

Bob Moss:

Palo Alto's hell-raiser

Editor's note: This is one in a series of occasional profiles of local people whose efforts have an impact on the community.

by Nick Anderson

Many are the gadflies who pester the Palo Alto City Council, and the Planning Commission, and other city officials about their pet issues. And many are the gadflies who are ignored, while the Council members, or Planning Commissioners, or other officials turn away, shuffle papers or do the crossword puzzle. Bob Moss, perennial denizen of the Council Chambers, is not one of those.

Take election night, for example. The Council's finance committee is meeting in a small conference room to discuss next year's budget. Few are there. Most concerned members of the public are watching the network news; most reporters are out covering campaign parties. Most Palo Altans are tired of hearing about the budget, anyway.

But as usual Moss, a cheery, blustery fellow of 54 years, has some words for the committee. He takes the mike, announces his Barron Park address, and in his familiar high-pitched voice begins to rattle off sage advice on how to run the city more efficiently. Though clearly impatient, committee members listen as Moss goes on:

"As I've said repeatedly before, you need to look at the layers of management in the city...."

"I'm glad to see that after 10 years we're getting serious about a business licence tax."

"I'm harping again on the unnecessary use of money for sidewalk and street repairs...."

"There's a lot of opportunities to save resources by doing work in-house, not through consultants."

Having said his piece, and really having one easy on them this time, he retires.

Moss is no stranger to the Council. In fact, four times he has run for City Council: in 1977, '79, '83 and '87. Each year he has met defeat—by only about 120 votes in 1983, his closest showing. Still the city listens to the vanquished candidate. Why? Pam Marsh, in her third year on the Planning Commission, has a telling anecdote.

A few years ago the Council was considering whether to limit public discussion time and, according to Marsh, Moss saved the day for the public. "What Bob Moss did was go through the Council minutes of the past half-dozen years and calculate the percentage of discussion that was public input and the percentage that was staff input and Council discussion, and present that to the Council," she explains. Having the data before them, the Council shelved the idea. "He is, in fact, the institutional memory of the city," Marsh says.

For the record, Moss says, the public and staff each contributed about one-fourth the volume of debate verbiage, and the Council itself spoke about half the time.

"I'm good at going back to the original sources," Moss says. "You'd be amazed at how many people will just take something because it's been printed and assume that it's correct without ever going back and

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checking the original sources."

Simply put, Moss keeps em honest. If it means reading the fine print in the traffic analysis of an obscure environmental study, fine. If it means launching a doomed candidacy for City Council even though incumbents nearly always win, so be it. For Moss, an arcane zoning change is a fascinating gambit, a challenging target to critique.

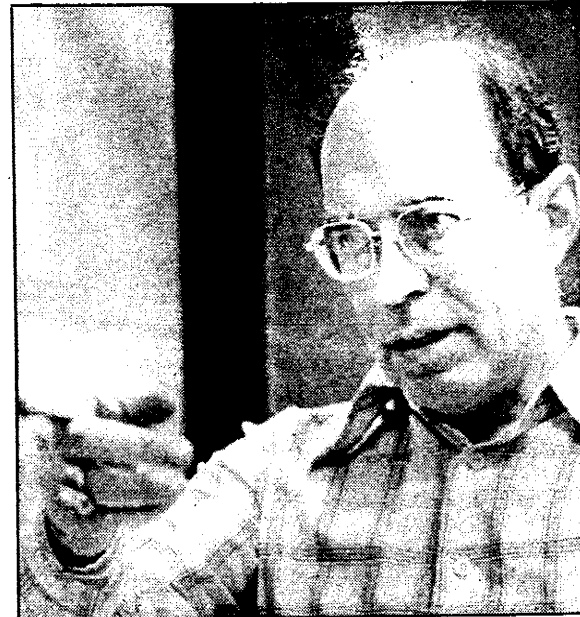
"You know, you go to those meetings and it's like being a fighter pilot," he says. "Hours and hours of boredom interspersed with moments of pure terror."

For Moss, terror is watching an uninformed City Council, overreliant on its staff. "All of the Council members have one major failure, and that is that they depend an awful lot on the staff, excessively,"

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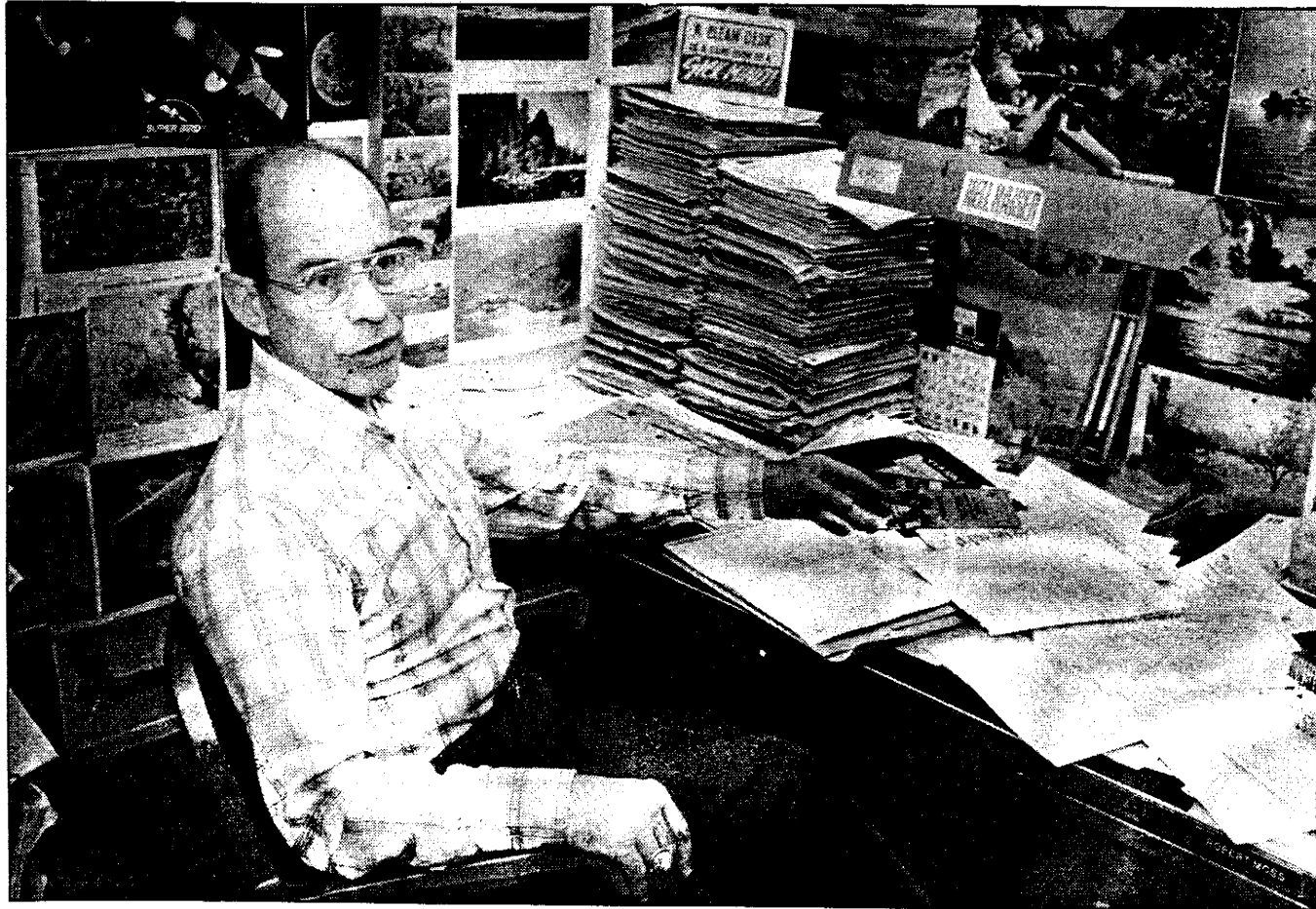


Renee Burgard



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Above, Bob Moss and City Hall don't often see eye-to-eye, but he keeps coming back to contribute his two cents and more to city dialogue. At left, Moss prepares to speak at a recent community meeting organized by the Barron Park Association, which outlined the community's right to know about hazardous materials and emergency planning.



Renee Burgard

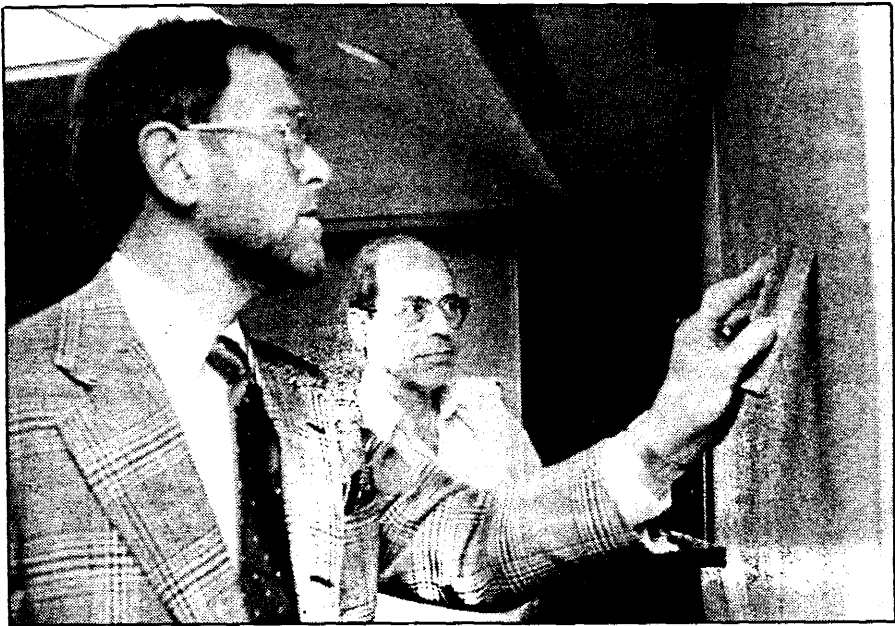
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Moss contends. "They tend not to challenge the staff." Moss has often, at point-blank range in public, accused the staff of lying, or fudging statistics.

Married and with five children, Moss says he spends about 10 to 12 hours a week being a city watchdog. He does some other things, too. He has been a longtime officer in the Barron Park Association, Palo Alto's most active neighborhood group; he's a member of the Cable Co-op board of directors; and an officer in the Civic League, the Council for the Arts in Palo Alto and the Palo Alto School for Jewish Education.

Bob Moss raises a little hell in his office at Ford Aerospace in Palo Alto, where he works on engineering for U.S. space probes.



Renee Burgard

Bob Moss checks some calculations done by City Council member Leland Levy, left, at a recent budget meeting.

Add to that lengthy resume his job as a metallurgical engineer at Ford Aerospace in Palo Alto, where he helps design U.S. space probes, and his editing of a trade journal for material scientists.

City planning, though, is where Moss has made his stamp, in Palo Alto and elsewhere. In fact, you might place him in

the vanguard of California's slow-growth movement, which is starting to sweep the nation. His first taste of civic agitation was a landmark in growth control, he says, when he and a group of neighbors fought a planned state freeway extension in 1967 near his southern California home in West
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Covina. The freeway would have gone straight through downtown and removed dozens of houses and businesses.

"At that time, the plan was that nobody in California should live more than two or three miles from a freeway," Moss recalls.

Moss says he and others dug up evidence showing that the road could have been built a half-mile away, on vacant land, and they persuaded the City Council to take a stand against the state highway department. "Ours was the first town, as far as I know, that actually had a freeway stopped in California," Moss says with satisfaction.

Closer to home, Moss has had a hand in a number of Palo Alto issues, pushing for a special zone for small-scale neighborhood businesses, a citywide 50-foot height limit, and a library and community center at the site of the old Terman School.

What would Moss do if he were king for a day in Palo Alto?

He'd ratify the recent citywide land-use and transportation study, which he says is a reasonable effort to control growth and rationalize the city's traffic and zoning. He'd seek more subsidies for affordable housing in the city, although he calls the "jobs-housing imbalance" an "ineffective buzzword" overused by policy makers.

Then he outlines an intriguing idea to eliminate expensive outside consultants. "I'd hire them permanently and share them with other cities," he says. "It would be a lot cheaper and a lot more efficient." The idea has merit, he insists, but has fallen on

deaf ears in the city.

Most members of the Council, who have heard the Mossian refrain endlessly, probably in their sleep, are careful to avoid criticizing him, though they are sometimes annoyed by his blunderbuss tactics.

Council member Frank Patitucci encounters Moss often in his post as finance committee chairman. "Bob Moss has—in a minority of instances—something useful to say," he says, mincing his words. "Bob is worth listening to. . . . If he focused on fewer issues, with more effectiveness, then I think we would definitely respond."

Council member Larry Klein is more reticent on the subject. "Bob has his views and he expresses them," he says.

Council member Emily Renzel, for one, is a Moss fan. "There have been many times when I've been grateful that Bob was there because no one was saying what was needed to be said."

A Council basher and a Council aspirant at the same time, Moss is diplomatic towards the nine incumbents. "All of them are very intelligent and very hard working," he says, adding that he has no regrets about his lost races. However, he doesn't plan to run again—for the time being.

"Well, the only way I'd do it again would be if people in areas where I historically have not had support (north Palo Alto) came to me and asked me," he says. "Then I would run." Although Moss is content to keep plugging away in his well-carved niche as a counterweight to the Council, he is apparently open to a political revival. ■