

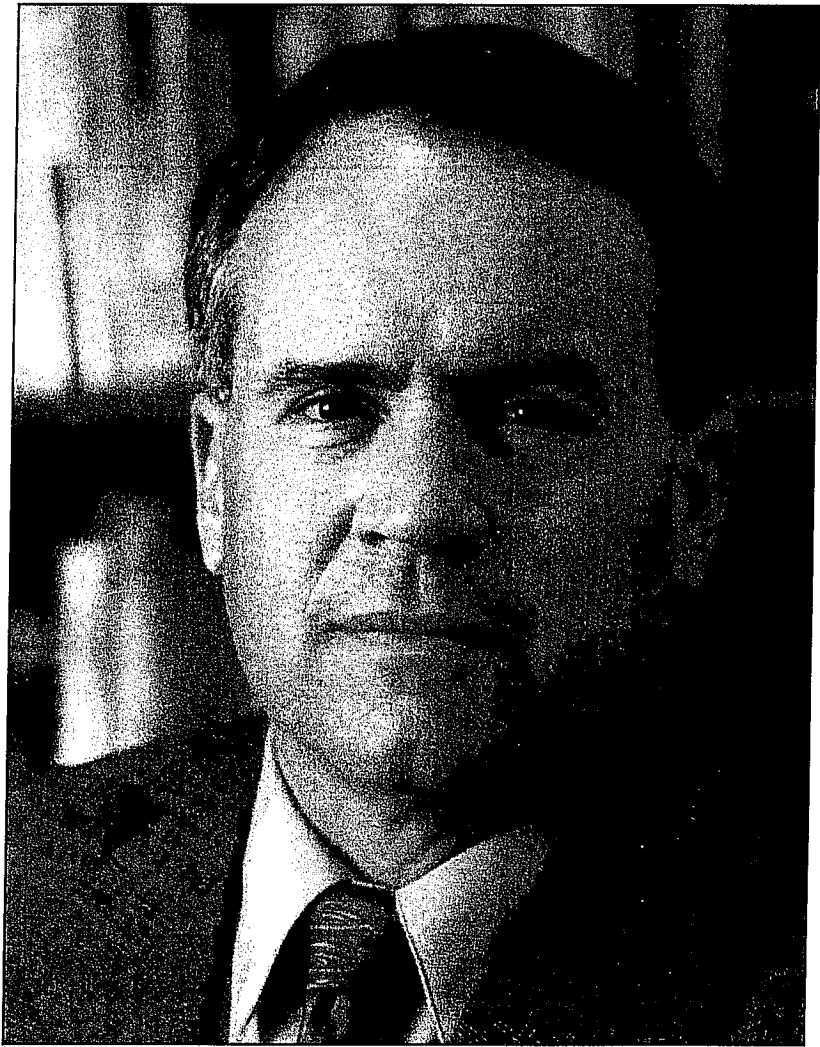
Wally Leimgruber has cobbled together an impressive career out of defying local expectations. The long-time Holtville farmer and 2-term Imperial County Supervisor is, in many ways, a throwback to the retail politics of yesteryear.

Elected in 1998 on a platform that emphasized family values and personal responsibility, he would earn the nickname of "Landslide Leimgruber" when he beat Ruben "Kiki" Garcia by a total of 57 votes. Four years later, his margin of victory expanded to 117 votes in a race against Brawley City Councilman Steve Vasquez that most observers believed he would lose.

But Leimgruber, who just began his second term as chairman of the Board of Supervisors, has modeled himself after the tortoise, rather than the hare, eschewing flash and points for style in favor of the role as a steady and resolute performer. He is scrupulously careful in the way he approaches most issues that come before the board, but when push comes to shove he takes a position and sticks with it.

In his first term on the board, his uncompromising stance on the matter of an outright ban on the application of sludge to agricultural fields in the county brought him into open conflict with certain landowners who favored its adoption. On the surface, it seemed to many that Leimgruber, in opposing a proposed county ordinance against the practice, was actually sticking up for the importation of sludge into the Imperial Valley.

It turned out, though, that Wally had done his homework, and that if such a ban had been adopted by the board, it would have created a legal opening for the purveyors of sludge to challenge the county's action in



A Man Named **Leimgruber**

court, making it more likely that this material would eventually find its way into local fields.

A couple of years later, when the state Department of Corrections indicated that it would consider building a facility for violent sexual offenders near Centinela State Prison in Imperial County, Leimgruber infuriated opponents of

the project by voicing his support for it.

The county Board of Supervisors ultimately split 3-2 in favor of the facility, which was later built in Coalinga, but that didn't keep angry opponents on Brawley's affluent west side from taking out papers to recall the District 5 Supervisor.

"The only thing that kept them

from circulating a petition and gathering up signatures against me," he remembers, "was they didn't live in my district."

Leimgruber staked out a similarly tough position on the Salton Sea during the marathon Quantification Settlement Agreement negotiations. Then a member of the Salton Sea Authority, he was the first to broach the idea of fallowing local farmland not only to transfer water to urban users in Southern California but also to maintain inflows to the sea. While he didn't particularly embrace the concept, he did call it "a viable alternative," which was widely interpreted as the same thing, and he received much criticism for it at the time.

Of course, in this case, too, he was right, as the situation at the Salton Sea has since become a giant loose end in what was supposed to have been the neat and tidy package of completing the nation's largest agricultural-to-urban water transfer. Still, Leimgruber has never been one to say, "I told you so," even when, as a politician, he is entitled to do so. Instead, he is content to press on with his understated program of work, doing what he perceives to be the people's business quietly, methodically and, above all, effectively.

Wally Leimgruber is an inveterate record-keeper, compiling files on virtually everything that has ever come across his desk, including waste disposal issues, general plan updates, constituent requests and Indian gaming proposals. The latter has been and continues to be an area of vital concern to him, and the dossier he has put together on the subject would probably constitute a small forest of old-growth trees.

His opposition to gaming in general, and off-reservation Indian gaming in particular, is well-known and undoubtedly runs counter to popular sentiment, but Leimgruber is unmoved by the fact that his

stand against such a project in Imperial County promises to be a lonely one.

His anti-gambling position, he says, has less to do with his own moral convictions than it does simple economics. According to Leimgruber, the supposed profits to be derived by the county are illusory, and will be more than offset by the increased cost in public services, not to mention the societal ills that will naturally be exacerbated by having a casino so close to home.

But what about the fact that locals are already availing themselves of these facilities within easy driving distance of the county, and in virtually every direction except to the south? Shouldn't Imperial County do what it can to re-capture this lost revenue?

"I really believe the costs far outweigh the benefits," says Leimgruber, who adds that he doesn't think the governor will

approve an off-reservation license in Imperial County, mainly because of the opposition it is certain to draw from competing facilities in adjoining counties.

For Wally Leimgruber, the disposition of such simmering controversies is part and parcel of being a public servant, and he appears not to have lost a lot of sleep over whose ox is being gored in the process. Of course, that doesn't mean he is unconcerned with how his decisions play out in the public arena; as a politician, he has to be. What it does mean is that once he takes a public position, usually after a period of much deliberation and fact-finding, he is unlikely to abandon it.

"The test of local government," he says, "is in its responsiveness to the people and the amount of good that it can do for them. As an elected official, I know that the buck stops here, and I'm comfortable with that." •



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