

Contra Costa Times editorial: Mourning passing of two mayors who made a difference

Contra Costa Times editorial
© Copyright 2011, Bay Area News Group
Posted: 01/11/2012 04:00:00 PM PST

The East Bay has lost two leaders who understood the meaning of public service, worked tirelessly to promote and improve their communities, understood that elected office was a place to better other people's lives and helped lead their respective cities, Richmond and Fremont, during challenging times of rapidly changing demographics.

George Livingston, the first elected African-American mayor of Richmond, ran council meetings and led the city with care and respect. Chosen by his City Council colleagues for the top post after Mayor Tom Corcoran died in office in 1985, he was seen as someone who could unite others. He soon ran for mayor in his own right and held the seat for eight more years.

Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, remembers Livingston as a man who was "always pushing the edge on the issues of equality and participation." Richmond Councilman Nat Bates recalls him as a "people's politician" who represented all residents, not just the black community. Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia says he worked to unite not only the council but the entire city.

Livingston competed in an era of hardball politics when the city was divided into political factions. While he was known as a consensus builder, he was by no means immune to the political power-brokers who threw their weight around behind-the-scenes deal-making. Nevertheless, he was a leader who cared deeply about Richmond.

Livingston died Saturday at Doctors Hospital in San Pablo after a long battle with diabetes. He was 78. His death followed by nine days the passing of an equally passionate city leader about 40 miles south, Fremont Mayor Bob Wasserman, who died at Kaiser Hospital in Fremont after a long respiratory illness. He was 77.

Wasserman was an Army veteran who served in the military police during the Korean War, became a civilian police officer and was appointed Fremont police chief in 1976. After he retired, he first won election to the City Council in 1992 and as mayor in 2004.

Known as an independent, honorable and honest leader, Wasserman helped guide the city as it emerged as a key part of the Silicon Valley tech boom and transitioned from majority white to majority Asian population.

As police chief, council member and mayor, he respected diversity and encouraged others to do likewise. He helped lead the city through a tremendous cultural change with little of the acrimony seen in other changing communities.

To be sure, while he demonstrated independence from Democratic Party leaders, he had his own political favorites. At his core, however, he put the city first.

It wasn't always easy. He was in charge when the NUMMI auto plant closed and when Solyndra, the solar panel producer expected to help lead the next generation of manufacturers, crashed and burned.

Nevertheless, the city he left behind was much more dynamic than when he took over the police department 36 years earlier.

Livingston and Wasserman were leaders for their times who served and cared deeply about their changing communities.