

PENINSULA

Silicon Valley's Watchdog Takes On Global Mission

He advocates cleaner chip-making

Ted Smith of San Jose is not ungrateful for the wonders that Silicon Valley's electronics industry has bestowed on the nation and the rest of the world.

"Innovation is the life's blood of the industry and it's given us a lot of benefits," says Smith, 53, founder and executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition. "But innovation is a two-edged sword. There is a tremendous downside because of the time lag in catching up with the consequences."

For 16 years, Smith has been the region's sharpest voice in pressing semiconductor companies to be accountable for preventing whatever damage the many chemicals used in their manufacturing processes may inflict on people and the environment.

The heartland of high tech could have just as well been named "Arsenic Valley" or "Gallium Arsenide Gulch," Smith says, because of the heavy use of those toxic substances in the manufacture of computer chips, "but Silicon Valley has a nicer PR image."

Smith, a former labor lawyer and onetime Vista worker with the poor, is best known for raising public awareness in the mid-1980s of the widespread leakage of toxic chemicals out of underground tanks and into the region's deep aquifer, threatening drinking water sources.

The work of Smith and his then-fledgling coalition eventually earned Santa Clara County the troubling distinction of having more Superfund cleanup sites on the Environmental Protection Agency's list than any other county in the nation.

Now the 10,000-member coalition has stepped up global efforts to push for cleaner, safer conditions overseas where chip companies have increasingly migrated to take advantage of cheaper labor and other costs.

ALONG THE EL CAMINO

Bill Workman

While Smith still turns up regularly at local government and industry conferences when toxics issues are on the agenda, as often as not he's traveling to another spot on the planet to try to prevent some new environmental disaster.

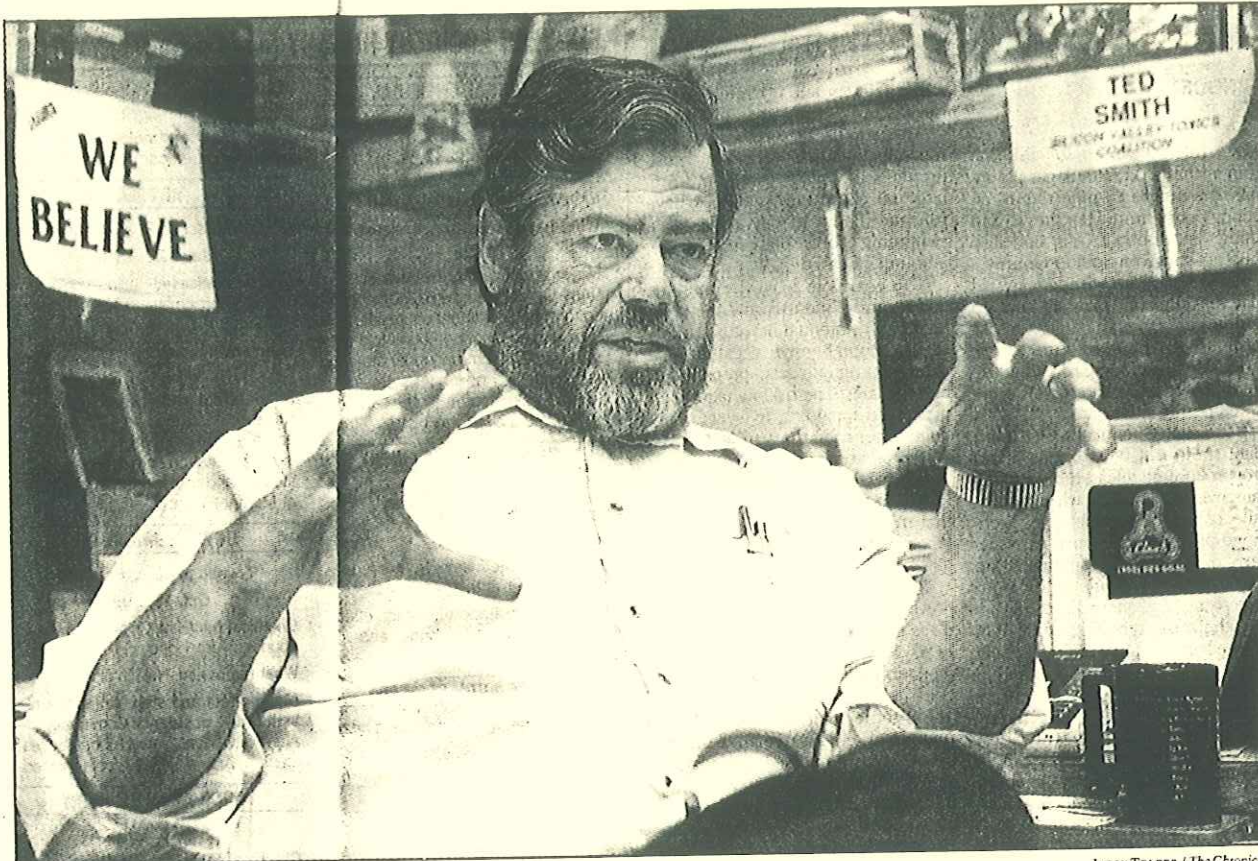
Two weeks ago, he and his wife, Amanda Hawes, an occupational safety and health lawyer, met in Glasgow, Scotland, with other environmentalists, trade union and political leaders, health professionals and women employees at National Semiconductor's Scotland plants to plot strategies for dealing with the impact of chip-making on that country.

The workers have complained of miscarriages, cancers and respiratory problems they suspect are linked to chip-making. The Glasgow conference, deliberately held on the eve of the Scottish national elections to broaden its impact, was widely covered by the British media.

"There's already a pretty high level of awareness of the issues there," said Smith, whose group's Web page (www.svtc.org) displays a world map showing where computer giants have set up overseas.

This week, Smith was off to Amsterdam to help European environmentalists push a law to ban certain hazardous materials in computers, TVs, stereos and VCRs by the year 2004, and to require electronics makers and distributors to take back no longer usable consumer products for recycling.

"There is no way in this country that we have of dealing with disposal of electronic junk," says Smith.



JERRY TELFER / The Chronicle

Ted Smith, executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, talked about the group's battle against pollution from computer manufacturers.

"We don't want it burning in landfill dumps — it's nasty stuff that gives off toxic fumes."

The proposed legislation, expected to be acted on later this year by the European Union, would also require American exporters to comply with a cleaner product design requirement.

Smith is gearing up, through the toxic coalition's International Campaign for Responsible Technology, to do battle with the American Electronics Association, the nation's largest trade association of electronics companies, over the proposed legislation.

The association has joined with the U.S. Trade Representative's office to oppose the European plan, contending it would undermine World Trade Organization rules.

Smith predicts the dispute is likely to confront Vice President Al Gore with a tough choice in his

presidential election campaign.

"We're going to try to keep that issue in Gore's face because he is so beholden to the electronics industry. Remember, he's supposed to be the environmental candidate, but he's also the guy who says he invented the Internet," Smith says with a laugh, recalling the gaffe Gore made in a recent interview.

At the same time, Smith concedes that the semiconductor industry has come a long way in recent years in cleaning up its act. And in some cases, companies and trade groups are now making sure that he and other industry critics are brought into discussions on standards.

It isn't always the computer-related manufacturers that may be responsible for environmental degradation, he points out.

Two years ago, Smith recalls, a Silicon Valley firm established a

plant in Malaysia that was built to the highest standards of wastewater treatment and pollution controls in the United States. The problem was that to encourage industry, the Malaysian government had cut down rain forest and driven out the inhabitants to make way for the plant, Smith says.

Before he made bringing the electronics industry to heel his life's work, Smith, a native of Schenectady, N.Y., had been a labor lawyer for a time, largely representing cannery workers and other blue-collar laborers in the Santa Clara Valley.

A graduate of Stanford Law School in the early 1970s, he had previously spent two years working as a Vista volunteer in Washington, D.C., in the late 1960s. It was a time, he recalls, when the nation's capital was aflame with urban riots ignited by the assassinations of Martin Lu-

ther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and tensions between police and black residents.

"That was a soul-searing experience," recalls Smith, who had met King during his undergraduate days at exclusive Wesleyan College in Connecticut.

Poster photos of King, singer Paul Robeson and legendary lawyer Clarence Darrow are on the walls of his small, cluttered office at the toxic coalition's cramped headquarters in a house near San Jose City Hall.

"I keep a couple of those stickies that say 'Organization is a sign of a demented mind' somewhere under all these piles," Smith says.

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