



## A Peak Into How the Mayor's Office Runs



He's a delegator, not a micromanager. He prefers handshakes to e-mails. And, when a fork in the Sunroad appeared, he values aides' advice over others. Photo: Sam Hodgson

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**Monday, Sept. 10, 2007** | When the dispute over the height of the [Sunroad Enterprises](#) office building worked its way through City Hall's chain of command in December, Mayor Jerry Sanders was receiving competing advice from within his

On one side, a key political advisor recommended taking a hard-line against the developer, sensing the city could limit the public repercussions over mistakes the mayor's bureaucracy made in handling the project.

On the other, a seasoned development official sought to resolve the clash through compromise, a strategy he said was the best way to protect the city legally and financially.

But after choosing to pursue the latter advice, Sanders embarked on a course that has proved to be a political nightmare for his administration.

"Obviously, it was the wrong decision," Sanders said in a recent interview. "I misread the entire issue."

That debate in the Mayor's Office, where political advisors and bureaucratic managers compete for Sanders' ear, is

illustrated in interview summaries used by the mayor's Office of Ethics & Integrity to compile the report on the [Su](#) matter issued in July.

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several topics and are just as likely to occur around the water cooler as at a conference table.

High-level administrators, brought in by Sanders for their administrative or business acumen, butt heads with the operatives who consult the mayor on the likely consequences of every decision.

Sanders himself prefers delegating work to micromanaging. He also receives information through the filter of his rather than the news media. By abstaining from e-mail, he forces communication to take place over the phone or in face.

While his budgets and financial plans have been dissected publicly, the operation of his office and his deliberation are lesser known sides of Sanders, the first modern San Diego mayor to be in charge of the entire city bureaucracy.

Although it's not highlighted within the [Sunroad](#) report itself, a flavor of the inner workings of Sanders' office can be gleaned from the supporting documents that were used in the crafting of the report.

"If you really want to know something about an organization, watch it in crisis," said Stephen Standifird, a professor at University of San Diego. "See how it responds."

The mayor's handling of [Sunroad](#) provides a case study of Sanders' management style, who was elected in 2005 after flashing his experience as a successful manager of the San Diego Police Department and various nonprofits. His record, he said, showed that he was capable of "turning around troubled organizations" and that he could manage the city of San Diego, reeling from multibillion deficits, back to financial safety.

Management experts say the details show Sanders handles his administration the way many executives do. But they are against judging it.

"The main message is that there's no one best way to do things," said professor Frank Schultz, who teaches course in leadership and strategy at the Haas School of Business at University of California, Berkeley.

The climate for top-level discussions within the Sanders administration appears to accommodate various points of view. It's also designed to move swiftly, experts said. The rapid manner in which aides said they dealt with myriad issues is demonstrative of newer corporations that are designed to breed innovation, such as Google. Those organizations lack the structure and formality ingrained into older companies, such as automakers like General Motors and Ford, they said.

"It's more characteristic of a smaller, younger organization that is trying to be entrepreneurial and innovative," said Schultz. "The way decisions are made in entrepreneurial situations are more flexible, whereas you get older organizations that tend to have more rules and procedures."

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The city of San Diego is hardly a software startup in a makeshift basement office. The municipality has been operating as an incorporated city since 1850. Today, it's comprised of more than 10,000 employees and operating with a \$2.89 billion annual budget. The more formal rules that Schultz speaks of are part of the everyday operation at the lower and middle levels of the city bureaucracy. Sanders has tried to firm up those procedures through a streamlining initiative called "business process reengineering" or BPR.

However, the city's guidelines did not protect against the construction of the [Sunroad](#) tower on Sanders' watch. The investigation by his own Office of Ethics & Integrity found that city officials showed poor judgment and missed warning signs that would have prevented the tower from being caught [Sunroad](#) before it erected a Montgomery Field-area office tower taller than the Federal Aviation Administration allowed.

But while Sanders tries to shore up the city's operations through the ongoing studies involved in the BPR process, meetings involving [Sunroad](#) appeared to be held on the fly.

By not using e-mail, Sanders appears comfortable with limiting his interaction with others and allowing top aides mediate the information he is given.

"The idea there is that he's going to select a really good group of advisors who will then filter the world in a smart ; relevant way got him," said David Schkade, a professor at the University of California, San Diego's Rady School of Management. "With limited time and energy, this is bound to be more relevant for the mayor."

In an interview, Sanders said he prefers not to use e-mail because he believes people use it to say "inappropriate tl because electronic messages can be taken out of context -- especially by reporters who request them. Additionally, "people say things in e-mails they wouldn't say in person."

The absence of that communication means access to Sanders is more difficult. As a result, the advisors who are ne more frequently become more influential, experts said.

The practice is indicative of another strategy of Sanders, which is to allow the experts in his administration to han intricacies of issues. The mayor has instead adopted a penchant for frequently holding press conferences and atter public events to champion the ideas of his administration and other causes outside City Hall that he deems valuab Diego.

Sanders acknowledges that farming work out to aides on his behalf became problematic in at least one point in his of Sunroad. He told reporters in June that a top [airport](#) executive was brought over to the city to help improve the of operations at two municipal airports. But it later surfaced that Sanders had signed and sent a letter in March to Diego County Regional Airport Authority asking to borrow one of its executives, Ted Sexton, to work specifically o [Sunroad](#) dispute.

Sanders said later that he doesn't remember signing the letter and that it was prepared by an aide. The gaffe set of about the mayor's oversight of the issue and whether he was trying to cover up the behind-the-scenes maneuverin Sexton and others to accommodate the [Sunroad](#) building.

And when it came time to chart a strategy on Sunroad, the mayor chose the advice of Jim Waring, the former busi who until recently oversaw the city's land-use departments, over that of politically minded Communications Direc Sainz.

The debate within the Sanders camp also illustrates the internal debate within his office between aides whose valu their political advice and those who are in charge of the day-to-day running of the bureaucracy.

Political hands such as community and legislative services chief Kris Michell and Sainz, two former aides to Mayor Golding in the 1990s, provide Sanders with the strategy in selling his mayoral agenda.

Sainz is portrayed in his interview summary as disagreeing with Waring, a former attorney and real estate develop Waring was part of a team that included several business and military leaders that Sanders recruited into his adm for their knowledge of operating large organizations and improving the efficiency and quality of the city governme

By following the advice Waring, the city allowed [Sunroad](#) to continue work on its building, despite the warnings of agencies and City Attorney Mike Aguirre, and embarked on a path that appeared to appease a campaign supporter company rather than rein in a rogue developer.

"That was their political fear," Waring said in a recent interview. "If you look back on the effort we made to come u solution, it's been mischaracterized as being pro-Sunroad and detrimental to the city."

The path chartered by Waring was more complex than the one proposed by Sainz and more difficult to explain pul Sainz told investigators he wanted to take a hard line against the [Sunroad](#) project, which at 180 feet drew warning FAA and the California Department of Transportation that the Montgomery Field-area tower could be a hazard to aircraft.

Sainz said that once the facts of the [Sunroad](#) dispute were realized, it was "clear in his mind that the city had made number of critical errors with respect to their part in the [Sunroad](#) project and adopted the position that the City should accept and state their own errors and accept that part of the responsibility," according to his interview summary. "I advised that he and Mr. Waring clearly differed in their opinion with respect on how to move forward."

Waring, on the other hand, said he was motivated to solve the problem separate from the lawsuit Aguirre filed against Sunroad. By negotiating a solution that could settle the litigation and please the FAA, the city could've dodged a potential \$40 million liability that the company was seeking in a lawsuit for approving the building at a height that was above FAA's height limit.

The decision to seek a compromise was one Waring fought for until his last day on the job, Aug. 14. Long after Sainz decided to press the developer to lower the building to 160 feet, Waring met with Councilwoman Donna Frye to consider allowing portions of the building to remain above the FAA's threshold. Waring was promptly forced out and a meeting with Frye was revealed.

The move was the last remnant of a strategy that transformed into the first scandal of the Sanders administration, one that Sanders regrets.

"Jim gave me advice all the way through," Sanders said in a recent interview. "I didn't have to take it, but I did."

To management experts apprised of the details, the dynamic in Sanders' office is typical of any business or organization.

"Anytime you have multiple constituencies in your organization, there will inevitably be conflict," Schkade said. "The conflict between operations people versus the people looking at strategy is a very common conflict in an organization."

The divide between advisors of a political ilk and the operational administrators was seen in another corner of the city. Ronne Froman, the former Navy admiral who Sanders tapped as the chief operating officer that would run the day-to-day workings of the city, told investigators that she shied away from working on the [Sunroad](#) issue and was never formally briefed through reports, memos or e-mails.

While assessments of the [Sunroad](#) situation were initially made within the city's development, planning and [airports](#) agencies, which she oversaw, Froman said that once [Sunroad](#) became a "political topic," her involvement became very limited, according to her interview summary. As the second-highest ranking official in city government, Froman's participation in managing the controversy was almost non-existent.

"Ms. Froman again clarified the fact that her responsibilities demand she focus her attentions completely on the day-to-day operations of the city government and not in any way on the political side of any particular issue," according to her interview summary.

Froman left the administration in June, at the same time she was supposed to be conducting the [Sunroad](#) report, and she went off to the city's ethics office.

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