

Watermark battle spawns neighborhood hero

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KEY WEST — City Planning Board meetings are not normally events that define a man's character, but when the fate of the skyline of the Key West Bight is at stake, a routine civic hearing becomes an historic benchmark.

Local attorney Bob Goldman, a 5-foot-5-inch, 135-pound scrappy attorney, stepped into the meeting hall like a veteran pinch hitter in the bottom of the ninth with the game on the line. He was confident, not cocky. He refused to be outdone by a lawyer bankrolled by a multimillion-dollar, statewide development conglomerate.

Goldman, 55, brought his game, which has become refined from years of helping broker big deals and being a point man for a former Illinois governor and other dignitaries. This time around, Goldman was representing a rag-tag group of Key Westers who say they are fighting a towering 26-unit luxury condominium complex called Watermark proposed for the property formerly occupied by Jabour's Trailer Court.

He challenged the project by citing the city charter and height regulations and quoting other land use regulations, hammering his points home with midwestern euphemisms and Abraham Lincoln quotations. The crowd erupted in applause and cheers after many of his dissertations. In the end, he pushed the project, which many neighbors feared would be approved that night, to a tie vote.

A tie might not seem like much, but neighbors see it as a victory and a seismic shift in momentum. Prior to the meeting, the neighbors faced two recent setbacks in their quest to quash the Watermark project.

"He was in the zone," said local architect Sullins Stuart, who has served as an expert witness during some of the hearings. "He was on top of his game."

From underdog to giant slayer

The meeting elevated Goldman from underdog to giant slayer. But Goldman has not always been on top of his game when it came to the project, he admits. He is not a land-use attorney by trade, and went through a serious learning curve on

city land development regulations and architectural regulations. Being a renter from central Illinois, state development restrictions on the Keys were a completely foreign concept to him. He didn't know city Historical Architectural Review Commission rules or state-imposed rate of growth ordinances.

"I hadn't done zoning cases since I lived in Illinois," Goldman said. "In Illinois, there're miles of fields and if you want to build, you build ... Land-use and zoning are such specialized areas of law. I didn't even know what HARC was."

He learned quickly. He had to. His neighbors in the tight-knit community were counting on him and fellow attorney Lee Rohe. They still are, as the battle continues. Goldman has since become well versed in city building regulations and obscure roof architecture. He was the first to point out to HARC that the project violated the committee's height requirements. He was able to swing two votes, one shy of quashing the project.

"He swayed me. He definitely did his homework," HARC Chair George Born said. "He knows the law and his arguments are based on that."

Goldman is facing opponents that have millions of dollars at their discretion and do not hesitate to spend it to further their cause. The Caroline Street Partners recently agreed to shell out nearly \$2 million to buy the homes of two neighbors who opposed the project. They have also retained Monroe County's top land-use attorney, Jim Hendrick.

Goldman, on the other hand, agreed to a fee that as he put it "comes out to be about \$15 an hour." But it's not about the money. He loves the battle and he is helping to protect his own neighborhood, he says.

Helping the little guy

"I always try to help the little guy when I can. I don't know where that stems from," he said. "I still live in the Kennedy era ... I believe in the law. I believe in people's right to counsel. People call me just to ask me questions. People should be entitled to have their questions answered."

His skills have earned the respect of his opponents. Hendrick realizes Goldman does not have the resources of the developers and also carries the burden of dealing with several clients who have different objectives, Hendrick said.

"Bob has behaved like a gentleman," Hendrick said. "Representing a diverse group can be difficult because the objective is always shifting. It can be frustrating to try and negotiate in good faith. Most times the most extreme objective prevails in this type of situation."

Goldman realized how difficult that can be after his client, Gary Lichtenstein, and Rohe's client, Bill Barry, who were challenging HARC's approval of the Watermark, agreed to sell their homes to the developers and drop their appeals without telling their attorneys first.

Goldman works out of his small one-bedroom apartment in an old boarding home in the Key West Bight. His office connects to a large balcony, which is located nearly in what could be the future shadow of Watermark. Goldman has been working with Rohe and several local architects who volunteered their time. Goldman has no receptionist or paralegal. He does have a small core staff consisting of his dog, Corky, and a talking African gray parrot named Largo. Largo has not picked up all the subtle nuances of the case, but he has managed to recite City Attorney Bob Tischenkel's name with amazing clarity.

"I try to keep him from swearing," Goldman jokes. Goldman has not been pleased with Tischenkel since the city attorney gave a contradictory legal opinion on jurisdiction of two separate city boards reviewing the project, Goldman said.

Corky serves as the inspiration for Goldman's many treks to the Watermark property and surrounding area. He uses the opportunity to analyze sunset patterns and listen to bight residents who will be impacted by the project. At the last meeting, more than 150 people showed up and nearly all opposed the project. The Planning Board listened to more than an hour of public comment, with only one person speaking in favor of the project.

"If you are standing in front of Waterfront Market, sunset is going to start at 3:30 in the afternoon," Goldman said.

Treasure chest of political history

His house is not the slick office of a powerhouse South Florida attorney, but it is a treasure chest of political history and an homage to social conscience. Goldman is a self proclaimed pack rat. A vintage color photograph of Kennedy touring Lincoln's grave hangs next to old legal filing cabinets and law books. An old box overflows with Stan Musial, Hank Aaron and other collectable baseball cards and political campaign buttons. An old folder bulges with copies of Newsweek and newspapers with headlines about Mercury astronauts burning up in their capsule, Nixon's pardon and other world changing events. On his shelves, Johnny Cash compact discs battle Neil Young and Bob Dylan for attention. A thin layer of dust rests on it all.

His house/office is the end result of a strange combination of hippy ideals, midwestern morals and Republican roots. Goldman was born and raised in Springfield, Ill. He grew up in a Republican household with a father, Robert

Goldman, active in local politics. His father served more than 20 years on the school board in Springfield. Robert Goldman was also a fighter pilot who was shot down in World War II and spent a month escaping hostile enemy territory and returning home. Bob Goldman would attend Culver Military Academy in Indiana, before attending college at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Goldman went on to study law at College of William and Mary, graduating in 1976.

He clerked and practiced law in New York before returning to Springfield, and eventually working as the advance man for former Illinois Republican Gov. "Big Jim" Thompson. He rubbed elbows with some of the state's and country's most powerful people.

Goldman left state politics in Illinois after he and other politicians circulated fliers around the state capital, railing on Republican Gov. Jim Edgar, who succeeded Thompson. The fliers urge people to not vote for him and Goldman's group went under the acronym R.A.R.E, Republicans Against the Re-election of Edgar.

"I'm not afraid to burn a bridge. I tell it like it is," Goldman said proudly.

Goldman chose to move to the balmy Keys and quickly bought a boat for day snorkeling and fishing trips. However, his knowledge of the Keys backcountry was far inferior to his legal skills. An old black-and-white photograph of him on his grounded fishing boat still hangs in his office. Goldman spent two years in Key West before receiving news that changed his life. His father, an athlete that competed in several marathons, died in a car crash. The tragedy led to bouts of depression that he feels he is just coming out of, he said.

"My dad is important to me and I miss him," Goldman said. "He was my best friend."

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