



An IB interview with Jan Cox Golovich

By Sue Sumner-Moore

Jan Cox Golovich was sitting in a Paris café when she decided to quit her job and do something else. "I loved the lifestyle. They had Wi-Fi and people were sitting there with their laptops, working. So I was sitting outside and looking at the street, and I just decided I wasn't going to go back to teaching." That was in 2004. Two years later, she opened Café Voltaire to bring a bit of Parisian lifestyle to Benicia. From the beginning, the community activist and former city councilwoman wanted to create a place where people could come together to exchange ideas and make connections with one another. She began planning her new business a year ago this month, and the café became Benicia's fourth independent coffee house when it opened Aug. 13, 2006. In addition to drinks, Café Voltaire serves an assortment of baked goods and soup every day, plus offers lunch Tuesday through Thursday from Delicious Delivery on a pre-order basis. Choices range from sandwiches and salads to appetizer sampler plates and must be ordered by 1 p.m. on the day of delivery. Jan, 51, also serves on the boards of the Affordable Housing Affiliation and Benicia Community Arts, and she is an active member of the Benicia League of Women Voters. She chaired the League's recent study of East Second Street, which focused on the proposed Seeno project. She and her husband, carpenter Stan Golovich, are the parents of Vanessa, 25, and Vienna, 23. They have lived in Benicia 23 years. Jan went ahead with her business plans even after learning Starbucks would open across First Street from her location in the Tannery.

JB What's it like to run an independent coffee house across the street from Starbucks?

I hope they'll be OK. Really, I do. They have so much more of a faux atmosphere. It's like "Cheers" in here – everybody knows everybody, and everybody welcomes everybody. I'm trying to do something different, trying to offer something more. There's been a definite backlash, especially now that people know there are going to be five Starbucks in town.

JB So what does Café Voltaire offer that differs from the chains?

We serve organic, fair-trade coffee and tea. It's very important to have fair-trade products because of the economic connections between what we buy and how people are treated. We can use our economic power to make people's lives better, to support businesses that treat people fairly. We also offer a variety of baked goods and I try to buy my products locally. It's important for all of us to support local businesses because money is recycled

locally and not siphoned off to corporations. When you buy from each other in your own town, it's exponentially beneficial to the entire community.

We also have French lessons on Thursday evenings, conversational Spanish on Mondays, poetry night the second Tuesday of every month, movies with a French theme on Fridays once a month and documentaries on the weekends. One of the most recent was "An Inconvenient Truth." After watching that, it's obvious that we have to do something about global warming and we have to do something soon. I'm trying to start a green project in town. (Editor's note: Jan hosted the first meeting for Benicia Inconvenient Group on Jan. 27 at the café.)

JB Did you realize you'd be putting your community organization skills to use in your business?

That was the whole point of this café! Prior to the American Revolution, people would come to public places and conduct their business. Now, people meet here,

they exchange business cards and things start to happen. We can provide a source of information, a source of connection. I've always been concerned about the lack of places to meet in town. When I thought about opening up a business, I knew I wanted to incorporate community activism.

JB How has business been your first five months?

It's steadily increasing as people find out about it and as we get better at what we do. You should have seen us the first couple of days! Now, we're much more organized and much more relaxed.

JB You chaired a study that focused on the proposed Seeno project, which is coming up for environmental review this month. What does the League of Women Voters study recommend?

The most important recommendations are that the city not allow bulldozers to just flatten the hills and that the city be very sensitive to the types of business that go out there. Of course, there will have to be some grading, but they shouldn't level the hills. And with the businesses, the city should make sure that the types of businesses that go in there don't hurt downtown. Downtown entrepreneurs are hard-working people. The city can make sure it doesn't pull the rug out from under them.

JB What do Benicians need to know about the Seeno project?

They need to know that it's going to make a huge impact on our town. It's going to change the circulation – the traffic patterns are going to be hugely different. We're going to have people commuting

in, which is a huge waste of resources. And you'll see a whole bunch of fast-food places. It's going to look like Cordelia. We could get a Wal-Mart, and that would affect downtown. People need to know that this project is going to impact your personal life.

People also need to know that the developer has a poor track record. It's well-documented; and when we did the study, we had a huge pile of clippings about lawsuits, lots of lawsuits, against this developer. They've never built an industrial park. They've built homes in Contra Costa County. They also interfere with city government. They poured a lot of money into our last election and we didn't find out about it until after the election.

JB What issues have you championed in the past?

When I started off, my interest was in Sky Valley. I was in college in Davis and for my local government class I had to go to a City Council meeting. People were saying that Benicia had to develop Sky Valley or else Vallejo or Fairfield would steal that land from us. I went to my professor and asked him if they could say that, and was it true. He told me they can say it as long as no one challenges them. I learned that statement just wasn't true and I challenged that statement.

JB Who inspires you?

When I started working on opening the café and I'd get discouraged, I'd look at this poster of Queen Elizabeth I, and I'd think, "She could run a whole country and I can't even open a café. If she could do that, I could open up a café, for crying out loud." **IB**

Futuristic Toll Plaza

The new bridge's futuristic toll plaza on Morocco Hill will replace nine 45-year-old toll booths with 17 state-of-the-art booths, all equipped with FasTrak to breeze traffic onto the span. The two left hand booths are for carpool bypass. The metallic copper and green plaza on the Martinez side of the Strait will eliminate any bottleneck on the bridge and provide fresh air for toll takers and a viewpoint of Mt. Diablo for tourists. The plaza is equipped with removable booths to become the first open road tolling facility in Northern California. **IB**

CITYFACT

By Anne Cardwell

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