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Borst reflects on service

City-County councilman says he always tried to do the right thing

By Jason Thomas

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Phil Borst was on the political frontlines for much of the development that would one day define Downtown Indianapolis: the RCA Dome, Circle Centre mall and Conseco Fieldhouse.

But helping his constituents has given Borst the most satisfaction during his 28 years as a Marion County City-County councilman.

"The one nice thing about city government is you can make a difference in people's everyday lives," Borst said Monday from the Shelby Street Animal Clinic, which he owns. "There are concrete things that when you get done, you can check off and say, 'I helped them.' "

A politician for half of his 56 years, Borst recently announced that he would not seek re-election to the council.

Although he will stay in office through Dec. 31, Borst was quick to endorse a replacement: longtime friend Jeff Cardwell, president of Cardwell Do-it Best Home Center, and Borst's campaign chairman the past 12 years.

Borst tackled skyline-changing projects early on in his career, beginning with what originally was called the Hoosier Dome, followed by Circle Centre and then by Conseco Fieldhouse.

Hesitant about the cost burden of all three developments, Borst eventually was convinced they would work.

David Frick, deputy mayor under then-mayor William Hudnut, broke the news to Borst over breakfast that the city was going to build a dome stadium.

"I said, 'We're going to do what?'" Borst recalled, smiling.

"Conseco was the same," Borst added. "I didn't jump on that until the Pacers explained why we needed a new arena."

As a member of the metropolitan development committee, Borst enjoyed a front-row seat for the development.

"I think my favorite time was in the 1980s with Hudnut," Borst said. "I think people in Indianapolis finally realized that, 'Whoa, we've got something.' I think we changed people's perception outside of the city for the good."

Borst also is proud of his involvement in addressing public safety issues.

Before consolidation became the buzzword that it is today, with Mayor Bart Peterson's push to merge police and fire protection, Borst and local officials were consolidating services in the 1980s.

First came the consolidation of Marion County's emergency communications -- an eight-year process -- followed by the merger of the city's and county's crime labs. In 2003, Borst

also helped form the Criminal Justice Planning Council, which addresses issues such as jail crowding and prisoner retention.

Politics, though, is a game, and Borst has experienced both wins and losses.

He served as council president from 2002 until Republican rule ended in 2003, at which time he found himself in the minority -- albeit as leader of the council's minority.

He often butted heads with Mayor Bart Peterson, particularly during budget hearings and merger issues.

"We know we have different roles to play," Borst said. "We understand there are ways to go about it, too. I disagree with the idea, not the person."

Borst's gentlemanly attitude has played well on Indianapolis' Southside.

"Nobody is pretending to be anything they're not," he said of Perry Township. "I've always kidded people that there's probably about as much money down here as there is in Washington Township (on the Northside). It's just that it doesn't get shown down here."

Like his constituents, Borst tried to accomplish an honest political life.

"I hope that I've always kept my word, and I've tried to do the right thing for the right reason," he said. "I'm sure I've strayed from that second one, but the first one, I think I've done pretty well. . . . For the most part, I've tried to do the right things for the right reason."