budgets of \$15,000 each, competing for shares of the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. They were still functioning thirty years later.

Higher visibility was the development of the Burlington Waterfront, which Sanders had made an issue in his 1981 campaign victory. Cleanup of derelict industrial land ensued, with development of a community boathouse and promenade through the 1990s, and a mix of luxury and affordable housing nearby.

### **Economic Development.**

Bruce Seifer, who took on the central responsibility for economic development within CEDO in 1985, noted early on the burden of satisfying a business constituency that had reservations about a “socialist” mayor. “We [CEDO] were doing all these community oriented things – my job was to deal with the business side,” as he later put it. This meant servicing the largest employers’ demands so they would stay in the city; but another way Seifer excelled, was indefatigable networking: meeting and listening and connecting businesses and would-be entrepreneurs to sources of assistance. It was as much a matter of responding to imaginative and socially oriented business leadership as push from city hall.

One thing that did come from city hall was a plan – called *Jobs and People* – with an analysis of economic potential in the city’s labor force, its workers and potential entrepreneurs. It came from two consultants, Christopher Mackin and Beth Siegel, working with CEDO. While the surrounding Chittenden County had a growing high tech manufacturing base, most of the employment was from absentee owned branch plants; purchasing was more than normally from outside the area. These characteristics, combined with

a surfeit of underemployed professional workers, suggested the need for local entrepreneurs and ownership, who constituted a core political constituency for the progressive administration in Burlington.

***Jobs and People*** suggested a focus on local ownership: indications were that locally owned establishments tended to stay in locations longer, purchase locally to a greater extent and even perform as good citizens more than absentee owned firms. And they had local examples – Ben and Jerry’s ice cream had started up in a Burlington North End garage, and was already contributing ice cream to local events. Business associations of various types formed. Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR) was an association organized around environmental improvement projects. At one point Seifer got VBSR to form a Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund supporting

the development of the state’s green economy.

**Housing policy** was a somewhat separate operation within CEDO. Clavelle and his main deputy, Michael Monte, thought of housing in a community development framework – different from the real estate orientation in many cities – and Brenda Torpy, who became the Assistant Director for Housing, began by convincing her colleagues of the central importance of maintaining affordability for low end units in the face of development pressures.

The vehicle they discovered was the community land trust (CLT), a model being developed at the Institute for Community Economics (ICE) in Western Massachusetts. Torpy convinced Sanders and CEDO to contract with ICE for the services of John Davis, who spent several months in Burlington walking the streets and organizing interest in the



device in the city's working class North End and other neighborhoods. The eventual result was the Burlington Community Land Trust (BCLT), which Torpy helped lead as board president.

Torpy resigned as CEDO's housing director in 1986 – eventually to become CEO of BCLT – and Davis moved in as her successor, where he shepherded several policy initiatives aimed at making increasing proportions of the city housing stock “permanently affordable.” He called it a “ladder of affordability,” to signify the interconnectedness of the several policies emerging from CEDO. One seemed to lead to another: a Condominium Conversion Ordinance in 1987, Housing Trust Fund in 1989, followed by voter approval of a one-cent per every one hundred dollars of the property tax assessment contributed to that. The city adopted Inclusionary Zoning in 1990. Davis left in 1994, but housing policy had continuity under Brian Pine (1990s to present). By 2010, according to Pine's estimate, 17 percent of the city's housing stock was permanently price protected and affordable.

### **Sustainable Progressivism**

Sanders resigned the mayoralty in 1989 to run for Congress. Clavelle succeeded him, while Monte took over CEDO. Progressives held the mayoralty for 29 of 31 years between Sander's first victory in 1981, and the succession of Democrat Miro Weinberger in 2012. Clavelle held the mayoralty from 1989 until he retired in 2006, except for two years (1993–1995). Those two years of a Republican mayor weren't enough to roll back CEDO policy achievements, largely because the city's housing policy had delegated significant authority to non-profits like the BCLT. According to Davis, writing in his book, *The Affordable City*, a pragmatic approach led to this devolution of power: “. . . there was an ever-present apprehension among Sanders's supporters and staff that each year might be their last.” Therefore they sought initiatives that would outlive their hold on city hall: “. . . a nonprofit infrastructure should be established outside City Hall – independent of City Hall . . .”

Clavelle, a left of center Democrat, seemed a more moderate leftist than Sanders. The sequence of

Sanders and Clavelle was a good one. Sanders had established a commitment to redistribution; Clavelle added a concern for the softer side of social justice – exemplified in his support for environmental sustainability and for nonprofits. The signal example of the first may have been the Intervale project, begun by entrepreneur Will Rapp who organized volunteers to start cleaning up a largely derelict floodplain. Eventually CEDO had financed the purchase of the area, and by the end of the 1990s the area was transformed into an urban farm, a mecca for visitors who had ideas about urban agriculture and food systems.

### **Progressives Out of Gas? Bob Kiss and Burlington Telecom**

In hindsight, several things came together in 2012 that put in question the policies the city had been successfully pursuing since 1981. Bob Kiss, who succeeded to the mayoralty as the Progressive party candidate in 2006, had served since 1981 as executive director of the county and regional poverty agencies. Kiss did not discontinue Clavelle's emphases, and he was a competent manager in most respects, but he was reticent, less agile with his rhetoric. And when handed a perfect storm of a crisis, he proved unequal to the task of making clear his actions and the issues behind them.

The crisis was the failure of the city-owned fiber optic network Burlington Telecom (BT), due to mismanagement, and an unauthorized, undisclosed transfer from the city's general fund that failed to shore it up during the 2008 fiscal crisis. This was revealed in late 2009 after Kiss had been re-elected to a second term. Less than one year into his second three-year term, Kiss was anathema.

The upshot was that Burlington's progressives, who had built three decades of mayoral control on a reputation for competence alongside their social justice concerns, did not field a candidate in the 2012 mayoral elections. A businessman and former real estate developer, centrist Democrat Miro Weinberger, won the election and the progressives were left to see what they could salvage. As one commented later, “They had a thirty year record, and then threw it all away.”

## Weinberger as Successor

Miro Weinberger came into Burlington's mayoralty in 2012. He could have tried to clean house, but did not. In the run-up to a likely re-election in 2015, at least two issues remain unresolved: Burlington Telecom has been put on hold, and the mayor, having announced an "affordability crisis" in market rate housing, faces questions from progressives long committed to a diverse income mix in any new construction.

Once in office, Weinberger tried to make the case for selling BT, though given regulatory hurdles, 4,000 subscribers, and much improved management, the outcome is uncertain; there is a possibility that progressives might be able to save significant city control. And, at least on the surface, Weinberger has retained an interest in affordable housing, maintaining CEDO's longtime housing director and being careful to praise progressive accomplishments in maintaining the affordable part of the housing stock.

His challenge was to see what he could do with the real estate developers – an important constituency, long accustomed to city hall resistance but now happy

with one of their own in the mayor's office. In June 2013, Weinberger released a Downtown Housing Strategy, advocating increased density and a policy focus on "market rate" housing. The premise is that this would increase supply and prevent the loss of "young professionals" from the city population (and the Democrats' voting base). But progressives are prepared to resist any housing policy that does not strike a balance between "affordable" and "market rate" units.

There does seem to be a progressive future for the city. True, electing a Democrat was uncharted territory for the progressives. Unlike Clavelle, rather than building up the nonprofit political infrastructure, Weinberger brought his own – real estate developers, a segment of the local political class that had long been marginalized or selectively used by Sanders and his successors. But the progressives have created many bulwarks to maintain their policy approach – an affordable housing coalition based in nonprofits like the Champlain Housing Trust, and a diverse set of businesses with at least some claim to social justice concerns. They will be a strong force, and it will be interesting to see how the various interests play out.

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