

Savvy Politician Begich Knows The System Well

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When Mark Begich offers voters "a lifetime time commitment to the city where I was born and raised," he's exag-gerating a little -- and getting in a sly dig at his two main opponents in the race for mayor.

Rick Mystrom, 59, and George Wuerch, 67, can point to long community and business connections here. But neither can produce a high school diploma with Anchorage on it. And technically, Begich has been involved in public life here for only a little over half of his 40 years.

Still, it seems like he's been around forever.

At age 10, he was the son of the U.S. congressman lost in an airplane crash. At 17, he was the kid Mayor George Sullivan appointed to the municipality's Youth Commission. At 19, he got a job with the city health department, and a couple of years after that he became Mayor Tony Knowles' driver, special assistant and go-fer. At 26, East Anchorage elected him to the Anchorage Assembly.

He was a prodigy. In almost 10 years on the Assembly, Begich served as chairman three times and as vice-chairman twice. Foes and friends alike give him high marks for political skills -- his ability to decipher budgets, line up votes and marshal support for projects he supports, and resist those he opposes.

But as popular as he is in the Muldoon and East neighborhoods that elected him to the Assembly, Begich has not quite been able to get over the hump in two previous campaigns for mayor.

Maybe it's the "L" label his opponents work so diligently to superglue to any Begich candidacy -- "liberal." Maybe it has been his relative youth: Last time around, opponent Wuerch bluntly observed that at Begich's age, "most people are spending their lives raising their families and expanding their professional credentials and experience."

Well, it's three years later, and Begich has expanded his family. He and his wife, Deborah Bonito, have an infant son, Jacob. His vending business and property rentals are prospering. Bonito's company, Sourdough Mercantile, has just moved into a prime spot at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport. Begich spends a few minutes before every audience telling people he's not just a politician.

"I know what it takes to make a payroll," he told a luncheon meeting of The Alliance, a conglomerate of oil field-related service companies.

For someone so often attacked as liberal, Begich typically plots a campaign targeting pavement-level basics. This year is no different:

- * Facing a 21-year U.S. Marine Corps veteran in Mayor Wuerch, Begich is pushing a "5-point plan" for veterans, including a promise to work with state and federal agencies to see that a veterans' home is built here.

- * He says he'll make schools better and streets safer and jobs more plentiful by focusing city bond packages on neighborhood projects that will attract federal and state matching dollars.

- * He says he'll honor the city's tax cap and oppose any new taxes and at the same time increase police and fire-fighter protection.

The assembly record

Unlike incumbent Wuerch and former Mayor Mystrom, Begich's record in city government has been fashioned exclusively as an Assembly member. That has given him less of a bully pulpit to promote himself and fewer opportunities to embarrass himself. It forces voters to guess a little more about what kind of mayor he would be.

Former Assembly members Bob Bell and Cheryl Clementson are supporting Mystrom in this year's mayoral campaign. Still, they admire the political acumen Begich displayed as their Assembly colleague.

"He's personable, he argues his case very well and he knows how to manipulate people politically," Bell said. "And I don't mean that badly."

And what do you think of his politics?

"Not much," Bell said. "Mark is what I'd call a tax-and-spend liberal. I never saw him cut anything out of a budget of significance, but I saw him add a lot in."

As an example, Bell said, Begich persuaded an Assembly majority to approve a settlement of a police and fire medical liability dispute that would have given the unions about \$181 million. Then-Mayor Tom Fink vetoed the measure, and Bell and three other members took Fink's side and sustained the veto.

The mayor who succeeded Fink, Rick Mystrom, later settled the same dispute for \$60 million less, Bell said.

"He appears to be willing to buy favor with municipal employees or even citizens with muni money," Bell said. "On the conservative side, we don't."

Begich, however, said Bell's figures are off. "That was another Tom Fink, 'let me scare you with a number' deal," he said, and the deal the city ended up with was similar to the one he originally proposed.

Begich said he was trying to address a growing unfunded public liability for police and fire retirement plans. Had it gone unaddressed, taxpayers could have found themselves holding the bag at a much higher price years down the road, he said.

"In 1991, no one wanted to talk about it. I said, 'We're going to have to resolve this issue,' and we did."

Even Fink -- surely as conservative a politician as ever was elected in Anchorage -- ruefully credits Begich's political resourcefulness, though he rarely likes the way Begich uses it.

"I wish Begich was conservative, because he's got more brass than the other two," said Fink, who's supporting Wuerch this year. "But he's not."

Begich was elected to the Assembly in 1988, turning back a crowded field in a race to replace retiring Assembly-man Brad Bradley. Begich's opponents included a state attorney, two fairly well known business people and a public relations executive who had chaired the pro-development group Common Sense for Alaska. Begich organized the most productive campaign fund-raising drive; on Election Day, he became the city's youngest Assembly member.

The new Assembly picked Bill Faulkner as chairman. Faulkner picked Begich as "sort of my deputy, my go-to guy," said Faulkner, who is backing Begich in the mayor's race.

"That was 1988-89. The economy was going down the tubes. I immediately grabbed Mark, and he helped me run the Assembly from the get-go."

Faulkner said those who try to cast Begich as a free-spender are wrong.

"Right when he came on board, that's when the economy was going down the tubes," Faulkner said. "We had to take the budget from about \$215 million down to \$180 million. Mark was very instrumental in that."

Over his decade as an assemblyman, Begich refined his political skills and some of his positions. At first a strong opponent of selling the city-owned Anchorage Telephone Utility, Begich eventually supported it. He supported the introduction of a "photo-radar" traffic control program early on but abandoned it after a year of bitter response from motorists and successful legal challenges.

Begich said the radar program originally was to be limited to school zones during school hours and ran into problems when it was expanded, against his better

judgment, to other areas. Still, he said, "the public didn't like that kind of enforcement, and I had to agree. It's over; no means no."

Losses affected him

Clementson, like Begich, represented East Anchorage on the Assembly. She says he helped her learn the ropes when she was first elected.

"He has an incredible understanding of government and how government should work," she said. "It's almost like it's in his blood."

But Clementson, like Bell, is supporting Mystrom this year. She said she thinks losses in two mayoral campaign runoffs -- to Mystrom by about 8,500 votes in 1994 and to Wuerch by a slimmer 2,500-vote margin in 2000 -- may have galled Begich a little too much.

The runoff campaign with Mystrom was particularly bitter, with the two accusing each other of telling lies in campaign ads. Begich predicted he'd be able to work with Mystrom after the loss -- although he also promised to hold the new mayor's "feet to the fire" on his campaign promises -- but within a few years Mayor Mystrom and Assembly Chairman Begich were setting a new standard for bad relations. The two most influential people in city government stopped talking to each other. For four months.

Even after Begich exhausted his three-term Assembly limit and stepped down from the body, Clementson said, he continued to keep his hand in city politics.

"After losing the last election (to Wuerch), he became a bitter person and began monkeying around (in Assembly politics) behind the scenes," she said. "I don't think that was a good thing."

Begich said being out of office doesn't mean he should stay out of the loop.

"I'm committed to the community in or out of office," he said. "You bet I'm going to call Assembly members or the mayor when I think they're doing something wrong. Or right."

Through his three successful Assembly elections and his two unsuccessful mayoral campaigns, Begich has enjoyed strong support from unions that represent public employees. This year is no different.

While Mystrom has accused Mayor Wuerch of courting support from city unions with sweetheart deals, Begich continues to attract some important endorsements.

On a sunny afternoon last week, he stood on the sidewalk in front of a Spenard firehouse and said he was proud to have the support of the police and firefighters unions.

He said both forces have lagged because of a lack of support during the administrations of Mystrom and Wuerch and promised to try to bring Anchorage's police manpower levels closer to the West Coast standard for per capita protection. He said he'll also hire more fire inspectors and train them better.

Rob Heun, the president of the Anchorage Police Department Employees Association, said the unions don't expect to land on easy street if Begich is elected -- just a fair shake.

Fifteen years ago, when negotiations between the police union and the city hit an all-time low during Mayor Fink's administration, it was Begich -- and Assemblymen John Wood and Jim Barnett -- who stepped into the fracas and tried to find a way out, Heun said.

"It was a hard negotiation (with the three)," Heun said. "I'm not looking forward to negotiating with Begich. He's very smart, very number-conscious, very savvy. But he's honest."

Joe Albrecht, a former firefighters union president, agreed.

"He may not agree with us on all the issues, but we'll get a fair hearing," Albrecht said. "And if there's a problem, Mark will move heaven and Earth to solve it."

Mark Begich

Birth date: March 30, 1962

Occupation: I am a 20-year business owner and operator and a licensed real estate agent. I am involved with three Anchorage businesses: president of Sunset Investments Inc., owner of the Begich Apartments, managing and owning 74 apartment units, and managing partner of MD and JL Investments, a real-estate holding company. In addition, my wife, Deborah Bonito, owns and operates three retail stores -- Kobuk Coffee Co., Mosquito Books and Sourdough Mercantile -- which feature the products of more than 130 Alaska craftspeople. My family owns and operates a historic family hot springs resort in Carson City, Nev. My mother, Pegge, manages the Bed and Breakfast on the property.

Q. How long have you lived in Anchorage? If you moved here, describe what brought you to the city.

A. I was born here and have lived here all my life, 40 years.

Spouse's name and occupation: Deborah Bonito, businesswoman

Child's name: Jacob

Education: Continuing education as time allows at UAA
Elected offices held: Anchorage Municipal Assembly (three terms), 1988-1998.
Was elected Assembly chair three times (1994, '96 and '98)

Previous unsuccessful runs for office: Mayor, 1994 and 2000

Q. What political figure (current or historical) do you most admire and why?

A. Congressman Nick Begich, my dad. I most admire his commitment to family, to education, his commitment to Alaska and its people, and his ability to lead and make things happen.

Q. What are your favorite leisure or recreation activities?

A. Staying home with my wife and son.

Q. What's the last book you read?

A. I'm an avid reader of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, such as Business Week, U.S. News World Report and the Wall Street Journal.

Q. What television programs do you enjoy?

A. I like watching classic old movies.