

Former Fresno City Manager Michael Bierman dies

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The last city manager in Fresno whose survival depended on counting to four has died.

Michael A. Bierman, the city's chief administrative officer through much of the turbulent 1990s, lost his long battle with cancer on Aug. 10. He had been retired from public service for several years and was living in Gilbert, Arizona..

Mr. Bierman was 66.

Former Mayor Karen Humphrey (1989-93) said Mr. Bierman combined strong leadership with a diplomat's touch.

"He did the best job he could considering the political situation," Humphrey said. "He minded his communication with the City Council really well, which isn't always the case with city managers."

The particulars of Mr. Bierman's life bespeak a man of commitment and persistence. He was born in Ohio and earned an undergraduate degree in foreign affairs from the University of Cincinnati. There was a period of study at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He worked for the city of Cincinnati for nearly two decades, rising to deputy city manager.

Mr. Bierman also had lengthy stints as city manager in Columbia, South Carolina, and Petaluma.

They need to be politically astute, but not political.

Former Fresno Mayor Karen Humphrey on a city manager's biggest challenge

But for heart-pounding pressure, it's hard to imagine any of it compared to Mr. Bierman's six-plus years in Fresno's municipal hot seat. He served from November 1990 to January 1997, a period that saw a revolution in the form of local government, a lethal crime wave that shook the city to its foundations and so many crises of the financial, ethical and administrative kind that life in Fresno at times took on a surreal quality.

It all started with the nature of Mr. Bierman's job.

Fresno in 1958 scrapped the commission government and went the council-manager route. Council members would set policy and hire a professionally trained manager to handle the nuts-and-bolts of governance.

June bugs had more security than a Fresno city manager in the pre-Bierman era. An "at will" employee, the city manager could be sent packing anytime four of seven council members turned on him (hence the city manager's need to always have at least four council allies).

The typical Fresno city manager before Mr. Bierman lasted about three years.

Mr. Bierman's predecessor at Fresno City Hall resigned amid considerable hard feelings in the summer of 1990.

Speaking on his way out the door, James Aldredge said Fresno should go to a strong-mayor government because the seven council members couldn't stop sticking their noses into administrative matters.

"The city manager becomes the person at the back of the parade with the shovel," Aldredge said.

Aldredge's replacement came down to Mr. Bierman and the city administrator from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mr. Bierman was the council's unanimous choice. He started at \$115,000 a year, nearly \$20,000 more than Aldredge's salary.

Mr. Bierman, 41 at the time, hit town in fall 1990 with a ton of confidence. He pooh-poohed Fresno's reputation for brutal City Hall politics.

"It doesn't bother me," Mr. Bierman said, noting that Cincinnati's council members were run by political parties. "Ohio is a very political system."

Mr. Bierman's aplomb was put to a quick test.

This was his turn to be in what he termed the first chair.

Roberta Bierman on her husband's decision in 1990 to become Fresno city manager

The Berlin Wall had fallen in 1989. The Soviet Union was headed to oblivion. The Cold War would soon end, and with it would go defense contracts galore. California's peace dividend would be a recession.

Mr. Bierman started work on Nov. 5, 1990. By mid-December, he was looking at a budget deficit of nearly \$3 million. The cuts, he said, might include a hiring freeze on police officers.

"It appears we can't afford what we've got," Mr. Bierman said.

Things never got easier for Mr. Bierman and Fresno.

Police Chief Max Downs retired in June 1991, giving Mr. Bierman a chance to make what is always the biggest hire in Fresno's municipal government. Mr. Bierman picked Joseph Samuels, a veteran of the Oakland Police Department.

Samuels lasted less than two years, resigning in mid-1993 to return to Oakland. It didn't take long for Mr. Bierman to name Ed Winchester, 24 years under his belt as a Fresno cop, as the new chief.

Mr. Bierman introduced Winchester to the public in early 1994 as both the "new police chief" and an "old face" at the Police Department. It was Mr. Bierman's way of acknowledging that Fresno cops value tradition at the top.

Fresno needed all the police help it could get because the streets were full of blood.

For reasons that remain in dispute to this day, murder exploded in Fresno during the early 1990s. A skyrocketing population was a factor. Fresno in a mere decade grew nearly 63% to 354,000 in 1990. Money was another pressure. The city had some 400 cops when Mr. Bierman took office, 200 short of what was needed by some estimates.

There was no dispute about the consequences. Fresno suffered through 88 homicides in 1992, a record 98 in 1993 and 94 in 1994. The late Pete Mehas, longtime Fresno County Schools superintendent, would look back on those years and dismiss any notion that Fresno was going to hell.

"We were already there," Mehas said.

Mr. Bierman and council members looked under every federal rock for grants to hire more cops. Fresno today has about 40% more people than those gory years, yet only about half of the annual homicides.

The early 1990s also saw City Hall take aim at City Charter Section 809, the piece in Fresno's constitution that tied raises for police and firefighters to wages in eight other cities. Critics said the formula was too expensive for a relatively poor city.

Voters repealed 809 in 1993.

"That was a biggie," Mr. Bierman said at the time. He couldn't know it, but it would take another six years and a state Supreme Court decision for the people's will to prevail.

City leaders in the months between Aldredge's resignation and Mr. Bierman's arrival in 1990 had kicked around the idea of a Little Hoover Commission. The crises in city and county government had grown too serious and numerous, they said. A panel of experts was needed to pitch ideas for reform.

Mr. Bierman interviewed for the Cincinnati city manager's job in the late 1980s, but lost out to former Fresno City Manager Gerald Newfarmer.

The commission, created in early 1991, would tip the dominoes that led to Mr. Bierman's departure from Fresno. There would soon be nearly 300 recommendations on the City Council's dais. The most far-reaching would be a charter review committee charged with studying a strong-mayor form of government.

"Right now the primary weakness on the council is that we have seven mayors," then-Council Member Chris Peterser said in 1991.

The voters in 1993 approved the idea. Jim Patterson, the last mayor to have a council vote, was elected the first strong mayor in 1996. He, alone, would pick his city manager. Jeff Reid got the nod as soon as Patterson took office in January 1997.

Mr. Bierman saw the future long before then.

The change "is still 18 months away," Mr. Bierman said in June 1995. Then he added with an unmistakable wistfulness, "There are still a lot of things here that I'd like to see get done."

The Michael Bierman era in Fresno was stunningly rich with events.

Ed Kashian and his partners planted the first seeds of what would become the River Park shopping extravaganza in north Fresno.

Operation Rezone, the federal investigation into municipal corruption, burst on the scene and forever scarred the city's reputation (Mr. Bierman got into no trouble).

Planning began on the Convention's Center's New Exhibit Hall, a project that would rival any in the city's history for controversy.

Policy chatter was just about endless on a Fresno Grizzlies stadium, a regional medical complex, a new federal courthouse – all of it proof that the times weren't tone deaf on downtown revitalization.

Mr. Bierman was steadfast through it all, a legacy not lost to one of his successors.

"While I didn't know him well, there is some irony in the fact that a number of the issues that Mike had to address, including a recession, budget deficits and an increase in crime, are as relevant today as they were more than 20 years ago," said City Manager Bruce Rudd.

"Add to these challenges the political drama associated with things such as Operation Rezone and the transition to a strong-mayor form of government, it is fair to say that Mike certainly set a high bar for every city manager who has followed him."

Mr. Bierman leaves behind Roberta (Birdie) Bierman, his wife of 39 years, two children and a granddaughter. A grandson is due in a few months.

"We loved being in Fresno," Roberta Bierman said. "The people were so friendly. They were more like Midwesterners, they were so nice. And we had a swimming pool. We didn't have one in Ohio."

Humphrey was shocked to hear of Mr. Bierman's death. She said the two had kept in touch for a few years after both left City Hall, but time and the pressures of life broke old bonds.

“He had a good sense of humor – full of one-liners,” Humphrey said.

Those one-liners may not be gone.

Fresno in early 1992 moved into the new City Hall on P Street between Fresno and Tulare streets. A time capsule was sealed in March 1992 and secured in a corner of what is still called by some “the spaceship.”

Two plastic Dancing Raisin figurines and a Fresno High School yearbook are among the 210 items in there. So, too, is a videotaped interview with Michael A. Bierman.

The capsule is slated to be opened in 2020.

This brings to mind Mr. Bierman’s last public policy decision of note in this town, an example of the wisdom and backbone that enabled him to survive the wars longer than every Fresno city manager before him.

It came in late December 1996. The Holiday Season was in full swing, and the attention of many was focused on joys other than municipal affairs. Yet, some baseball fans insisted Fresno couldn’t wait until the New Year for city leaders to act on what, even then, was another in an endless stream of downtown stadium issues.

Nonsense, Mr. Bierman said.

“I think people can wait.”

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