

BOB DOPPELT

Eugene is better off Because of Kitty Piercy

BY BOB DOPPELT

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This is Kitty Piercy's last month as mayor of Eugene. It seems fitting to recall some of the contributions she made to our community over the past 12 years.

I got to know Piercy during her first term as mayor in 2005, when my students and I assisted her with the Sustainable Business Initiative. The SBI highlighted Piercy's commitment to simultaneously enhancing local economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity. This is called the "Triple Bottom Line."

The SBI also illustrated Piercy's devotion to building trusting relationships with everyone.

Rusty Rexius, co-president of Rexius Forest By-Products and co-chairman of the SBI, told me, "Kitty is a unique breed. There is very little she and I agree on politically. But it did not matter. She reached out to me and was always a willing listener and was concerned about and became an advocate for things I care about. I respect that a lot."

By advancing the SBI, Piercy helped many people think differently, especially city government.

It led the City Council in 2007 to establish the Sustainability Commission and moved the city to hire staff to oversee its sustainability efforts. The council also divested from fossil fuels, protected the Amazon Headwaters, made Eugene a leading municipality on climate change, and did much more.

When asked about Piercy's role in these successes, Matt McRea, the city's former climate and energy analyst, said, "The mayor provided a new way for the city to think about and act on sustainability. ... We would not have a sustainability program, a climate and energy plan, or the landmark climate ordinance without her leadership."

Piercy's dedication to civil dialogue extended to everything she did. Immediately after she was elected, Piercy changed the tone of City Council meetings from an often caustic atmosphere to one of respectful interaction among council members and staff. This ambiance continues.

She also developed positive rapport with the University of Oregon. One of the many outcomes was the creation of the Regional Accelerator and Innovation Network, which supports local entrepreneurs. Piercy and the then-mayor of Corvallis, Julie Manning, were instrumental in persuading the UO and Oregon State University to work together to develop RAIN.

RAIN was merely one aspect of Piercy's vision of a comprehensive approach to local economic development. The Regional Prosperity Summit and resulting Economic Development Plan were other elements. Piercy played an important role in working with city and county officials and the Chamber of Commerce to organize the event and ensure that the actions agreed upon were implemented afterwards.

The revitalization of downtown Eugene is another product of Piercy's commitment to economic development. Dave Hauser, president of the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce, told me that Piercy "Did remarkable work negotiating with the City Council to revitalize downtown. It took political courage to pilot and support tools" like the Multi-Unit Property Tax Exemption program. "It has generated hundreds of millions of dollars in investments downtown... ."

Equally important was Piercy's commitment to improving social conditions and protecting human dignity. In 2011, for instance, she urged the city council to organize the Opportunity Eugene Community Task Force on Homeless Solutions that made recommendations to address the problem. She also actively promoted the "Housing First" concept that urges everyone to set aside moral judgments and get the homeless housed.

In response to First Lady Michelle Obama's call to end veteran homelessness by 2015, Piercy and Lane County Commissioner Pat Farr launched Operation 365 in 2014. This initiative found homes for 404 veterans, exceeding the initial goal of securing housing for 365 vets.

In addition, Piercy organized a community conversation about how to respond to young transients occupying downtown streets. She also relentlessly supported

Eugene becoming a Human Rights City. For this she was recently honored as 2016's Human Rights Champion by the Eugene Human Rights Commission.

As with other concerns, Piercy's accessibility was a common theme I heard regarding social issues. "Every time we called, whether it was about SquareOne Village, responding to hate, expanding affordable housing, or helping homeless veterans, Kitty was always there," said the Rev. Dan Bryant.

Another theme that stood out through my interviews was Piercy's stamina in attending hundreds of community events. Still another common refrain was how humble and unassuming she was, while also being very politically savvy. She knew how to get things done.

Not everything has gone well, and like other cities Eugene still faces many challenges. But our community is markedly better off today than it was 12 years ago because of Kitty Piercy.

Thank you, mayor, for a job well done.

Bob Doppelt is executive director of The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for The Register Guard on issues relating to sustainability and climate change.