

Calendar

Who's in Charge?

Strong-Mayor Forum

As part of its regular series of forums on local issues, the San Diego Action Network will host a Friday-night debate about the proposed restructuring of the city's government. On Election Day in November, residents will be asked to vote for or against the so-called strong-mayor form of government. It would replace the current council-manager system, which has been in effect in San Diego since 1931. George Mitrovich or his representative will speak in favor of the change; Peter DiRenza will speak against it.

Last week, Mitrovich, founder of the City Club of San Diego and co-chairman of the San Diego Good

Government Association, was asked if he could give examples of cities where the strong-mayor form of city government was working well. "There are a lot of examples," he said, "but I would say that Denver is the best example. I think Denver is the most progressive city in America." The San Diego native added that he was in a

position to make such a judgment because for twenty years he has been president of the Denver Forum (see www.thedenverforum.com).

To put it simply, the strong-mayor form of government would take power from the city manager and give it to the mayor. If that were accomplished, said Mitrovich, the person who "really runs the city" would be elected, not appointed. "The truth is, most people don't understand that the mayor doesn't run the city," he said. "I had a conversation with a police officer the other day — a very smart, knowledgeable guy; he had not clearly understood the distinction. A brother of mine hadn't really understood it either."

Was he saying that the current form of city government in San Diego was not democratic? "From my perspective, no, it's not. Have you ever heard of the Phoenix 40? They're businesspeople who didn't like the way their city [which has a council-manager system] was functioning. So they came together and decided to figure out how to run Phoenix. And I would say the evidence is that they did a pretty good job, at least if you're

happy having 40 unelected people making most of the decisions about your city's future. You don't do that in a democratic society."

Mitrovich was asked why he thought his opponents liked the status quo. "Look," he said, "I'm not running for office. For me, this is truly a philosophical-political issue. It's about the essence of what a democratic society is." But, he added, for a very long time there has been "general frustration with the fact that there are no clear lines of authority. If the constitutional authority to run the city is given to the mayor and an independent legislative body — the council — it's much easier to figure out where

blame needs to be assigned, when that situation arises."

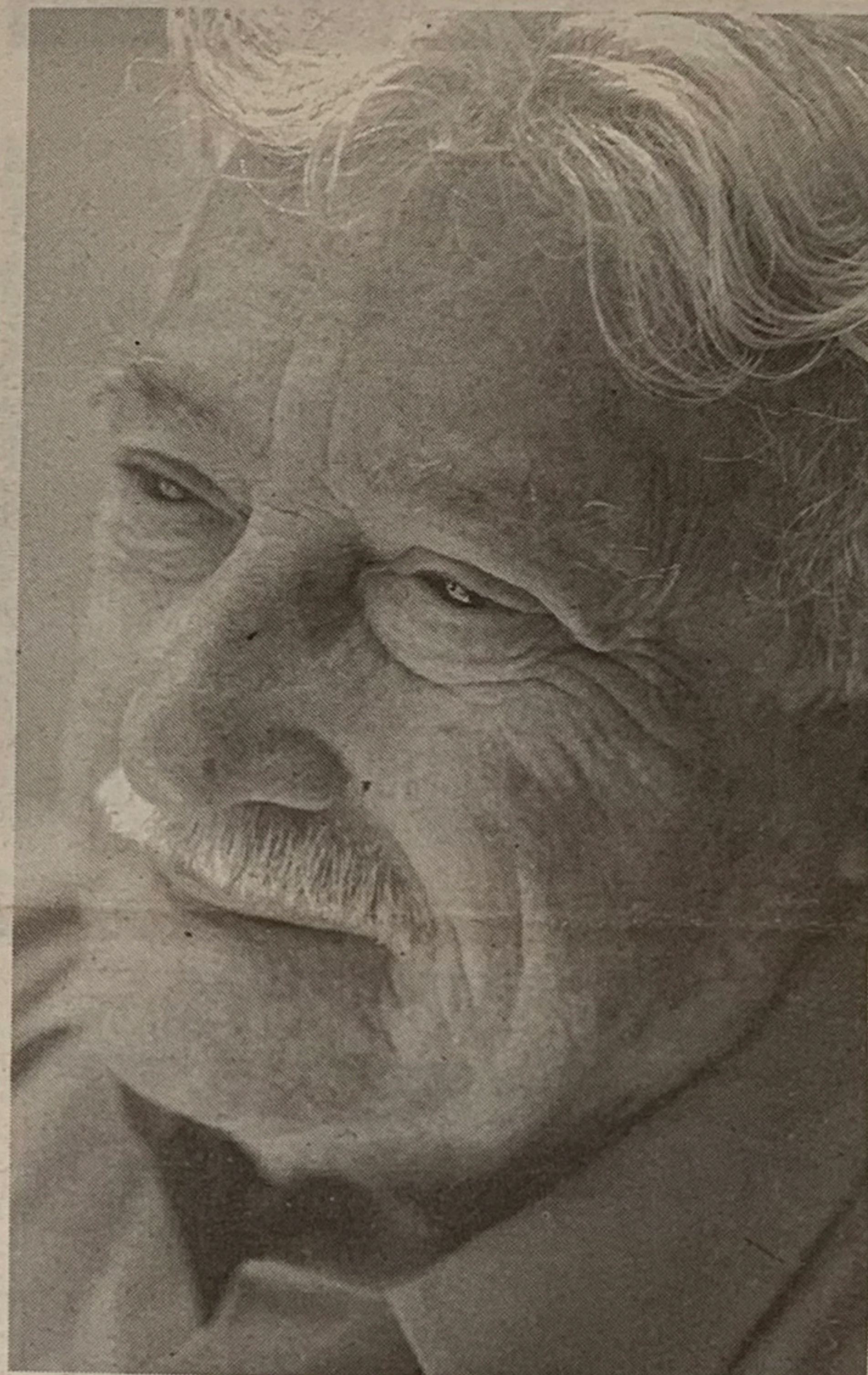
Like Mitrovich, Peter DiRenza gave a preview of his central argument last week. The retired military counterintelligence officer and former San Diego County Grand Jury foreman said he is against the restructuring because it would give the mayor too much power without enough oversight. "We have a mayor that's been in office for four years and has not been able to correct problems. We had a mayor before him that did basically the same things."

So why does he think the opposition wants this new form of government? "They want it because they'll have more access to Dick Murphy."

DiRenza was told that the opposition on Friday night will argue that this new form of government would make people in city government more accountable. "That's a laugh. This proposed form of government would open the door to more corruption. People wouldn't have to go through the entire city council of nine, including Murphy, anymore. They'd just have to go to Murphy's front door and stand in line."

Both Mitrovich and DiRenza were asked how much personality has to do with a successful government of any kind. "Personality can be a very big factor," said Mitrovich. "The personalities are big, no question. Rudy Giuliani comes to mind. Willie Brown comes to mind. And Jerry Brown. But my position on this issue remains unchanged, which is that the fundamental issue is the structure of government, not the person."

DiRenza's answer was this: "I'm not talking about personality. I'm talking about character, competence, efficiency, people being too close to developers and business and big money people."



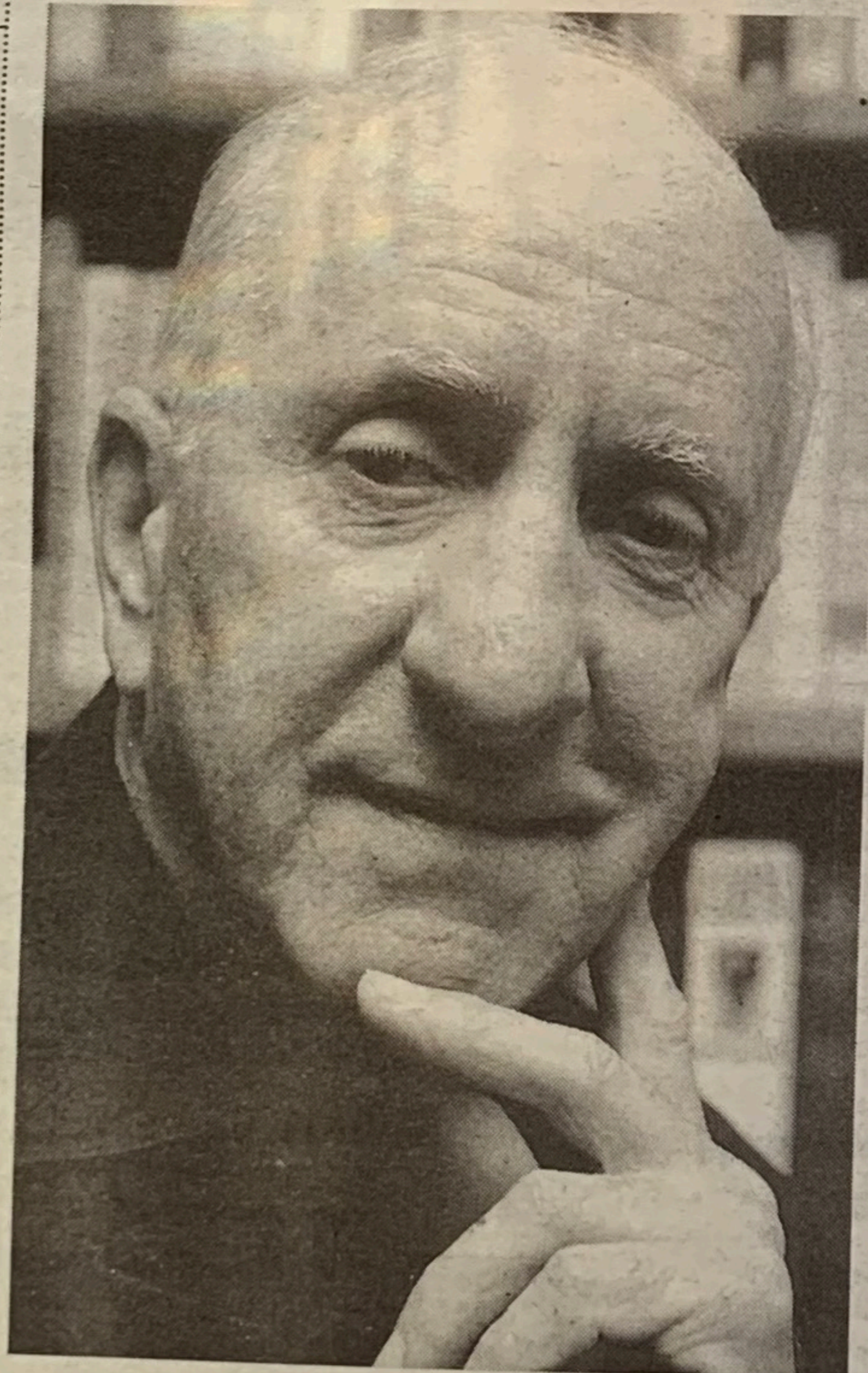
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ALLEN

Peter DiRenza

So he'd prefer a new mayor to a new form of government? "Yes, I would, but I don't think that's going to happen. The two people up for election, Murphy and [County Supervisor Ron] Roberts, are not my ideal people, and with that type of a situation, I would vote for Murphy over Roberts. But I would not vote for a strong-mayor form of government under either of them." Would he vote for it under anybody? "It would depend on the individual," said DiRenza.

— Jeanne Schinto

Forum on the Strong-Mayor Form of Government Proposal
Friday, July 30
7:00 to 9:00 p.m.
Joyce Beers Community Center
Vermont Street north of
University Avenue between Terra
and Aladdin restaurants in the
Uptown District mall
Hillcrest
Free
Info: 619-688-1886



George Mitrovich

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