

## Salt Lake City Mayor Becker leads with gentler style

Milestones » Becker's accomplishments come from a be-there-in-person approach.

By Derek P. Jensen

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He propped up gays and auditioned a downtown theater, but critics groan he glossed over gangs.

He crisscrossed the city's streets and cultivated Washington, D.C., for cash, but grimaced as Sugar House was savaged.

He righted the city's sinking budget ship and quietly crafted a sweeping sustainability plan, but has yet to completely fix planning.

Ralph Becker churned through his freshman year as Salt Lake City mayor, but made little noise. Instead, the workmanlike urban planner made strides smoothing Rocky Anderson's eight-year riptide.



And even though he rarely sought the microphone, Becker by most accounts was subtly effective, salvaging relationships with the Legislature and Davis County and inside City Hall -- all while plugging his progressive agenda.

"He's reached out to people who were sort of anathema in Rocky's administration -- to Davis County, for instance, and to the LDS Church," says Councilman Eric Jergensen. "There's such a difference in the spirit of cooperation between the council and the mayor's office. That has been a much better way to run a city."

Critics argue the mayor hasn't done enough to mend the capital's east-west tear. But a close look at Becker's record shows a surgical focus and check mark after check mark on a tally of campaign pledges.

"We are on track and pretty well on target," Becker says. "Certainly there are things that could have happened faster. But I don't have a lot to complain about."

**Promises kept** » Serving 10 years as an outnumbered Democrat at the Utah Legislature, Becker became the consummate compromiser. So taking his first turn as a public manager in a politically friendly capital, the new mayor brought a whopping wish list.

Most of the items are crossed off. Becker broadened bikeways and green-building codes. He found a spot on Main Street for a Broadway-class theater. He finessed a domestic-partnership-type registry through right-wing lawmakers. He hired heads of economic development, planning, education, the environment and trails. He launched a small-business initiative and scholarship program. He pushed a Sugar House streetcar and preserved the airport TRAX line. And he revamped a city planning bureaucracy he once blasted as a "shambles."

Much of the work came in congress with the previously alienated City Council -- and all came stamped

with Becker's steady style.

"He's very involved in all the right ways," says first-year Councilman J.T. Martin. "And this is not a guy who micromanages in any way."

Tim Chambless, a planning commissioner and political scientist at the University of Utah, says Becker ably survived a "tough first year" marred by a budget deficit and a droopy economy.

"He's been gracious. He's been a good listener. He attends meetings at least six days a week," Chambless says. "I applaud that."

**A hands (and foot)-on touch** » After winning a 2007 landslide, Becker painted his new office and displayed new art but probably should have bought new shoes. On weekday evenings he took time to visit every community-council district across the city, including tours on foot.

"I like him," says Bill Davis, chairman of the People's Freeway Community Council. "At our meeting, the bus showed up and Ralph showed up. He's had a genuine interest in what's going on."

And it didn't end in the neighborhoods. Becker made a point to huddle with every city board and commission. He made three fence-mending forays to Davis County. And he held quarterly sit-downs and regular cycling jaunts with Republican Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. and Democratic Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon.

Becker also put flesh on the oft-invoked community-outreach skeleton. Through his Salt Lake Solutions, the mayor preserved the west-side Fisher Mansion, added programming and police at Pioneer Park and played advocate for the U.'s Project Universe. He also birthed "Dialogue on Discrimination," a series of community confabs to discuss racism, poverty, religion and other social issues.

To the surprise of many, including himself, Becker traveled nearly as much as Anderson. But few label the journeys frivolous and Len Simon, the city's Washington lobbyist, insists the six trips there will pay off with the incoming Obama team.

"Ralph has done an excellent job of laying the groundwork to do some incredible things," says Kirk Jowers, director of the U.'s Hinckley Institute of Politics. "He also has reached out to other interests or religious groups in the city that have felt neglected or even abused under Mayor Anderson's administration. That attention could pay huge dividends."

**Planning pitfalls and west-side fire** » When gunshots pierced the peace of Glendale this summer, Becker sicced the cops on the gangs in an unprecedented saturation effort. But some west-siders say not much has happened since.

"It seems like it's a skillful shell game," says activist Michael Clara, who wonders why the mayor formed a task force after a 7-year-old girl was gunned down but refuses to hire a gang coordinator.

Clara wants gang-prevention programming in capital schools like other cities enjoy. And he points to an inequity in services: Why can't 900 West near the Chapman Library get pedestrian-activated traffic lights if 1300 East on the city's affluent bench can?

"He campaigned on the fact that he was going to rectify a number of those things, which he hasn't done."

John Pace, an attorney who sits on a city grant board, agrees.

"I still see very little in terms of making a huge effort to get at at-risk kids," he says, suggesting the mayor divert Broadway theater money to the west side. "I only hear about study groups and amorphous proposals. Do something nuts and bolts. Treat it as the problem it is."

Becker rejects the criticism, saying he won't waste tax dollars on a single coordinator when experts say solutions require a combination of federal, state and local resources.

"We took that to heart," Becker says. "We established ... a gang forum and that group is prioritizing the most effective approaches we can take."

On another front, some planning frustration persists. Becker roared about developer Craig Mecham's pit in Sugar House, but later relented on a crackdown, citing the sagging economy.

Whispers swirl over the city's \$8 million purchase of the Barnes Bank Building for planning. Insiders warn the building just east of City Hall could be a money pit that guts the city's checkbook.

And during the summer, Becker nearly faced a no-confidence vote by the Greater Avenues Community Council before sating his accusers in a face-to-face meeting.

The council's Jim Jenkin says the mayor has fixed planning's administration, but maintains problems on the ground remain. "I'm optimistic, but I'm still unsure after a year how it's going to shake out."

Becker points to his new leadership team that has retooled city planning, improved morale and begun an ordinance overhaul. That includes a sustainability blueprint Becker boasts will be the most comprehensive in the country. The most maligned function in City Hall, he insists, has "turned a corner."

Chambless, who has served under four mayors, notes Becker is the first to come to a commission meeting unannounced. "Clearly the message being communicated to us is that planning is important," he says. "We appreciated that."

At the same time, the commission still has four empty seats.

**A future focus »** Despite the recession, Becker plans a robust 2009.

In January, he will unveil a government-transparency guide along with a "major initiative" at his State of the City address. He plans to decide the fate of The Leonardo science and cultural center and cement plans for an athletic complex on the city's northwest edge. Becker also expects to launch curbside recycling for glass.

"We have some surprises coming," he says.

Indeed, Becker hopes the capital can play offense, perhaps for the first time in years, at the Legislature.

His goal: Secure a funding source for his proposed Utah Performance Center on Main, anchored by a new mega-theater. "We know that's going to be a very big hill to climb."

Fans point to Becker's understated style as a key to success. But, so far, that's the same quality foes flag.

"The department heads are given so much more room to maneuver," Jergensen says of Becker's softer reign. "If that's invisibility, it might also be called good management."

Jowers, a Republican, insists the Democratic mayor already has put the city in a position to thrive.

"He's developed enough good will that he could have an incredible next couple of years."

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**-Hits:**

Established a mutual-commitment registry.

Found a Main Street pocket for a Broadway-style theater.

Retooled city planning with a new leadership team.

Balanced the budget despite a hefty shortfall.

Toured the city's 21 neighborhoods; made Washington, D.C., connections that include Obama's new urban-policy office.

Misses:

Downtown Parking Authority is not finalized.

Year-round public market is still a concept.

Bicycle lockers and rentals at transit hub are still being negotiated.

No widening of nondiscrimination ordinance nor creation of domestic-partner-beneficiary rights for city retirees.

The Leonardo, Sugar House project and plans for a new public-safety headquarters remain in limbo.