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GOVERNMENT

Elections director John Arntz's term not renewed by Elections Commission



by **JOE ESKENAZI**
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By a vote of 4-2 after a lengthy Wednesday closed-session meeting, the commission opted to not re-up Arntz for the position he has held since 2002. The position will come open in May, 2023.

The vote to not renew Arntz's five-year term came not quite eight days after the city's fourth election in the calendar year, and fifth election in one year's time.

In 2021, the **Elections Commission wrote** to the mayor that "San Francisco runs one of the best elections in the country and we believe this transparent process has allowed us to continue to improve our elections." **In 2020, it wrote** Arntz a commendation "for his incredible leadership ... The Department successfully ran two elections this year while facing significant challenges, including national threats to election security, mandatory vote-by-mail operations to all registered voters, anticipated increase in voter participation, budget cuts, and the COVID-19 pandemic."

The reaction across the city's political spectrum has been one of disbelief — and anger.

"I think some folks have forgotten the history of this department," said City Attorney David Chiu. "Before Director Arntz, we had five directors in as many years, ballot boxes floating in the bay and an intense lack of confidence in city elections. Many of us are mystified."

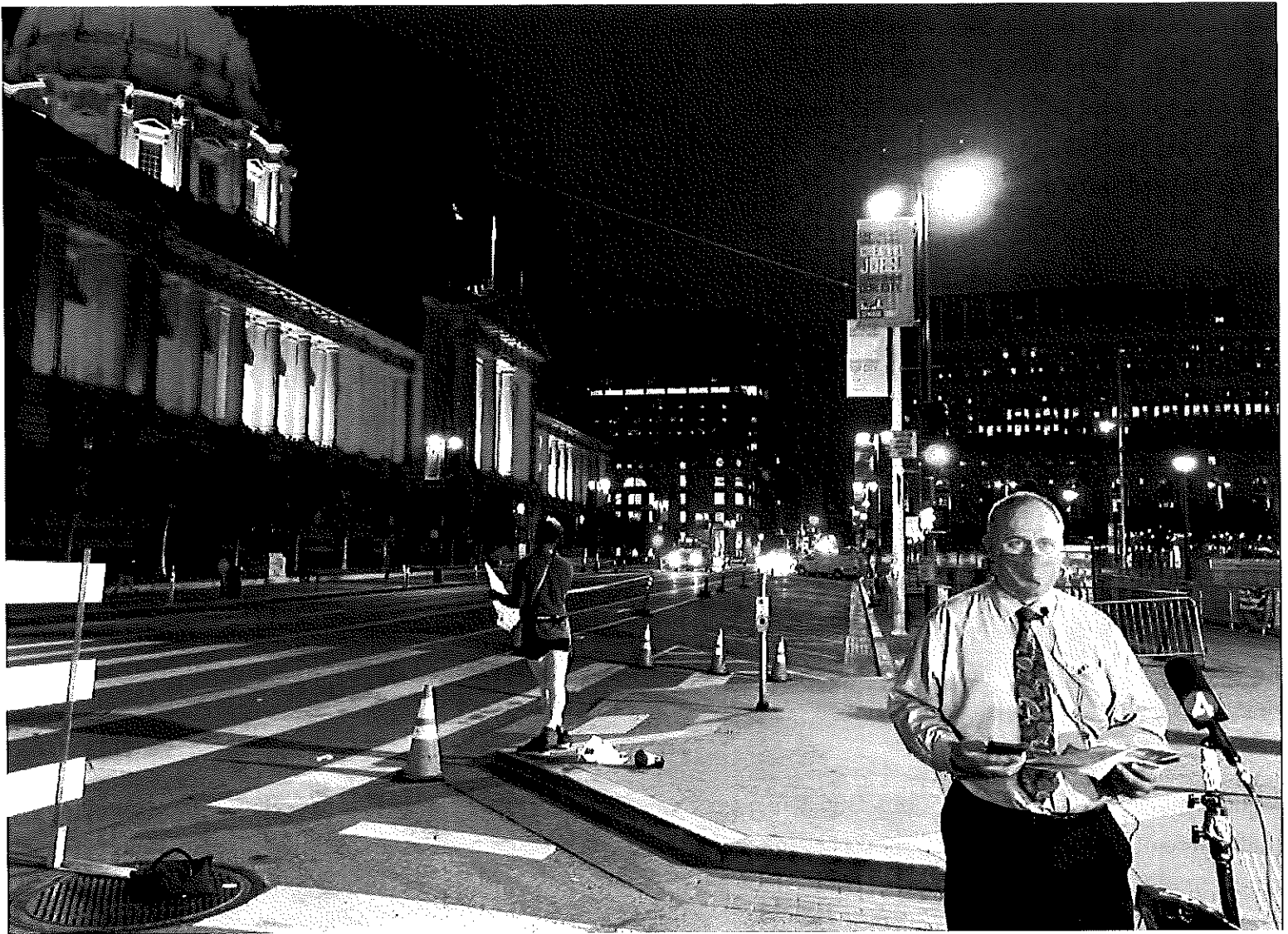
Supervisor Aaron Peskin added, "This is commission malfeasance. It almost becomes a justification for Mayor Breed to have **letters of resignation** from people who go do things that are completely insane."

Mayor London Breed did not go there, but did say that the Elections Commission's move was ill-advised.

"John Arntz has served San Francisco with integrity, professionalism and has stayed completely independent. He's remained impartial and has avoided getting caught up in the web of City politics, which is what we are seeing now as a result of this unnecessary vote," she wrote.

"Over the last year, John successfully ran four elections, while navigating a pandemic that thwarted San Francisco into crisis response — all without a single issue. Rather than working on key issues to recover and rebuild our City, this is a good example of unfair politicization of a key part of our government that is working well for the voters of this city."

Elections Commissioner Cynthia Dai, who voted to not renew Arntz's contract, said there was no performance-based reason for the commission's decision. She did not dispute that San Francisco has run **free** fair and functional elections for 20 years. Rather, she says, it was time to open up this position to a more



Elections boss John Arntz shows his cards tonight at City Hall. Early results are in. Photo by Annika Hom, November, 2020.

All 12 of the managers in Arntz's department, without his knowledge, wrote a letter to the commission ahead of time, **pleading with them** to re-appoint him. Their input was disregarded and, during Wednesday's meeting, their letter does not appear to have been acknowledged.

The rationale offered by the commission struck Elections staffers as bizarre.

"This all happened eight days after the Nov. 8 election," said deputy elections director Nataliya Kuzina. "They discarded the opinion of the very same people who have been conducting city elections, and discarded the director with a proven record to do his job. He has extensive election experience and knowledge. People whom he manages are supportive of Director Arntz. So, those are the facts in front of us. Considering all these facts, this decision seems to have been driven by something else."



John Arntz in 2018. Photo by Mallory Newman.

Peskin contrasted the “Wild West” behavior and distrust of the Elections Department two decades ago with the “smooth-running machine” under Arntz. In a nation where increasing portions of the populace voice ill-founded concerns about the sanctity of elections, no serious people in San Francisco are doing that.

“This is demoralizing and humiliating to John, and to the staff of the department,” Peskin said. “Rarely do you see employees of a department come together to champion their boss, and that is the case here.”

Dai said the Elections Commission would be looking to the mayor and Board of Supervisors for funds with which to conduct a search for Arntz’s potential replacement.

Peskin’s rejoinder: Good luck with that.