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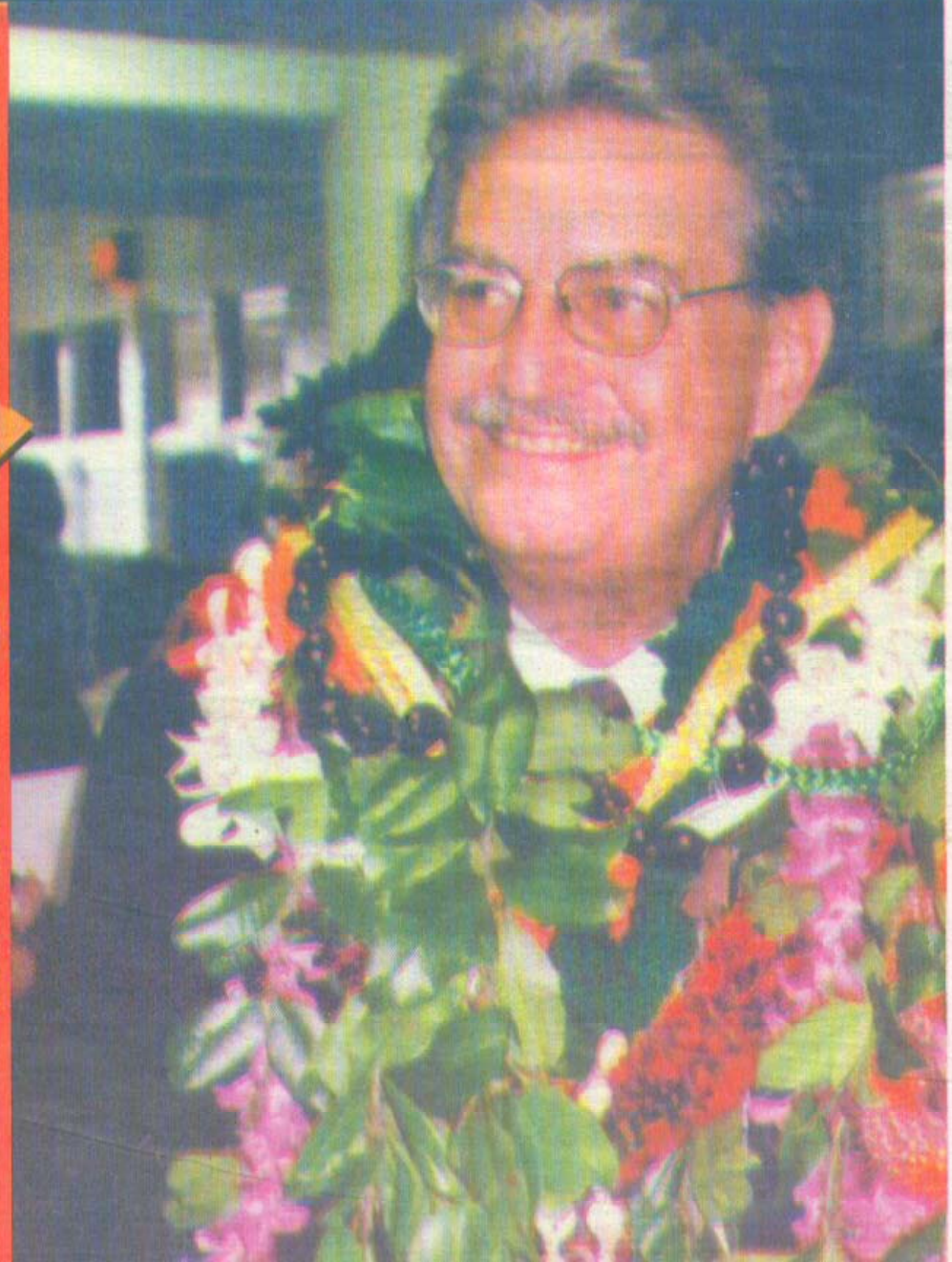
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## Chairman of the Board

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# Chairman of the Board

Out with the old, in with the new.  
Gary Safarik steps into the role of  
chair of a newly-configured  
Hawai'i County Council

by Lane Wick

When he was 12 years old, Gary Safarik heard President John F. Kennedy's inauguration-speech call to Americans to serve their country.

It was Jan. 20, 1961.

"Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

Kennedy's immortal words resonated with millions around the world, but, for Safarik, they meant more than for most. He immediately sat down and penned a hand-written letter to the president, pledging his support and his efforts.

About a month later, Safarik received a reply from the White House, delivered directly to the door by an impressed postman who took notice of the official White House envelope.

The reply, from an aide to the president, said the president appreciated the 12-year-old's support, and included a copy of Kennedy's inaugural address.

"Always," Safarik says now, "that has been in the back of my mind. It was the first time I really felt it was possible for me to make a difference."

Safarik, a Hawai'i County Council member from Puna since his election in 2000, in early December was named County Council Chair, one of the most powerful governmental positions on Hawai'i Island.

On Dec. 6, Safarik led four other council members, a new-found coalition of Ka'u, Puna, Kohala and Kona representatives, to an apparent shift in leadership and direction on the county council. Taking office that day, Safarik gained the coveted council chairmanship on a 5-4 vote. His coalition leaves the representatives from Hilo and Hamakua in the minority opposition — a major shift in the island's balance of power.

For years, there's been a vocal band of residents on the Big Island's West Side who have complained bitterly that the island's East Side, wherein Hilo, the County Seat, is located, has controlled the council and favored that side of the island in dispensing county funds and favors. Even though the county administration headed by Mayor Harry Kim, who took office in 2000, has seemed to endeavor to treat the whole island equal-

ly, the perception has been that the council itself has been leaning staunchly to the East.

Safarik, whose Puna district lies on the island's southeast section, joined with the four non-East Side council members prior to their inauguration in agreeing on appointments to council committee chairmanships and other organizational moves that many see as favoring the West Side.

And, indeed, it was those four council members, three of them new to the council, who joined with Safarik to cement his chairmanship.

Still, whether the initial coalition headed by Safarik will become a controlling bloc on the council over the next two years remains to be seen. Members of the coalition group, particularly veteran Councilmember and new Council Vice-Chair Bob Jacobson (Upper Puna, Ka'u and South Kona), all seem to have demonstrated their independence and willingness to swim upstream in the past, so how alliances may indeed form on the new council is still anybody's guess.

And Safarik himself is hoping against hope that he will be able to gain the trust of the suspicious East Side council members and get the entire council working together.

"My job now is to make sure that the people who felt uneasy about voting for me, for a change in leadership, will feel included in what we do," Safarik told the *Hawai'i Island Journal* in a recent interview. He added, "I have to earn their respect and trust. We need to be a Council of the Whole. I want to be sure that whatever we do, we do so collectively."

Safarik said he had talked with members of the council who had not supported his chairmanship bid, and felt that things, overall, "are starting off on the right foot. I assured them everyone will have equal access."

And he added:

"We're going to decide on things the right way, case by case, as opposed to looking at them as a bloc vote. Even with differences which will exist, I want to maintain a level of understanding among everyone. I want to be a bridge maker."

In his December 6 inaugural speech,



HD Photo

Safarik also addressed the need of the council members to work together.

"Every member of this council enjoys a mandate to devote their best to the cause of public service. Every member is welcome to contribute to that effort. Every member is a valued colleague," he told those present at the inauguration.

"We are a Council of the Whole. We serve the whole island. Our people look to us to make our island one."

Safarik, who had enjoyed a reputation on the council as a tough fighter for his Puna district, said he was aware that his position as council chair would require new approaches and new recognitions on his part.

"No longer am I primarily an advocate for Puna, but, instead, for the whole island," Safarik said. "In my heart, I want to make sure the people in East Hawai'i don't start to feel they are being left out of the loop. I want to convince people in West Hawai'i that we are hearing them, but also assure people in East Hawai'i that we will continue to listen to them. Our actions will speak louder than words."

## And About Being Inclusive ....

Among Safarik's first hills to climb as chairman, he said, was to find a way to implement "teleconferencing" for coun-

cil meetings that would allow citizen testimony from other island locations during council meetings.

"We, frankly, eliminate a vast percentage of potential input from people who just can't drive to the other side of the island when we have meetings," Safarik told the *Journal*, "and in this day of communication technology's many uses, it seems to me we should be able to do this. When we meet in Hilo, people should be able to testify, and follow our meetings, from Kona."

Safarik said he has asked County Corporate Counsel Lincoln Ashida to help facilitate the teleconferencing. As long as the council itself was meeting intact, Safarik said, he believed citizen input from other locations should work. In the past, the council had been told that teleconferencing such as Safarik was suggesting wasn't legal because of the possibility that such communication could break down during the meeting. But Safarik said he believed system redundancies available today would insure that wasn't a problem.

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"I hope we can begin this early in 2005," Safarik said, "and I am excited about it!"

Safarik also is working at creating a system for citizens to submit testimony to the council via e-mail, and having that email testimony become part of the public record. As e-mail comes in on council issues, he said, it could be forwarded to the appropriate council committee for consideration.

Another innovation Safarik hopes to work out is a monthly meeting he'd have with Mayor Harry Kim. Such meetings would be intended to create a closer working relationship with the county administration.

"We have different branches of government that create checks and balances, and that is the way it should be," Safarik told the *Journal*, "but we need to work more closely with Harry. We need to talk face-to-face and look eye-to-eye for the common good. I want people to see us working with the mayor, not in lock step, but doing what each of us is supposed to do."

### Prior to His Council Days

Safarik was born Jan. 8, 1949 on Oahu, and grew up in neighborhoods, and attending schools, where haoles were a minority. Most of his childhood playmates and school friends were of differing races and ethnic groups, which gave him, he told the *Journal*, "a sense of belonging to all the other cultures."

"I grew up on the ocean, and learned that the coast and the reefs are fragile and that began my appreciation for the environment," he recalled. "Growing up in Hawai'i in the 1950s and 1960s was just magical to me. It was so quiet and peaceful."

For ten years, from 1968 to 1977, he was a police officer in Honolulu, a professional experience that he still views with mixed feelings: "I respect the hell out of police officers. It is a difficult job, at best. I have very fond memories of the people I worked with, and a real feeling of friendship for them."

Safarik was 20 when he graduated from police recruit school and began walking a

beat in one of the high-crime areas of Honolulu.

"It exposed me to the toughest side of society, to some of the worst of mankind," he told the *Journal*. "There was a lot of heartache and misery you ran into, a lot of abuse. You had to build up layers of defense, of doing your job, but of not wanting to see the misery."

Safarik also worked in vice and in the canine unit, then left the department after 10 years of service, he said, because "I'd had enough."

Safarik has degrees in criminal justice and in business from the University of Hawai'i. After resigning from the police force, he began work in the communications industry, a business in which he remains today.

In the early 1980s, he and his family moved to the Big Island where he began management of a Motorola Radio business.

"I got involved in several business and community organizations as part of my business," he said, "and I got this feeling that the community wasn't being heard by its leaders. And I just felt I was on the

outside, looking in."

Always in the back of his mind, Safarik said, were those words of John F. Kennedy, "ask what you can do ...."

He was involved in youth programs, the Rotary Club and other organizations, but eventually decided that he needed to run for public office, for the county council, to actually be in the driver's seat for making needed changes in Puna and on the Big Island.

In 1998, Safarik, who ran as a "conservative Democrat," lost to then incumbent County Councilmember Al Smith, Lower Puna's councilmember since 1994, in a very tight race.


Undaunted, and even more committed, Safarik ran again in 2000, and won.

Safarik's Puna District is the fastest growing district on the island: a district plagued with unemployment, growth problems, transportation woes and the island's highest crime incidents in categories such as burglaries, robberies and assaults.

Safarik's designation to lead the county council and help direct much of its activities, it seems likely, should be to the benefit of Puna.

But now, he realizes, he needs to look out just as hard for the rest of the island.

Safarik's council office sports a good number of framed photos of family and friends, most taken on special occasions. He points with pride to those close relationships.

As reported in a late summer issue of the *Journal*, Safarik is looking ahead to the probability of tossing his hat into the Big Island's mayoral race in 2008, when Harry Kim's second term has expired. He's hoping his service as head of the county council paves the way for that. 



## Gary Safarik's inaugural comments:

Aloha!

First, I want to welcome and congratulate the mayor, the prosecuting attorney and all my council colleagues on this inaugural day. I also want to thank our many friends and fellow citizens who came to join us today.

Today, I'd like to share a few brief remarks with you about our future. Many years ago, a man named John Kenneth Galbraith became a Pulitzer Prize-winning economist and author.

But, as a young man, he labored for Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the grim days of the Depression. He made an important observation about those difficult days, and the meaning of leadership. He wrote:

"All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership."

That's a good point of departure for talking about the work and direction of your new council.

Our present moment is marked by many anxieties:

- \* Can we manage growth on our island? Can we do this with care and keen intelligence? Can we be pioneers in smart growth?

- \* How will we cope with our astounding real estate market bubble and its impact on real property taxes?

- \* What will we do to mitigate our points of traffic gridlock in Kona, Puna and Waimea?

- \* What can we do to reduce the predatory grip of ice on our youth and families?

- \* How can we improve the quality and civility of our public conversations — to arrive at agreeable and respectful solutions, not endless argument?;

- \* What new financing mechanisms and skills will we employ to tackle our infrastructure deficits?

- \* What building blocks for sustainable growth and opportunity will we create for the youth of the 21st Century, so that they may lead full and happy lives on this island, without departing for the mainland?

- \* How do we make ourselves a safer, more caring community?

All of these questions speak to our anxieties. And all these anxieties also represent opportunities.

We are a society in transition. The era of great plantations is behind us. It left us rich with many opportunities ... for diversified agriculture ... for the orderly planning of new communities ... for preservation of treasured places and open space. That work begins with adopting amendments to our General

Plan. It will take real shape with the work we do together on our Community Development Plans.

We're making progress on our War on Ice. But there's much left to do. It's not a problem that can be solved entirely by law enforcement. It's a problem closely related to the anxieties of our people. We know that many people succumb to the temptation of stimulants because they are so hard-pressed to keep up. We need to relieve those pressures. We need to repudiate the cruel scourge of this drug and those who prey on its victims, and provide healing resources for those victims.

We need to build bridges to people who feel neglected or disconnected. In large measure, that theme underlies the organization of this new Council.

It is a deliberate organization reaching out to all the people of the Big Island. You are heard. Your concerns are felt. We will address your needs.

Every challenge that faces us requires us to give a little and sometimes more than a little. Healthy communities do not shirk these challenges: they face them boldly.

- \* Healthy communities finance long-term solutions — like a solid waste reduction technology, or a mass transit system.

- \* They embrace public workers who man the front lines in delivering essential county services.

- \* Healthy communities listen to their founders and kupuna — and forego immediate gain in favor of the long view.

- \* Healthy citizens take stock of the crippling meanness of naysaying and, instead, renew their lives as positive thinkers and contributors.

In short, healthy communities step up to the plate for the common good.

Today, we embrace all our fears and anxieties, along with all our hopes. These are all opportunities. Today, we commit ourselves to these opportunities.

Every member of this council enjoys a mandate to devote their best to the cause of public service.

Every member is welcome to contribute to that effort. Every member is a valued colleague.

We are a Council of the Whole. We serve the whole island. Our people look to us to make our island one.

Today, let us commit ourselves to the people of the Big Island to do our very best. Aloha.