

Stu Rasmussen (1948-)

In a state heralded for its tolerance, Stu Rasmussen stands out. The charismatic city council member of Silverton—serving terms in 1984-1996 and 2004-2008—was the first openly transgender mayor elected in the United States. He once described himself as “a dude, a heterosexual man who appears to be female.”

In the mostly conservative, agricultural community of 9,600 people guided by a strong mayor-city council government, Rasmussen—with his flaming red hair, breast implants, stylish dresses, and high heels—might seem out of place. But he persuaded voters to elect him several times, primarily because of his progressive thinking, fiscal conservatism, and leadership style. During council meetings and for functions as mayor, he usually dresses conservatively and takes a no-nonsense approach to running the city.

Rasmussen, a Silverton native, is easily the most recognized person in the community, in great part because he owns and runs the historic Palace Theater, located in the heart of the town’s Commercial National Historic District. As a teenager in the 1960s, he sold tickets, ran the concession stand, and operated the projector for his father, Albert. When he was in his twenties, Rasmussen managed the seventy-five-year-old theater and took over operations in 1984, the same year he was elected to city council.

"My dad was manager when I was born and as far back as I can remember it's been a part of my life," Rasmussen said during an interview. "I'm now disciplining the kids and grandkids of kids I tossed out when I started." Most evenings, Rasmussen greets theater patrons at the door or from behind the concession stand.

As mayor, Rasmussen has been instrumental in developing a community center, expanding the public library and senior center, rejuvenating local business, and increasing tourist trade. Although he has been a cross-dresser for his entire life, he decided to risk his political career in 1986 by openly revealing his “feminine other self,” as he described it. He announced that he was a transgender and ran for re-election to the city council—this time in a dress and high heels. The people in the small community re-elected him convincingly, he said, because, “those who know me judge me by how I govern the city and run my theater, than by the way I look.”

In 2008, Rasmussen ran for mayor on a platform of controlling growth and addressing critical public safety issues. In the election, he received a 13 percent majority over an eight-term incumbent. During his tenure in government, he resisted efforts to add subdivisions and expand the city boundaries, supported community policing, and strongly marketed Silverton as community of antique shops, small family-owned businesses, and open-minded attitudes.

Rasmussen openly discusses his lifestyle, but he prefers to talk about city goals, land-use issues, revitalizing the business district, and balancing property taxes. He is single, lives in Silverton with Victoria Sage, his girlfriend of thirty-five years, and enjoys a family of house cats.

Written by [Joe Fitzgibbon](#)

Further Reading:

Stu Rasmussen for Mayor of Silverton. <http://www.sturasmussen.com/>?

Wilson, Kimberly A. C. "Silverton gives its vote to transgendered mayor." *Oregonian*, Nov. 7, 2008. http://blog.oregonlive.com/multimedia/2008/11/post_9.html.

Wilson, Kimberly A. C. "Silverton rebuffs protest of transgender mayor-elect." *Oregonian*, Nov. 24, 2008. http://www.oregonlive.com/news/index.ssf/2008/11/silverton_rebuffs_protest_of_t.html.

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