



## Former Santa Barbara Councilman Randy Rowse Says Closing State Street Was Right Call

*In addressing the Santa Barbara Leadership Team, he also defends the police chief and says he would love to see a focus on the future of Milpas Street*



Nine blocks of Santa Barbara's State Street remain closed to vehicles until at least Dec. 8 to help restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

By Joshua Molina, Noozhawk Staff Writer | [@JECMolina](#)  
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During his nine years on the [Santa Barbara City Council](#) and decades before as the owner of the [Paradise Cafe](#), Randy Rowse was never a big proponent of closing streets. In the face of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), that's all changed.

"I think the city did exactly what they needed to do in this circumstance," Rowse said. "You had to give everybody as much opportunity to get as far out of the way as humanly possible to see if we can stimulate something, anything, to keep going."

Rowse joined former Santa Barbara Mayor Hal Conklin at Wednesday's [Santa Barbara Leadership Team](#) weekly meeting. A few dozen business and community leaders attend the virtual event to listen to Conklin talk with a prominent city official on topics related to downtown. The forum offers Conklin an opportunity to share his rich stories of yesterday and offer suggestions about how Santa Barbara can look to the past to solve some of today's contemporary problems.

Wednesday's discussion was at times a name-dropping fest. In a span of 45 minutes, Rowse dropped the names of former Councilmen Rusty Fairly, Grant House and Bendy White, and the late architect Barry Berkus.

Conklin, who served on the City Council from 1977 to 1995, recalled the now-dissolved Redevelopment Agency as "a great planner of the future and assembler of property and could do master planning around buildings and around blocks." He also said that "policing issues aren't new" and that he and Rowse both had to deal with them.

Conklin asked Rowse about the advice he has for the council in dealing with current calls for a civilian review board or reallocating police resources. Rowse defended Police Chief Lori Luhnnow and urged the council to "recognize what you have." "This particular police chief has not only continued but enhanced the programs, community policing, restorative policing, implicit bias training and all the things that anybody who looked at policing from a progressive, modern standpoint would go, 'Yeah,'" Rowse said. He said he heard the opposite calls while he was in office

"What we heard was, 'Oh, there's just not enough cops, they won't do anything about the homeless, we can't get anybody here fast enough," Rowse said. "I never heard that there were too many cops and we had to take their money away and make less of them happen. That never crossed my desk."

He said Santa Barbara has a community [police department](#) and that "we are not the same as Minneapolis, Chicago, L.A., New York. It's a different animal."

Rowse in his wide-ranging conversation also said he would like to see the city pay more attention to Milpas Street.

"State Street has always had the attention for all the years, but I would love to see a Milpas Design District, where they really had their own kind of community charette about what they would like to see for the future of Milpas," Rowse said. "It is really a vibrant community that is heavy residential, heavy commercial, it's got a lot of traffic, it could probably use a community conversation about where it's going to go."

Rowse and Conklin agreed that the city needs to streamline its permitting and development approval process so that people want to invest in downtown.

"To do a partnership, you have to really have the partners together arm in arm to make something happen," Conklin said. "And to get developers and property owners and [Housing Authority](#) and everyone else, with the city and the plannings to make it happen, you've got to walk arm in arm, hand in hand. That's the only way [Paseo Nuevo](#) ever got built."

The pandemic, of course, has sliced right through the heart of the city's efforts to revitalize downtown. Rowse said the city needs a long-term plan to help State Street reach its full potential.

"The biggest challenge right now is what happens when it is over, and (I) hope to God it's over soon," Rowse said. "How do we put the genie back in the bottle? What do we do with State Street, which obviously is a big question on everybody's mind."

He said the decisions the city and state regulators make regarding things such as noise ordinances and alcoholic beverage licenses should support everyone.

"How do we do it without picking winners and losers?" Rowse said. "That's the hard part about government intervention. You don't want to pick winners and losers. You need to make it so that everyone gets a shot at prospering."

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