

The roots of a revolt

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Steven Gardner, Sun Staff — [Jan 4th, 2004](#)



Gary Tripp

One of the mysteries of November's election is how two environmentally friendly Bainbridge Island City Council candidates were so resoundingly defeated by an electorate well known for its sensitivity to the environment.

Sure, a large portion of island voters grew weary of news about council bickering and land-use controversies.

But that doesn't completely explain how incumbent Michael Pollock and would-be councilman Arnie Kubiak lost to homebuilder Jim Llewellyn and self-proclaimed moderate Nezam Tooloee.

It took the right combination of circumstances to get the snowball rolling down the hills of Bainbridge that created an electoral avalanche.

Those circumstances included the involvement of an entrepreneur-turned-activist named Gary Tripp who suddenly found himself with lots of time on his hands after his Seattle dot-com business went bust.

With the extra time, Tripp found a way to encourage large numbers of Bainbridge residents to become involved in the land-use debates that would paint the city as a draconian controller of residential property.

And that, say many islanders, had a big impact on the ballot box.

Revolution roots

The last time Tripp, who just celebrated his 58th birthday, got political was when he was elected president of the Bainbridge High School Class of 1965.

Since then he made it through college and into the business world, from employee to boss, from serving his country to serving time in prison and from working with numbers and money to tackling science and technology.

Last year, he grew to prominence on Bainbridge Island by accusing the city, in particular its Planning Department, of being beholden to radical environmentalists.

He accused the city of manipulating the scientific process to support its agendas, to knowingly putting forward illegal policies in hopes it could get away with it.

Given the island's reputation as an environmentalist's mecca, it's surprising to some that so many people agreed.

"The shoreline controversy acted as a catalyst for a lot of other stuff, but that suggests that the other stuff was there to be catalyzed," said island resident Jim Mooney.

Yet had Tripp's entrepreneurial timing not sent him crashing into the recession, "island gadfly" may never have become part of his history.

In 2000, he headed a Seattle company, 360 Powered, that proposed to make search engine data more current and complete.

The company needed investment money to go to market. When the dot-com bubble burst, investment capital became scarce.

The company went bankrupt. By early 2003, so did Tripp.

During the summer of 2002, he read a newspaper story detailing the city's revisions to its Shoreline Master Program. The changes created specific rules for shoreline property owners regarding vegetation, protective bulkheads and improvements.

Fomenting outrage

"It just seemed totally unfair that the city, without really informing or involving the citizens who were going to be affected, were taking away people's traditional rights to use their property," he said.

When Planning Commission workshops had more staff than residents, Tripp decided to do something about it.

He created fliers, printed up copies and handed them out at the ferry terminal. During his studies of city policies he came to believe that the city's existing rules were bad enough, never mind the changes. Eventually, the community took notice.

Charles Schmid, a board member of the environmental group Associated Bainbridge Communities, said Tripp was persuasive in creating undue fear that environmentalists were running amok. "It's actually Newt Gingrich attack mode," Schmid said. "Unfortunately people listen to that."

During the next set of shoreline rule discussions in the fall of 2002, more than 200 people attended, a lot of them angry.

The commission hosted several more meetings. All were well attended.

Tripp teamed for a while with Wing Point resident and Seattle attorney Bill Marler and others in protesting the process, eventually forming the nonprofit Bainbridge Concerned Citizens. Tripp continued to take on the city and its land-use policies. He switched from fliers to e-mail and began distributing the Island Watch newsletter.

Marler, however, soon became disenchanted with the conduct of Bainbridge Concerned Citizens. Though not content that the city was acting fairly, Marler dissociated himself from the organization.

Coming home

Tripp took an unusual route to becoming a Bainbridge public figure.

He earned a bachelor's degree in finance and a master's in business administration from the University of Washington, then served in the Army in Korea.

In San Francisco, he worked two years for the Arthur Young & Co. accounting firm and four years managing a pet supply company.

In 1978, he returned to Seattle where he said he helped turn around a clothing manufacturing business, ran a hydroelectric power developer and began a career in real estate development.

He also became involved in an effort to dramatically change the way power is created by using permanent magnets to change polarity in metal substances.

What he couldn't find, he said, was the right substance to make a workable application.

In December 1987, Tripp went to a jailhouse in Tacoma to visit Patrick Grady, an acquaintance who was serving time for cocaine distribution. Grady asked Tripp to do something for him: introduce two people on the outside to each other. Tripp agreed, even though he knew it was for a drug transaction.

One of the contacts was an undercover federal agent working on a tip that Grady was operating a cocaine ring from behind bars.

Tripp was one of seven arrested in a sting by the Drug Enforcement Agency.

He pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute cocaine and served 42 months of a 51-month sentence.

Tripp served part of his sentence at a minimum-security prison in Lompoc, Calif., before being sent to a co-ed prison camp near Spokane.

While in Spokane, he worked with the city to rewrite its indexing and personal property tax program, out of which he created a product that allowed companies to automatically go online to store backups of critical data.

Between 1996 and 1999, he lived in China developing power plants before returning to Bainbridge Island full-time to launch 360 Powered.

Fanning flames

Had investors sufficiently warmed up to 360 Powered, Tripp likely would have spent 2003 running an entrepreneurial company. Instead, he dedicated himself to island politics.

None give Tripp sole credit for Llewellyn's 58 percent win over Pollock or Tooloe's 63 percent victory over Associated Bainbridge Communities board member Kubiak.

But most acknowledge that by creating public disgust with the city's shoreline policies, Tripp helped get the momentum started.

"When people who don't normally go to meetings get into their cars and go to a meeting, one of the things that happens is not only is the meeting packed, they go away with a vested interest in what happens now," said Mooney, who for a time served on the board of directors of Bainbridge Concerned Citizens.

"They go away emotionally committed to follow through at least in the sense of keeping up to date with what's happening and who's doing it," he added.

Mooney left Bainbridge Concerned Citizens, he said, on issues of style. "I didn't want to have to be in a position where I had to defend everything BCC said."

Marler's dissociation with Bainbridge Concerned Citizens was also based on his discomfort with the methods Tripp used.

"Political confrontation and personal confrontation is not the way you accomplish things on the island," Marler said. "Because it became such a personalized confrontational organization, it just wasn't something I felt comfortable being involved with anymore."

Many of those who left still agree with Tripp in principle that the city had gone too far in restricting property uses. But reluctance to be linked closely to Bainbridge Concerned Citizens is common on the island, even among those listed as neighborhood contacts for the group.

Tripp is clearly unafraid of going on the attack, calling the Planning Department an "adversary," lumping in Mayor Darlene Kordonowy and Christine Rolfes in with other "radical" environmentalists and calling City Attorney Rod Kaseguma the city's "bobbing head."

"I viewed myself as a provocateur, the person who would fan the flames enough to get the issues on the table," Tripp said. "I didn't go about this to make the City Council my friend."

During the election, Tripp printed ads questioning whether Pollock was hiding information by not filing campaign disclosure forms required by the state.

Tripp did the ad under a newly formed political action committee, not Bainbridge Concerned Citizens.

A few weeks earlier he had sent out a fund-raising letter critical of Pollock and suggesting one of Bainbridge Concerned Citizens' missions was to get moderate people elected to office.

Lois Andrus, an Associated Bainbridge Communities board member, filed a complaint with the state Public Disclosure Commission charging Bainbridge Concerned Citizens with acting like a political action committee without being registered as one. As of Friday the commission's investigation into the matter was pending.

Others complain Tripp gets his facts wrong, or uses accurate information to create misleading conclusions. In the most recent public examples, City Councilman Bill Knobloch used two City Council meetings to counter Tripp statements.

Tripp and the city differ on who won a case brought by Shannon, Donna and Jane Stafford against the city before the state's Shorelines Hearings Board.

The Staffords won on all but one argument, but that single loss meant they had to move their proposed residence three feet to merit approval.

Tripp saw the case as a repudiation of city policy, while Knobloch saw it as proof the city was right to deny the Staffords' earlier request. During the City Council campaign candidates were quick to deny any connection to Bainbridge Concerned Citizens.

"Most people view BCC as being a strong advocate of property rights, as strong on that side as (Associated Bainbridge Communities) has been in protecting the environment," said Tooloee. "That was not my message. My message was, 'Wait a minute. We have widely shared views in this community. We agree on the values. The means of protecting those values is where we've had stalemate.'"

The results

Tripp gives himself mixed reviews on his impact. He said his work probably enhanced the margins of victory and may have even influenced who ran.

As for changing actual city policies, however, he's less willing to claim victory.

The Bainbridge council's solution to the subdivision moratorium included open space provisions he believes will be deemed illegal in court.

Despite a court ruling against the city's shoreline moratorium, the city continued one in Blakely Harbor.

And the city still has to go through the Shoreline Master Program review process that planted the seeds for Bainbridge Concerned Citizens.

As for the election, Tooloee dismisses the idea that the shoreline hearings were where he first got the idea to run for City Council. And when islanders are asked what caused the results that occurred in the 2003 City Council election, most will say it was the council's dysfunction during the past two years and the sense that the council had swung too far to the environmental left.

Still, most will concede that Tripp had an impact, particularly when it came to the land use issues.

Whether Bainbridge Concerned Citizens continues to be a loud voice on the island may depend on the willingness of someone besides Tripp to share the load.

Tripp said he needs to get back to the business of earning a living. For the past two years, he said, he's lived off money returned to him from an investment into the Chinese power plants.

For now, he's got his eyes on technology that could reduce diesel exhaust emissions on vehicles.

Meanwhile, the City Council holds its first meeting with the new members on Jan. 14. The three council members who won election in 2001 may have some fence-mending to do if they have any interest in being re-elected in 2005.

The message sent to Pollock in November could be sent to them in two years if memories persist.

It's not all that improbable.

"I think one of the things the shoreline controversy did is crystallize a lot of vague apprehension that the city was being too much taken over by the radical environmental community. Pollock symbolized that," said Mooney.

"Things have a funny way of getting connected up sometimes."