

Photo by Heather Young

Atascadero's new mayor, George Luna, sits beside wife Ursula. Luna served on the city council for more than 15 years before being elected Mayor on Dec. 11.

# A new mayor in town

## Long time council member takes the reins in Atascadero

By Heather Young  
STAFF WRITER/PHOTOGRAPHER

ATASCADERO NEWS

**M**any know George Luna as an Atascadero City Councilperson who, more times than not, was on the minority end of a 4-1 vote on any given subject. Others know him as a Cal Poly Math professor, and yet others know him as an activist.

Luna was born and raised in San Diego and, except for a few short trips into Mexico, did not leave his hometown until he was 17-years-old when he traveled to play in a football game in Arizona, he remembers. When he was young he aspired to be a professional athlete, and he was all-city in both football and baseball. He had to choose between trying

out for the Hollywood Stars, a minor-league Baseball team in Los Angeles that no longer exists, and getting an education.

"I always wanted to be a professional athlete. Then I fell in love with mathematics and music," he said. "I was always the kind of kid they'd give a football or a glove or something like that instead of a guitar. I was a big kid."

Luna chose to attend the University of Oregon in Eugene as a linebacker on a scholarship. He stayed there for two years until he transferred to UC Santa Barbara and got a bachelor's degree in math. After graduation he worked for the Naval Ordnance Laboratory in Northern Corona (Nor Co) for six months as a mathematician figuring out how many missiles would work if the country went to war.

He worked there until he saved enough money to travel



around Europe for a full year. His intent was to visit almost every music festival there. He said he went to quite a few festivals, including concerts in London, Vienna, and Germany.

For the most part, he stayed in German-speaking counties because he studied German in college. The 21 year-old Luna bought a 1952 motorcycle and used it to travel through the European countryside. He traveled alone, but said he met a lot of people. He stayed with a German family for the winter of 1962-63.

"I'm glad I did it while I was young," Luna said. "Europe is a wonderful place because you can cross a border and it's an entirely different culture. My favorite city was [probably] Florence."

He only came back to the U.S. because the draft board told him to. He did not end up getting drafted for the Vietnam War; they only wanted him to come back for the classification.

When he returned from Europe, he entered UCLA where he earned a master of arts in math. He taught at Fort Lewis in Durango, Colorado for four years, where he met his wife, Ursula. They married in Las Vegas 36 years ago, before moving to Seattle in 1969. Their son was born the same year that they moved to Washington, he said. Luna finished his doctorate studies in math from the University of Washington four years later. He taught at Cal Poly in Pomona for one year, followed by the University of San Diego.

Then the Lunas moved to the Central Coast in 1977 when he began teaching at the San Luis Obispo campus of Cal Poly. He and Ursula moved from Los Osos to their newly-built home in the Atascadero (westside) hillside in the early '80s. They discovered the property in 1979 while touring the county by motorcycle.

The creeks and open space, which they loved so much, brought them to Atascadero.

Ursula became involved in local activism first because someone had removed eight mature oaks from the property neighboring theirs. Ursula went to city hall about it and from there got involved with the planning commission as well as a local tree committee, which was later abolished because it was too controversial. She later became involved with the Atascadero Land Preservation Society (ALPS) and the Atascadero Native Tree Association (ANTA), both formed in the late '80s. Today she is an ALPS board member and both Ursula and George are life members of ANTA.

In 1988 Luna was appointed to the city's seven-member planning commission and served a four-year term there. He first ran for council in 1990, but lost by 64 votes. He ran again in 1992 and won. He ran for reelection in 1996 and 2000 where he was the top vote getter both times.

"I saw that at both the planning commission level and at the council level that some strong leadership was really necessary to preserve the things that brought me to Atascadero, that's the trees, the urban forest, the open space and protecting the trees. Atascadero once had a 50-foot setback on the creeks. We lost that in the mid-'80s in a planning commission

meeting. Now there is a 35-foot set back," he said.

Luna served as a councilperson for 11 years before he finally got selected as mayor by his fellow councilmembers earlier this month.

His first endeavor as mayor was to implement regular office hours, though he is not the first mayor to have hours open to the public (Marjorie Mackey was the first). Serving office hours is not a requirement of the mayor. He will be in his office, Room 209 of the City Administration Building, every Wednesday including Christmas Eve and New Years Eve, 2-4 p.m. Anyone wishing to talk to the mayor can stop by anytime during those hours.

He hopes to expand his office hours by there being enough people wanting to talk to their mayor. For those who want to speak to him, but are unable to stop by during those hours, appointments can be made by calling 466-2946.

"It feels, actually, good," Luna said on finally becoming mayor. "I was the top vote getter in the last two elections, so there were a lot of people who supported me who would like to see me as mayor and it finally happened."

Luna became mayor because the city council adopted a new policy on how it fills the mayor's post. The mayor is now selected based on seniority rather than the five-person council making the decision. The council found it repeatedly came to a grid-lock due to three out of five members ran for the may-orship.

"I think it's a fair system. In fact, that would be one of the accomplishments we've done over the last year," Luna said. While Luna thinks the new system of deciding who will fulfill the mayorship is fair, former Mayor Ray Johnson disagrees, based on how it may turn out in the future.

"The mayor has an important role of running council meetings. Not everyone can run meetings well," Johnson said. "George will have no problem doing that. There'll be a time when that will be a problem."

As a council member and mayor, Luna has many issues and plans for the upcoming year and future of Atascadero. One issue is revitalizing the downtown. He wants the center of the city, the area around city hall, to be the life of Atascadero as the original general plan called for. The plan was changed and El Camino Real became the center of business. Luna said that Atascadero is not a walker-friendly town and he hopes the council can draw complimentary, but not redundant businesses, to the center of the community.

"I think with the opening with the Carlton (Hotel) we're actually going to get some very fine restaurants," he said. "One of the important things, I think, is to get an entertainment center in the downtown to get people to go down there and circulate. It's supposed to be a pedestrian-orientated downtown. So if we can get some complimentary kinds of stores, that could get people walking around."

Another goal of the new mayor is cleaning up the junkyard on Via Avenue and turning it into an industrial park.

"Some people would describe it as a toxic waste," he said.

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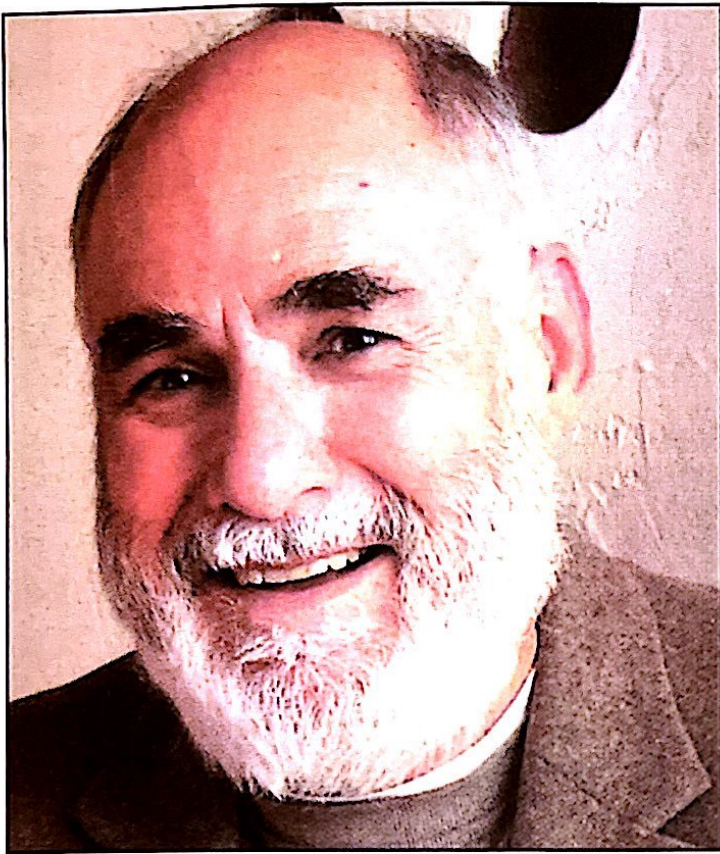


Photo by Heather Young

Luna continues to work toward fulfilling campaign promises he made three years ago.

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"It's time to clean that up. There have been complaints in the past that Atascadero doesn't have enough industrial land and one of the reasons why is because of the poor utilization of its industrial land," Luna said.

He feels his biggest struggle as mayor will be the second-unit issue. A second unit is a smaller, self-contained building on a lot with another residence. Many people build second units for elderly parents to live in. He said there is some support for second units throughout the city, but it has the potential to double the density of the community. The elements to consider, he said, are how it's going to impact the traffic and how quickly emergency vehicles will be able to respond with the added traffic and density.

Luna's top priorities, as found on the internet from the 2000 City Council election include: "Continue to support SMART growth that brings good jobs, protects property values, and does not come at the expense of the environment. Follow through on the downtown revitalization plan and Main Street program. And bring integrity and trust to our government by serving the interests of all the citizens of Atascadero, not the interests of land speculators."

Luna is continually working towards the campaign promises he ran on three years ago. The ideals he stated are ideals that anyone who has worked with him can see are evident in the work he does.

"In all opposition, he was a gentleman, and I appreciate that about George," Johnson said.

In addition to being mayor and serving on the city council, Luna is currently active in the California Coastal Commission as an alternate, SLO Integrated Waste Management Authority, the Atascadero City Finance Committee, ANTA, the Atascadero Historical Society, and now he teaches one quarter per year at Cal Poly. Luna said he didn't know how he balanced it all when he was teaching full-time at Cal Poly, which meant three four-hour classes each quarter plus office hours.

"It was very, very difficult," Luna said. "Turn off the TV, it saves an enormous amount of time."

He said he was not the first professor to serve on Atascadero's city council, the first was Alden Shiers.

Although to some the title of "mayor" may make him appear to be out of reach and aloof to the average citizen, Luna assures people that isn't the case.

He holds out hopes that one day there may be peace on earth. His present plans call for some traveling in his retirement. He hopes to go back to Europe, but this time with his wife and son. He also has plans to find out the mysteries of his family by researching his genealogy in Salt Lake City. It's obvious he cares, about his own family, his community and the world.

It's what Atascadero's new mayor is all about. Nothing too complicated there. For those who haven't taken the time to get to know him, they are often surprised at the quick smile lying just below the surface of Mayor Luna.

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