

## HISTORY

# The greatest hits: Recalling Sonny Bono

**Tracy Conrad**

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The petition to recall Palm Springs Mayor Sonny Bono garnered 2,000 signatures just one year into his term. That he had become mayor at all was a notable event in a remarkable life. Bono had always reinvented himself. This latest incarnation as mayor of Palm Springs was no more improbable than his previous existences as songwriter, singer, record producer, cabaret nightclub actor, movie producer, television star and restaurateur.

It was as a restaurateur in Palm Springs that his political life started. In 1988, he wanted a bigger sign for his restaurant and was frustrated by Palm Springs City Hall, "It's a real cliquy town. And their attitude is if you don't like it—tough!" He resolved to solve the problem by running for mayor and then running the town.

Nobody thought much of his campaign. In his newspaper advertisements he promised change, and a city government responsive to the needs of business. He worried out loud about traffic problems. He inveighed against the throngs of disrespectful spring break revelers, their scanty attire and quasi-criminal behavior. And invited voters to have coffee with him at his eponymous restaurant, Bono. Still, no one thought he had a chance.

When asked by a reporter for The Desert Sun about the townspeople's reaction to his candidacy he admitted, "They thought it was a joke."

But his whole life, Bono had been perennially underestimated. Naysayers had never stopped him. Undaunted, he charged ahead and ultimately charmed the voters with his industrious campaigning and cheerful attitude. He won in a landslide.

As if lifted from the banter of the successful Sonny & Cher television show, there was teasing that he'd spent \$100,000 to win a job that paid \$15,000 per year. But just one year later, in 1989, there were serious rumblings in the community. A group of forty or so determined citizens wanted to throw him out of office.

The Los Angeles Times summed up the first years, "There are those who praise him. As these fans see it, Bono, 54, has worked diligently in his freshman year to overcome his political inexperience and learn the ropes at City Hall. His high visibility—exploited through appearances on late-night television shows and at various special events—has placed Palm Springs in the national spotlight, and his plans for an international film festival in town have attracted widespread interest."

"Some business leaders even credit the rookie mayor with wooing back developers driven elsewhere in recent years by the city's inhospitable regulatory environment. But more frequently heard these days are the voices of Bono's critics...Many former supporters, who



**Mayors Sonny Bono (left) and Frank Bogert (right) riding horseback in the wash to the Indian Canyons.**

COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

initially viewed Bono as a savior who would rescue Palm Springs from the grip of less progressive leaders, now believe that his bid for mayor was merely a stunt to help revive a flagging entertainment career..."

Bono was unfazed. "There is one group that thought I would just come in and rubber-stamp everything, but that's not reality. So if I've made them angry, then that's just part of the job."

Bono had indeed changed the way things were done. He refused to take part in a walk to fight AIDS; he allowed a noisy and inconvenient Vintage car race; he was lambasted by residents and two of his fellow councilmembers for removing three members of a city tourism board, and at the meeting about it, prohibiting public comment, prompting cries of "dictatorship."

"Sonny Bono is now Sonny Bonaparte and we're not going to put up with it here in Palm Springs," said Shirley Barker, a real estate broker who volunteered in Bono's campaign. "I'd like to see him run right out of town."

The effort to recall Bono began in earnest. The citizen group produced an eight-page document outlining their grievances.

The document charged that Bono broke his promise

to protect seniors and enforce rent control. During the campaign he had promised to "plug the loopholes in rent control," but once in office he allowed the rent in mobile home parks to skyrocket, prompting residents to create a ballot initiative to stop it. The document accused him of funding public relations staff rather than badly needed police officers. It charged he also was instrumental in hiring an out-of-town public relations firm to the tune of some \$200,000 which promoted Bono more than the city. It detailed his request to have the city foot the bill for his first-class travel expenses. It complained about his support for an unpopular utility tax, his failure to revitalize the downtown, and inexperience in government. Particularly irksome was that he was inaccessible to the public, unavailable to meet with residents. The document accused him of being a joke, a self-promoting embarrassment.

Bono, initially mildly annoyed by what he called a "boisterous minority," began to publicly complain of defamation and harassment. To combat the attack, he met with leaders of the group individually, making his case personally and explaining who he really was.

Long interested in politics, Bono had helped the Gerald Ford presidential campaign. Despite his television personae, clad in bell-bottoms and fur vests, he was a businessman and a family man. He'd dropped out of the music business in the late 60s when, in his view, it was all about drugs. He had more in common with the "old guard" than either side had realized.

Bono was charismatic. He understood publicity and celebrity from his years in the public eye. He had certainly raised national awareness of Palm Springs.

Bono's charm offensive worked. The recall effort fizzled after 2,000 signatures — just half the amount required to cause a special election. Bono served as mayor for four years and went on to be elected to Congress in 1994. There, again, he was not taken seriously at first.

The Republican caucus had a new majority and its leader Newt Gingrich would come to trust and admire Bono, whose advice would ultimately transform Republican messaging. Respected journalists David Maraniss and Michael Weisskopf in their book, "Tell Newt to Shut Up" credit Bono with being the first person to recognize Gingrich's public relations problems in 1995 and recommend a fix. Bono counseled that Gingrich's status had changed from politician to celebrity.

Bono, the celebrity turned politician, had created yet another career for himself, survived a recall attempt, and launched himself onto the national scene in a whole new capacity. And had uncannily predicted the future of a Congress of would-be celebrities.

*Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com*