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The Political Evolution of Northampton, Massachusetts

By

Robert Driscoll

The political direction of Northampton, Massachusetts made a decisive turn in the 1990s. The city's political ideology shifted from a conservative agenda supported by native born residents to a liberal agenda supported mainly by new residents. This turn began with the municipal election of 1991 and was completed two years later with the municipal election of 1993. During this time period, Northampton elected its first woman mayor and the first non-native mayor. The city also elected a new city council, which contained several non-native councilors. New residents moving into Northampton and becoming politically active in the city brought about this change in local politics. The new residents replaced the native born voters as the largest voting block in the city. The defining moment of this shift occurred in 1992 when the city voted on a proposition two and half override question. This election would mark the last time the native-born conservative agenda prevailed. This shift occurred in Northampton at the same time as the state of Massachusetts and many local cities, such as Springfield and Holyoke, were becoming more fiscally conservative in their ideology. One year before the shift began in Northampton, Massachusetts elected a fiscally conservative republican governor who was re-elected in 1994. Northampton went in the opposite direction from the state in the 1990s. Northampton successfully shifted from a conservative agenda to a liberal social and economic agenda and became a prosperous city. Northampton prospered economically while other cities suffered from budget deficits and a decline in new growth.

Northampton is a medium size city with a population of about 30,000 people. It is located in the Pioneer Valley north of the larger

cities of Springfield, Holyoke, and Chicopee. It serves as the seat of government for Hampshire County. The city is home to several prominent institutions, which attract visitors from outside the region. These institutions include Smith College and Clarke School for the hearing impaired. The city is also located very close to several other well-known colleges and universities. A mayor and a nine-person city council govern the city, and the council is comprised of two at-large members and one member from each of the city's seven wards.

Prior to 1991 a conservative mayor and city council governed Northampton. In 1989 the city elected Mayor David Musante to an unprecedented sixth two-year term in office. Mayor Musante was a native of Northampton and was viewed as a politically moderate mayor who would move to the left of the political spectrum when necessary. He was the first mayor to reach out to the new residents of Northampton and try to win their support. He was supported by a conservative city council. In 1991, Mayor Musante chose not to run for re-election as mayor. This caused the position of mayor to be vacant for the first time in twelve years. The 1991 mayoral election featured a race between Ward Four City Councilor Michael Ahearn, a native of Northampton, and At-Large City Councilor Mary Ford, a non-native of Northampton. In a very close race Ford defeated Ahearn by less than two hundred votes to become the first female mayor and the first mayor born outside of Northampton. This was the first time that a newcomer was able to prevail over conservative old Northampton.

While the voters supported a liberal for mayor, the city re-elected a conservative city council. Five of the nine city councilors who were elected in 1991 supported Ahearn's campaign for mayor. The council was comprised of nine men, eight of whom were Northampton natives. This election showed that city residents were divided in their political viewpoints. The liberal progressive agenda was gaining strength, but the conservative agenda still controlled a majority of the voting block. The 1991 election was the first step of a two-year process that would shift Northampton from a city run by conservative native born residents to a city with a liberal agenda.

The conservative agenda began experiencing defeat by 1991 because the population characteristics of Northampton had dramatically changed over the previous ten years, since the last time the mayor's seat was open. However, even though the characteristics had changed, the total population of the city remained virtually unchanged. The 1970

federal census states the population of Northampton was 29,669 residents.¹ The 1980 federal census actually shows a decline in the number of residents with the population dropping to 29,286 residents.² This number remains virtually unchanged in the 1990 federal census, which reported the population to be 29,289.³ The federal census of 2000 continues to show no change with the population being 28,978.⁴ These numbers demonstrate that the population of Northampton has remained unchanged for an extended period of time. The characteristics of these 29,000 people have changed since 1970, and this is what has caused the change in Northampton. The 1980 city census illustrates that the average age in Northampton that year was 33.5 and that 14.6% of the population was over 65 years of age.⁵ Ten years later, the 1990 census reveals that the median age had changed to 37.3, but the percentage of people over the age of 65 had dropped to 13%.⁶ A comparison between the two censuses also shows that the number of residents under the age of 18 dropped between 1980 and 1990. This data illustrates that between 1980 and 1990 the population of Northampton shifted so that more of the citizens were now middle-age people with fewer children. This fact is made clearer when you compare the percentage of family households between 1980 and 1990. In 1980 the percentage of family households was 53%, this number drops to 49% in 1990. In 1980 the number of households of people over 65 was 12%, while in 1990 this number drops to 10%.⁷ These numbers demonstrate that the population had changed so that in 1990 40% of the population was living in households under the age of 65 that did not have children. Younger residents had replaced the older residents of Northampton. These new younger residents were not joining the older residents of Northampton,

¹ United States Federal Census for 1970.

² United States Federal Census for 1980.

³ United States Federal Census for 1990.

⁴ United States Federal Census for 2000.

⁵ Northampton City Census for 1980.

⁶ Northampton City Census for 1990.

⁷ Northampton City Census for 1980 and 1990.

they were replacing them. The influx of new residents to Northampton did not cause the population of Northampton to increase because they were replacing the people who had lived here.

As the demographics of Northampton changed the number of homes in the city did not increase, but the number of homes that were being sold in a given year did increase. Northampton Assessor Joan Sarrafin states that during the 1980s and 1990s “there has been virtually no new commercial growth in the city and very limited residential growth.”⁸ The people who moved into this city during the 1980s were buying homes that were owned by the natives of Northampton. Sarrafin points out “the residents who are selling their homes are most of the time not buying another home in the city.”⁹ One explanation of why the natives were not purchasing homes in the city is the price of homes in the city rose so dramatically over this time period. Many residents could not afford to buy another home in the city. According to the 1980 census the median price for a home in the city was \$122,000.¹⁰ Sarrafin points out that the median price for a home in Northampton now is about \$170,000. She attributes some of the increase in home prices to the reputation of the city: “The reputation of the city has made it a desirable place to live. This new interest has driven up the value of property within the city.”¹¹

Another factor that has affected the home sales in the city, according to Sarrafin, is the Internet. People have begun shopping for homes over the computer. The fact that homes can be sold via computer has allowed people to ask a higher price for the homes and made it much more difficult for the natives of Northampton to remain in the city. Sarrafin also believes that the use of computers to help sell homes has caused homes to sell much faster once they are placed on the market. People are buying homes in the city before they even arrive. The increased desire to live in Northampton has caused the price of homes to continue to rise. As the selling prices have increased, the

⁸ Interview with Joan Sarrafin, Chairwoman of the Northampton Board of Assessors, July 31, 2002.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Northampton City Census for 1980.

¹¹ Sarrafin interview.

assessments on surrounding homes has also increased. The new assessments have raised property tax rates to a very high level, making Northampton unaffordable for many residents. The higher property taxes combined with the price people can sell their homes for has caused many long-time residents of Northampton to move out of the city and to resettle in surrounding communities that are more affordable and more politically aligned to their viewpoints. The homes that are being sold in Northampton are often being purchased by professional people who are not from the area but are familiar with the area for a variety of reasons, such as this might be the area they attended college or they might be familiar with the city's reputation as an arts community.

While the population of Northampton has remained virtually unchanged for the past thirty years, the number of registered voters in the city has steadily increased. The new citizens of Northampton have taken a more active role in city politics than the residents they replaced. In 1970 there were 13,157 registered voters in the city; in 1980 there were 13,874 registered voters; by 1990 the number increased to 15,517 registered voters; by 2000 the figure had grown to 18,887 registered voters.¹² When these figures are compared to the population totals for the city, it is clear that as people moved into Northampton they became more active in politics. The number of registered voters increased by over 5,000 people while the population of the city declined. One explanation of this figure is that the population shift resulted in fewer families with children being included in the population totals. The population of Northampton has become predominantly professional well-educated middle-aged people who are not raising a family. City Clerk Christine Skorupski also points to the increasing number of political parties that people are allowed to register under as being a factor leading to more people registering to vote.¹³ When people register to vote they are now allowed to designate several party preferences, including the Green Party, Reform Party, and Libertarian. The newly registered voters are using the right to participate in elections. In 1991, 68% of the

¹² Interview with Cynthia McQuestion, Assistant Northampton Registrar of Voters, August 1, 2002.

¹³ Interview with Christine Skorupski, Northampton City Clerk, August 7, 2002.

eligible voters participated in the election, while in 1995 78% of eligible voters participated.¹⁴

These demographic changes are the reasons behind the changing political direction of Northampton. The population of 29,000 people changed. In 1980 most of the city was comprised of people who were born and raised in the city and were raising families in the city. By 1990, those native born people had begun to get replaced by new comers to the city. The native-born voters are described as the conservative voters; the newcomers to Northampton are described as progressive voters. The election of Mary Ford as mayor in 1991 demonstrated that the city was evenly-divided between the conservative voters and the progressive voters. She was given the responsibility to govern a divided city, but she would have to govern while working with a council that was as equally divided as the city. She was forced to work with a council that had four strong allies and four strong opponents, who were elected by wards of the city that still had a large percentage of natives in them. The ninth member of the council was an independent voice that did not always vote the same way, but he was elected from a conservative ward and had endorsed Ahearn's bid for mayor.

The decisions Mayor Ford made during her first term in office helped usher in the new era of Northampton politics. She had a position from which she could advocate the liberal point of view. This was the first time the progressive voters had a strong position to advocate from. Ford also brought more progressives into politics by appointing them to a variety of boards and commissions, such as the planning board and zoning board.¹⁵ She encouraged people to get involved in politics. Many of the people that Ford would appoint in her first term would become candidates for office in later years.

Early in her first term in office, Mary Ford decided that the city needed to approve a proposition two-and-a-half override in order to balance the city budget. She chose to present it as a general override question instead of a menu style override. The city council approved her request to place an override question on the ballot on March 31, 1992 by

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Official Minutes of the Northampton City Council as recorded by the City Clerk, various dates between 1992-1993.

a vote of 5-4.¹⁶ The four conservative councilors voted against her request because they favored the menu style override where voters could choose which departments to fund. This election became a major turning point. As the current Mayor Mary Clare Higgins points out, “There was a strong feeling of native Northampton versus new comers. The general override was a clear example of old versus new. It showed that native Northampton had the power to unite behind an issue and defeat it.”¹⁷ The election did become a war between conservative and progressive Northampton. Both sides worked very aggressively to win voters over to their point of view. When the election finally took place conservative Northampton was able to declare victory. The final vote total showed that there were 5,052 votes against the override and 3,752 votes in favor of the override.¹⁸ The override saw its largest margin of defeat in the four wards that had elected conservative members of the city council. The override was overwhelming approved in the remaining three wards. This election gave the conservative voting block something to celebrate. They felt vindicated because they were able to prevent Mary Ford from getting what she wanted. This election was also very important to the progressives. Mayor Higgins explains that “this election helped to energize the newcomers to become more involved in politics. They were affected by the cuts imposed by the city council.”¹⁹

Following the defeat of the override the mayor and city council were required to reduce the city budget in order to balance it. The Mayor proposed deep spending cuts in all departments. The members of the City Council representing conservative Northampton refused to support the Mayor’s budget proposal. They felt that her budget cut too deeply into vital city services, such as the fire and police departments. The City Council had the authority to reduce the Mayor’s budget proposal. They decided to reduce spending for the city schools and the arts programs. They argued that the majority of the citizens of Northampton would rather have a well-staffed police and fire

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with Mary Clare Higgins, Mayor of the City of Northampton, July 31, 2002.

¹⁸ Official election results as recorded by the City Clerk’s office, May 12, 1992.

¹⁹ Higgins interview.

departments than investing in city-wide arts programs.²⁰ They were successful in their efforts to restore funding to the police and fire departments while at the same time cutting the arts programs to almost nothing. The City Council approved a series of budget cuts to several city departments. All the proposed cuts to the mayor's budget were approved on 5-4 votes.²¹ The departments that were reduced included the recreation department, planning department, mayor's office, law department, and building inspector. The five councilors who supported the cuts were councilors Paul Bixby, John FitzGerald, Leonard Budgar, Raymond LaBarge, and Richard LaBarge. These cuts angered Mayor Ford and the members of the City Council who supported Mayor Ford's agenda and would further energize the progressive voters who felt the defeat of the override vote.

The actions taken by the City Council following the override vote caused the progressive voters to become energized, while the conservative voting block celebrated the victory of the override vote. Conservative Northampton was unable to capture the energy that they used to defeat the override vote. After the vote was completed, the groups that opposed the override disbanded, but the groups that had supported the override remained organized, plotting and planning their next moves. The progressives began watching what the City Council was doing very closely, and they became upset by the Council's actions. After the 1992 override vote, the City Council began following a more conservative voting path. It began opposing Mayor Ford on almost every issue. The City Council made it difficult for Mayor Ford to govern effectively and they prevented her from carrying out her agenda. Ford tried unsuccessfully to push forward a liberal agenda. For example, she proposed a measure that would have created more affordable housing in the city and tried to apply for a housing grant to support a homeless initiative in the city. The City Council blocked both of these attempts. In the case of the grant application, Ford needed to schedule a special meeting of the City Council to approve the application in time. A majority of the City Council refused to attend the special meeting and the application could not be filed.

By 1993 the progressive voters were angry at the City Council. As the biennial election was approaching in the fall of 1993, many residents

²⁰ Official Minutes of the Northampton City Council as recorded by the Clerk.

²¹ *Ibid.*

decided to take action. Most of the people that decided to run that year chose to run because they were upset with the actions of the City Council. Linda Desmond, who ran for City Council from ward five that year, states “I decided to run because I was [made] angry by the manipulation and conservative voting path my predecessors had created.”²² She went on to say “I truly believed that they were representing the Northampton of the 1950s not the Northampton we had become in the 1990s.”²³ People were very concerned that nothing was getting accomplished in the city. They viewed the Council as being a road-block to Mayor Ford’s agenda. Mary Clare Higgins ran for City Councilor At-Large for the first time in 1993. Higgins said, “I was concerned about the votes taken by the city council re: affordable housing.”²⁴ Many of the people who chose to run in 1993 were making their first attempt at public office. Several of the people who ran that year had first gotten involved in politics when they began campaigning in favor of the override, others had worked to elect Mary Ford in 1991. Three of the candidates actively worked on Mary Ford’s campaign in 1991.

The 1993 municipal election was clearly a campaign between conservative voters and progressive voters. Mayor Ford decided to seek a second term as mayor. City Council President Paul Bixby opposed her. Bixby was a native of Northampton and he had served as the leader of the conservative faction of the Council that had opposed Ford so often in her first term. He had been an outspoken opponent to the override vote in 1992. Each of the nine City Council seats produced a contest in 1993. Many of the nine races pitted a veteran of Northampton politics against a newcomer to politics, who in many cases was a newcomer to the city. This election divided the city into two groups, the progressives, who were often newcomers to Northampton, versus the conservatives, who were natives of the city. It was viewed as a fight for the soul of Northampton. The candidates for City Council did not run as a block. There was no organization among the many candidates who shared the same point of view. As Linda Desmond states “I ran on my own. I

²² Interview with Linda Desmond, Ward Five City Councilor (1994-1998), April 3, 2003.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Higgins interview.

supported the other candidates because they shared my political philosophy.”²⁵ Most candidates did, however, align themselves with one of the two mayoral candidates. Both mayoral candidates campaigned for the City Council candidates who shared their agenda, and both felt that the only way they were going to be a productive mayor was if they were given a city council that shared their viewpoints. Ford campaigned on an agenda that promoted affordable housing and more money for education, including new schools. Bixby ran on an agenda that promised to reduce waste in government, promised strong funding for the fire, police and public works departments, and level funding for arts programs. These two candidates helped to create a clear divide in Northampton in 1993.

November 2, 1993, became a crucial date in Northampton politics. It was the date of the annual municipal election. For the first time in twenty years voters were faced with contested races for mayor and all nine City Council seats. As the day began, the city was controlled by a city council with a conservative agenda. By the end of November 2 power had shifted from the conservative agenda to a liberal, much more progressive agenda. “After the proposition two and a half override vote was soundly defeated last year, Richard Labarge thought conservatism had a voice in the city. But last night’s vote seemed to indicate otherwise, he said.”²⁶ Labarge was one of the only conservative city councilors to survive the election. The progressives would not take office until January 1994, but the conservatives lost their momentum and ability to govern on this date. The City Council did not make any substantial decisions during the last weeks of the term.

The most important race on the ballot was the closely-contested race for mayor. Incumbent Mayor Mary Ford defeated City Council President Paul Bixby 6,039 to 4,440.²⁷ Ford ran very well in her strongholds around downtown Northampton. She was able to overcome Bixby’s strong showing in the heavily populated conservative wards of five, six, and seven. Ford’s victory was not a surprise; Northampton has a long history of returning incumbent mayors to office. The important fact about the mayor’s race is that Ford increased her base of support since 1991. She was able to do better in the conservative wards than she

²⁵ Desmond interview.

²⁶ *The Daily Hampshire Gazette*, November 3, 1993.

²⁷ Official election results as recorded by the City Clerk’s Office.

was expected to do. This race showed that the strong conservative wards were no longer that solidly conservative. It also showed that the number of people who supported Ford's liberal agenda had dramatically increased over her two years in office.

The most surprising results of the election occurred in the races for City Council. "Voters significantly changed the makeup of the city council by electing six new members, four of them women, ousted two long-time incumbents, and dramatically reduced the average age of the councilors."²⁸ The voters chose to elect councilors who were much more progressive and liberal than the councilors they were replacing. The voters also chose to endorse candidates that were supporters of Mary Ford: "Candidates aligned with Ford did very well yesterday. Five of the six candidates who publicly supported her won."²⁹ The Council races, however, showed that the city was still divided, but for the first time the balance of power had shifted to the more progressive agenda. The progressive voting block was able to organize and unite behind a slate of candidates and showed that they were now the largest voting block. The demographics of the city had changed with newcomers replacing older residents. The change took time to achieve, but this election showed that the newcomers had finally become the majority. The 1991 race showed that the city was evenly divided, but the conservatives still had a slim advantage, which enabled them to win a majority of the Council races in 1991 and lose the mayor's race by a small margin. The 1993 race showed that the city was still evenly divided, but the progressives had slightly more voters enabling them to win the mayor's race and seven of the nine City Council races. This was the first time in the history of Northampton that a majority of the City Council changed in the same election.

There were several interesting council races that demonstrated how divided the city was at that moment. The race for the Ward Five City Council seat matched a veteran member of the Council, John FitzGerald, against political newcomer Linda Desmond. Desmond had become active in politics two years earlier when she began campaigning for Mary Ford. Ward Five was considered one of the more conservative wards in the city in 1993. FitzGerald was one of the most conservative councilors. He was an outspoken critic of Mary Ford's leadership of the

²⁸ *The Daily Hampshire Gazette*, November 3, 1993.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

city and had actively campaigned for Bixby. Desmond was able to defeat FitzGerald by a very narrow 47 vote margin, 780-733.³⁰ Desmond was helped in this race by a very strong showing in Ward Five by Mary Ford. Ford lost Ward Five to Bixby by a very narrow margin. Desmond had publicly endorsed Mary Ford and campaigned on the need to change the Council to one that supported Ford.

The Ward Four City Council race matched Michael Ahearn, a former city councilor who was attempting to return to the Council, against Michael Bardsley. Ahearn served on the Council for four years before attempting to run for mayor against Mary Ford in 1991. He had a conservative record on the Council and ran for mayor on a conservative platform. Bardsley was seeking public office for the first time. He had co-chaired Mary Ford's campaign in 1991. He was also involved in the effort to pass the proposition two-and-a-half override. This race was similar to the race for mayor, matching up Ford's former opponent with her campaign manager. Ward Four was considered one of the city's most progressive wards. Mary Ford easily defeated Paul Bixby in Ward Four. Bardsley defeated Ahearn by a margin of 97 votes, 711-614.³¹

The Ward Seven City Council race featured a match-up between a long time veteran of the City Council, Raymond LaBarge, and political newcomer Maureen Tobin. LaBarge had served on the Council for ten years and had established a conservative voting record. Tobin had never run for elected office before, but had been involved in the Mary Ford campaign in 1991 and the override vote in 1992. Ward Seven was a large ward that usually was very conservative in its voting patterns. Paul Bixby had one of his best showings in Ward Seven. Even with a strong Bixby vote, Tobin was able to edge out LaBarge by 67 votes, 882-815.³²

In Ward One, a former city councilor, Mario Mazza, attempted to regain the seat he had held ten years earlier. He campaigned on a conservative agenda, and actively supported Bixby for mayor. He was challenged for the seat by a newcomer to Northampton, Judith Fine. Fine was the owner of a popular downtown business and wanted to give the shop owners a voice on the City Council. Fine was able to defeat Mazza's attempt to regain the council seat.

³⁰ Official election results as recorded by the City Clerk's Office.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Four people ran for the two at-large seats on the City Council. One of the four, Patrick Goggins, was an incumbent city councilor. Goggins was a progressive member of the City Council and he consistently voted to support Mayor Ford's proposals. The other three people running were political newcomers. One of the three, Mary Clare Higgins, presented herself as a very progressive candidate. She actively campaigned for Mayor Ford. Goggins and Higgins were able to defeat their two conservative opponents.

Two of the more conservative wards in the city are Wards Three and Six. These two wards re-elected councilors who supported the conservative agenda. Richard LaBarge in Ward Six and Leonard Budgar in Ward Three easily defeated more progressive candidates. The most progressive ward in the city, Ward Two, elected a progressive councilor, Edwin Scagel, by a large margin.

These results show that the progressives had taken control of city government, but they did not do it in a landslide. The conservatives lost control of the government by only a few hundred votes. Those few hundred votes were enough to turn the tide in Northampton politics. The progressive agenda had taken control of the mayor's position and an overwhelming majority of the City Council. This was the last great stand for the conservative agenda in Northampton politics. Following this campaign the conservatives did not get involved in politics and they did not challenge these newcomers. Those who were defeated in 1993 were the last of the core group of old-time Northampton politicians. Two years later many of the councilors who were elected in 1993 ran unopposed for a second term. In 1995, Mayor Ford was unopposed for a third term and five of the nine city councilors faced no opposition for re-election. The conservatives accepted the fact that they had been overtaken by the liberal more progressive voting block.

The new government took office in January 1994. The mayor and new City Council quickly began proposing and implementing a new progressive agenda. The new council also took action to reverse some of the decisions made by the previous council. In 1992, the mayor had asked the City Council to purchase a piece of property in Northampton known as The People's Institute. The People's Institute is a private, non-profit community center in the city which provides programs such as day care and a pre-school to city residents. A board of directors ran the Institute. In 1992 the board approached the mayor and asked her to consider buying the Institute on behalf of the city because it is was

having financial difficulties. The mayor felt that it was in the best interest of the city to purchase the property and take over control of the Institute. She felt it was important to continue to provide the community with the programs offered by The People's Institute. She presented her proposal to purchase the property to the City Council in March 1992. Several councilors objected to purchasing the property because they felt that the city was facing a budget crisis that year and could not afford to buy and maintain this property. Their feeling was that if the board of directors could not provide the services that the Institute offered without losing money it was not possible for the city to do it. The City Council voted on the proposal to purchase The People's Institute on April 2, 1992, and the proposal was rejected. The Mayor revised the proposal and presented it to the Council again on April 16, 1992. The Council rejected the proposal again citing the financial difficulties faced by the city. Mayor Ford was very upset about the Council's failure to purchase this property, feeling that residents of the city would be hurt if the programs offered by The People's Institute were eliminated. Both times the Council voted 5-4 against purchasing the property.

The new Council met for the first time on January 6, 1994. One of the first actions taken by the new council was to authorize the purchase of a portion of The People's Institute's property. Many of the newly elected councilors replaced people who had voted against purchasing the property. The newly-elected councilors argued that the need to continue to provide residents with the services offered by the institute outweighed the financial strains it would cause the city. The Council authorized the mayor to purchase another piece of the property on May 19, 1994. Even with these two purchases some of the property remains under the control of a board of directors. The city renovated some of the property that was purchased and now rents it out to the state to use as a juvenile court.

As the new City Council took office the city was in desperate need of a new fire station. The previous City Council had been pushing the mayor to begin the process of building a new public safety complex. The mayor argued that in order to build a new fire station voters would have to approve a proposition two-and-a-half override. She refused to ask the voters for a second override during her first term. This issue became a major campaign focus during the mayoral race in 1993. Ford promised to begin the process of building a new fire station during her second term. In January, the new City Council began asking for money to renovate and add on to the middle school. The councilors began

advocating for a proposition two-and-a-half override vote to raise money to pay for a renovated middle school. The mayor quickly agreed and gave in to the new Council and proposed an addition to the middle school. The Council voted on May 5, 1994 to place before the voters a proposition two-and-a-half override question, asking voters to support renovating the middle school. It would take two more years before the Council began discussing building a new fire station. This Council felt that education and new schools were a priority over public safety.

The first term of the new Council saw many other proposals that would never have been presented before the previous Council. On May 5, 1994, the Council approved a plan to develop and promote more affordable housing in the city. At that same council meeting the Council create an Elm Street historic district, which made it more difficult for people in certain areas of the city to change the appearance of their property. The Council was very concerned with preserving the appearance of downtown Northampton and began passing acts recognizing various celebrations within the city, such as declaring Fair Housing month in the city on April 20, 1995.

The new progressive Council took their most controversial step on April 6, 1995. The Council approved a new city ordinance titled the Domestic Partnership Ordinance. This ordinance recognized non-married couples as being legal partners and gave certain rights to partners that normally would be reserved for married couples. For instance, under this ordinance a partner would be able to access his/her partner's child's records at school. The city would also be allowed to offer health insurance to the partners of city workers. This was an ordinance that was actively campaigned for by the local gay community. The ordinance, however, was not limited to homosexual couples. This ordinance allowed heterosexual couples to register as well. The Council proposed the ordinance and passed it with very little debate.

Immediately following the passage of the ordinance, conservative members of the community began voicing their opposition to the act. A petition drive was started demanding that the act be repealed. The organizers of the petition drive were able to gather enough signatures within two weeks to force the Council to either rescind their vote or place the question on the general election ballot.

The council was faced with a very difficult decision on May 4, 1995. They could either vote to rescind the ordinance or they could support it once again. If they chose to support it again, they would need

the approval of the voters before it could become law. The progressive Council felt that this was an extremely important ordinance and it needed to be supported. They reaffirmed their vote on May 4 and again on May 18. The ordinance was then placed before the voters on the November ballot. Conservative Northampton was able to unite together behind this cause. The conservative agenda was not able to field many candidates for office in 1995, but they came out and campaigned against this ordinance. The progressives thought they were going to easily pass this ordinance because it appeared that the conservatives were unorganized. As Linda Desmond states:

The ordinance showed the populace that this Council was going to follow a progressive path, which would support social justice. By the strength of the opposition, it also indicated that there was still an active voting majority that did not always support our liberal ways.³³

The progressives were very surprised when the ordinance was defeated by the voters by a 97-vote margin in 1995. The conservatives were also able to defeat one city councilor, Maureen Tobin.³⁴ Tobin represented a very conservative area of the city that did not agree with her support of the ordinance. This would be the last time that the conservatives were able to celebrate victory.

Mary Ford and the new City Council led Northampton down a new path after 1993. The new path has proven to be successful for the city. The city has invested in and supported a wide variety of arts programs, which have attracted attention from outside the region. This attention has brought many more people into the city as visitors, some of whom decide to resettle in the city. The city has developed a reputation as being an open, accepting, and diverse community. People are attracted to the city because of the variety of programs offered. The population of Northampton is now a diverse mix of people from all parts of the country. The direction the city government has taken over the past ten years is largely responsible for the success of the city. Northampton prospered while other cities and the state suffered through very difficult

³³ Desmond interview.

³⁴ *The Daily Hampshire Gazette*, November 7, 1995.

economic times. The city and the state moved in opposite directions politically in the 1990s. The state turned towards more conservative leadership in the past ten years, electing a series of fiscally conservative Republican governors. The city did not support any of these Republican governors in the general elections. The city has also been more liberal than the state Democratic party in the past ten years. For example, during the most recent Democratic gubernatorial primary Northampton supported Robert Reich while most of the state was divided between Shannon O'Brien and Thomas Birmingham. Northampton has consistently supported liberal, progressive candidates for statewide office.

The city's economic success has been an example for other communities for several years. Northampton's downtown has been booming over the past ten years, while the downtown areas of cities such as Springfield and Holyoke have declined. The downtown areas of most surrounding cities contain empty and boarded up storefronts and neighborhoods that are undesirable to travel in. In comparison, Northampton never has an open storefront because they are so in demand and the downtown area has people walking and shopping well into the evening. The downtown area of Northampton has become an example for other communities. The city often hosts visitors from other communities who come to because they want to learn about Northampton's success. The city's government has been able to achieve a progressive agenda while at the same time maintaining funding for the public safety programs in the city, which has helped to keep crime at a low level. The city has not reduced the staff levels of the police or fire department in over ten years, and has not been faced with the serious crime problems that have plagued surrounding cities. It has also avoided the problems of drugs and gang activity in the downtown region. Much of the success of the city can be attributed to the government that the city has had for many years. The conservative Council laid the foundation for the success of the city by supporting the public safety programs, providing initial funding for the arts programs, and by building things such as a parking garage downtown. The progressive Council built on this foundation to develop Northampton into an economically and socially prosperous city that has a national reputation. In 1996, author

John Villani published a new book in which he described Northampton as “the number one small arts town in America.”³⁵

The changing demographics of Northampton, Massachusetts during the 1980s and 1990s caused the political ideology of the city to become more liberal and progressive. New progressive voters replaced the conservative voting block of the city that had consistently supported like-minded candidates. Many of the conservative voters decided to leave Northampton as it began its transformation. The progressives were able to begin electing like-minded candidates and slowly began taking over control of the government. The conservative voters became an increasingly smaller percentage of the voting block.

The conservative voters who remained in the city were not strong enough to succeed politically after a certain point. As the 1990s went on, the conservative agenda had no chance of succeeding on a city-wide basis. The conservative agenda has not been a serious threat in the last two municipal elections. The progressive agenda that originally pushed the conservatives out of office has been pushed more to the center of the political spectrum as a new more liberal voting block, the Green Party, begins to gain strength in the city. Northampton’s diversity has and will continue to attract new residents with a variety of political viewpoints. This diversity will continue to shift the political spectrum of Northampton for many years to come.

³⁵ John Villani, *The 100 Best Small Arts Towns in America* (Sante Fe, NM: John Muir Publishing, 1996), 10.