

Paul Soglin

His longtime love of Madison shapes the way we live today

By MELANIE CONKLIN

A newcomer to Madison hearing tales of local government could arrive at the mistaken impression that there have been two or more men sharing the surname Soglin who have ruled this city.

Natives even refer to Paul R. Soglin's stints as Madison mayor as Soglin I (1973-1979) and Soglin II (1989-1997).

And an outsider might not guess that the Red Mayor — who rose to power after getting roughed up by cops in the anti-Vietnam War protests while a member of the City Council — is the same guy who narrowly lost a mayoral election in 2003, after being branded the more conservative, establishment candidate.

Soglin's personality and governing style are equally perplexing and eclectic. Wonkish, impassioned, decisive, intellectual, impulsive, pugnacious, impolitic, arrogant, reasoned, charming, feisty — all words that are accurately used to describe Soglin. Oh, and ornery.



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Paul Soglin at a 1967 anti-war rally on the UW-Madison campus.

“Saying Paul has a temper is like saying he has a mustache,” one of his aides once observed. He went on to add: “But he has a sense of purpose. That’s what sets him apart from many other politicians — he sees the big picture.”

And thanks to his big-picture vision and his compelling persona that often captivates even those who dislike him, Madison is what it is today.

Soglin’s mark on this city is clearer than any other mayor to hold the office.

Imagine a Madison without Soglin. That would mean likely erasing the Civic Center-turned-Overture, Monona Terrace, the Capitol Square, Madison Metro bus system and State Street as we know them today.

Soglin’s fingerprints are all over Madison in smaller ways as well. During his first term he was at a meeting where the public works director was showing maps describing the dilemmas presented by the traffic problem on Atwood Avenue — and the lack of an easy solution. After a few moments, Soglin leapt from his chair like an electric current had surged through him, grabbed a pencil and ran toward the map, sketching lines and mumbling.

Stepping back he revealed a wild, innovative design — the current Atwood Avenue. “You can’t do that,” said the stunned director. “Yes I can,” retorted Soglin. “I’m the mayor.”

That’s “Hizzoner da Mare,” as



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the sign on his office door used to read. Hizzoner was also known for getting under the skin of foes — and sometimes even friends. At the grand opening of Monona Terrace, he used his speech as a chance to bash the state for punishing Madison with its formula for distributing state revenues for municipalities. Once, he put up posters around the Square chiding state lawmakers he felt were anti-Madison. And just this year, he incited animosity by insinuating that most elected officials aren’t qualified to hold public office.

Soglin is a Chicago native who came of age and grew up with Madison. He was a radical when the city was a hotbed of anti-war dissent. He expanded the role of

city government as being involved in such social issues as child care at the forefront of national municipal changes in the 1970s. He spent the ’90s seeking solutions to problems such as gangs and sprawl as Madison became an increasingly urban city, facing issues that plague larger cities.

And currently, albeit behind the scenes or in his online blog, he fixates on economic development, in a city struggling to reconcile the possibility of being both progressive and pro-business while remaining at the top of best-city-to-live-in lists.

Soglin’s license plate reads “WI MSN.”

Mayor or not, it’s his town. ■