

New Galt mayor, Barbara Payne, aims to focus on unity, economy



Dan Evans/News-Sentinel Galt Mayor Barbara Payne gestures toward the buildings in Oldtown Galt that have been renovated in recent years during an interview on Monday, Dec. 13, 2010.



Barbara Payne at a glance

Age: 68.

Occupation: Retired construction superintendent and retired Galt business owner.

Family: Married, with two adult daughters and one adult son.

Background: Payne lived in various locations in California and Texas during her childhood. She graduated from Santa Cruz High School. She attended North Texas State

When Barbara Payne owned the Olde Towne Gift Shoppe, she often would stare out the store's window and watch mothers roll strollers into the street because there were no sidewalks across the railroad tracks.

In 2004, Payne decided to run for the Galt City Council in order to not only improve the sidewalks, but all of Galt's downtown.

"I saw the potential of the nice old buildings if we just revitalized it," Payne said.

She is proud that the city has installed Americans with Disability Act-compliant sidewalks near the railroad tracks and offers a facade improvement program to help businesses clean up their buildings. Now, Payne said many of the storefronts that had previously been vacant are filled with new businesses.

"I want Galt to be prosperous. The best way to do that is (to) look at what resources we have here," she said.

This month, the other council members voted her in as the new mayor. She is the third female mayor in Galt's history,

University and the University of Houston, Clear Lake City, but didn't receive a degree.

She then became a building superintendent in Texas and California. She worked on the Sterling Oaks subdivision in Galt, and then bought a home in the neighborhood.

She opened the Olde Towne Gift Shoppe and owned it for eight years before she closed it in 2006 to focus on her council duties.

but the first one in more than a decade. Marian Lawrence served from 1982 to 1984 and Christina De La Cruz was mayor from 1996 to 1998.

"It's a compliment for me only because it's telling me that the majority of the people like what I was doing. Whether it is because I'm a woman or not, I don't know," she said.

In the past, she has run against other women who have lost, so Payne said she believes Galt voters focus more on her as a person than her gender.

During her time as mayor, she would like to focus on uniting different groups in the community, encouraging businesses to come or stay in Galt, and youth initiatives.

Below are some of her top priorities:

Galt as a Dairy Capital?: Payne started the Shop Local group about a year ago, which is a partnership between the city, the Chamber of Commerce and businesses. The group's motto is "there is no place like home," and the goal is to encourage people to shop locally and to brand Galt as a small-town tourist destination.

One of the city's main assets is that dairies surround it, she said, and agriculture is a big influence in town. She plans to meet with the owners of the dairies and see if Galt can integrate them more in town to become a "Dairy Capital." She said some of the pizza places could use the local milk to make cheese, or a creamery could use the resource to make ice cream.

- Ensuring businesses stay: To find out more about the businesses located in Galt, Payne plans to meet with each one and find out exactly what the company does and if the city could help them in any way.

"At the very least, I want to let them know the city appreciates them, so if they get better offers, give us a chance to counter the offer to keep them here in Galt," Payne said.

- Uniting the town: Because Highway 99 divides Galt, Payne said it often seems like there is a split between the east side and west side of town. In the spring, she hopes to hold a town hall meeting on the east side, so the city can see what the residents' visions are for the city.

"By doing so, maybe they will buy into the city more and become more a part of the community," Payne said. "Sometimes you've got to go to the people. They won't always come to you."

- A community calendar: With so many civic organizations in the community, a calendar might help prevent multiple events happening on the same day, Payne said.

She plans to form a committee that will get every church, school and organization to submit a calendar of events, so residents can find out information about what is going on in one place.

Payne said it also might encourage churches, schools and organizations to plan ahead, instead of waiting until the last minute.

- Something for the Gleeks: In 2005, the councilwoman planned a “Napoleon Dynamite” day complete with a llama and activities for children and teens.

She would like to try another theme day with “Glee,” a high school musical dramedy on Fox.

Payne also answered some questions about how the council has changed after the election. Below is a lightly edited version of the interview.

Q: How has the council changed now that three new council members have been elected?

A: Now, we are a team. One of the things that is hard to learn as a new council member is that you have to work together as a team. One person can suggest and want to do things, but you have to have the cooperation of at least a majority of the council and the partnership with the staff, especially the city manager.

Q: If you could snap your fingers and get one thing for Galt, what would it be?

A: New jobs. I don't think that has ever been more evident than it is now. It's not just Galt, it's everywhere. But Galt in particular because of the fact that other than the agriculture community that we have, we are a bedroom community and people live here but their jobs are out of town. That pulls against us when we are trying to form a community.

Q: There is constant discussion about growth in Galt. What are your thoughts?

A: The people who have moved here came because it is a small town, and they didn't want to be in the big city. So they are not going to be in favor of this growth happening. Some of the old-timers don't want change, so they don't want growth.

But what they all want is to be able to sustain their town and they don't want taxes to go up. You have to have some growth or else you are going to have taxes go up.

People fear we will have uncontrolled growth, and we will become another Elk Grove. What I'm trying to do is go out to the people, build their trust and get them involved.

Q: During your two terms as a councilwoman, what has been one of the hardest things to deal with? How did you get through it?

A: To be quite honest, the hardest thing has been to deal with the council being divided. It's not only hard for me to deal with a divided council, but it is hard for the staff and it is hard for the city manager.

Since I've felt the pain of that, it's so important to me that we don't have that situation again. We want individual opinions, but we want it to be in a positive way where we can learn from each other, but still at the end of the council meeting we can have coffee together, or say, "Hi."

Q: How do you think you can foster unity?

A: The city, the voters, have tried to elect people who can get along. I feel that.

Because of the whole country, as well as the state, I think people are so tired of the conflict between the parties, and the conflict between the politicians, and the people get pushed out of the picture.

To me that's what happened in the election. The people were saying, "We want leaders who can work together and get along for the benefit of the people."

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