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Kearney pledges cooperation

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Petaluma's newest council member was officially sworn in Monday, filling a seat that has been vacant for two months and bringing what many hope will be a voice of compromise to the council.

Gabe Kearney, a 29-year-old emergency preparedness coordinator for Kaiser Permanente, was surrounded by family and friends as he was sworn in as Petaluma's seventh sitting council member Monday after being appointed in a 4-2 vote on Feb. 28.

In an interview with the Argus-Courier on Monday, Kearney gave his outlook on upcoming votes and city issues, saying cooperation is one of his top goals.

"If we want to see the city move forward, we have to compromise," he said.

Kearney commended the passionate nature of Petaluma politics, but said that sometimes people "let that passion get in the way of what they are looking at," creating deadlock.

But it was passion that got Kearney interested in local politics, he said. He grew up in a "working-class union family," reading about and looking up to politicians like former state assemblyman and San Francisco mayor Willie Brown, Congressman Tip O'Neill and the Kennedy family. The real-life drama of politics always captured his interest. As a teen, he went to City Council meetings after hearing people speak out against domestic partner benefits offered by the city.

"They were just so hate-filled and wrong and off-base," he said about the speakers.

Issues such as these motivated Kearney to run for council in 2000 at age 18, although he finished seventh out of eight candidates. This November, he finished fifth out of nine hopefuls with 12 percent of the vote.

Kearney said that local politics have become much more polarized since he ran in 2000. He also discussed the "us vs. them" mentality that can thwart compromise.

"It's easier for people to digest when it's put into those basic terms," he said about the two perceived factions on the council, adding that the media has contributed to that view. "I struggle with that."

After a two-month deadlock in which a number of preferred candidates — Kearney not included — emerged for both factions of the council, Kearney was nominated by Mike Healy as a "compromise" candidate and was appointed quickly with support from both sides of the council.

A number of "progressive" council members — including Pam Torliatt, David Glass, and Tiffany Renée — endorsed him in the November election, and Kearney said that

many saw him as aligned with those interests. Although he shares many values with the members of the council that favor a slower approach to development, Kearney said that the support he received from the council members seen as more business-oriented indicate his ability to cooperate.

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Kearney also said that some have made too much of his endorsement by progressive council members, maintaining that he ran an independent campaign.

"Did they endorse me? Yes. Did I run my campaign with them? No," he said.

Kearney also gave his stance on a number of issues that will come before the City Council in his two-year term.

Weighing in on planned big-box developments, Kearney said that he has yet to fully review the Lowe's shopping center proposal, and has mixed feelings about the public process surrounding the Target shopping center.

Kearney said that he is not opposed to Target, but would be opposed to Target selling groceries in Petaluma. While he shops at Target, he has bigger concerns about companies like Wal-Mart.

He also acknowledged the need to capture some sales tax dollars spent in other towns.

"That's a lot of money that's leaving town," he said about shoppers driving to Lowe's in Cotati.

Kearney said that his stance on the Lowe's project will be determined after weighing details that come forward in city documents. He also emphasized that retail development should not be the only source of revenue, and that the city should market itself to all business sectors.

"We need a mix of revenue. We need to get retail in, but then we need to look at light manufacturing jobs and fill those (office) vacancies."

Outside of shopping centers, the budget will be a main focus of the council.

"I don't see us focusing on anything much outside the budget," said Kearney, who added that the budget is "not a pretty picture, that's for sure."

Kearney said he would be hesitant to look at further furloughs or cuts to public safety, saying that the money saved would not be worth the reduction in services to residents. One of his top priorities is preserving service levels as much as possible.

But some cost savings could come through consolidating services or positions where possible, he said.

Until his appointment, Kearney served as chair of the Sonoma County Community Development Commission, a county organization focused on affordable housing and other public services to promote economic stability. He also serves as parliamentarian of the California Young Democrats and chair of the Sonoma County Young Democrats

Kearney will represent a number of minorities on the City Council, and he said he hopes to provide representation for those groups. He one of the youngest council members in the city's history, is the first openly gay council member, comes from a Latino heritage, and is the only current council member living on the east side of town.

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