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The mayor’s lobbying conflicted with her public duties, which last week included assisting Elections Supervisor Brenda Snipes (right).

# NEWS

## Our Mayor, the Lobbyist, Part 4

**She visited Hollywood the same day as the developer. Now residents fear for their homes.**

BY BOB NORMAN

Broward County Mayor Ilene Lieberman has insisted that she can keep her two identities, politician and lobbyist, completely separate. But several months ago, her personas collided at a Hollywood City Commission meeting — and a neighborhood that was largely forgotten in all the political posturing that followed will likely pay the price.

Lieberman, acting as mayor, addressed the seven-member board on December 17, 2003, to promote the financial help her county government had given the city. Shortly after her talk, commissioners voted on two housing projects worth about \$60 million planned by the mayor’s employer at the time, Pinnacle Housing

Group. The meeting evidences another example of Lieberman’s straddling the ethical line — and at times crossing it — in her work for the Miami-based developer. She quit the job in September after *New Times* began an investigation that has documented how she has used her influence to help Pinnacle bring home more than \$100 million worth of projects in Broward (see “Our Mayor, the Lobbyist,” parts 1, 2, and 3).

Lieberman’s relationship with the company wasn’t spelled out to the public before she walked up to the podium at the December meeting. First, she told the commission of a \$5 million county grant to help build the Arts Park project in Young Circle. “And we know this will be a showplace,” she raved.

There was the \$650,000 the county gave the city for its Swim Central program and \$850,000 more to build a public pool. And \$441,370 for a city park and the YMCA. Then \$750,000 for mass transit.

Lieberman wasn’t finished: “I know you all have a strong and passionate desire to see beach renourishment happen as quickly as possible...,” she told the commission. “We’re going to spend about \$5.1 million on a beach restoration project from Port Everglades to the south county line.”

Commissioner Sue Gunzburger, who represents Hollywood, then joined her colleague at the mike. “We want to be seen as a partner to the cities... and your friend,” Gunzburger said.

“And understand that sometimes, even though we’re partners, there will be issues we are not going to agree on,” chimed in Lieberman. “I love my sister. I’m not allowed to tell you how old she is. She had a birthday on Monday, and she has sworn me to secrecy. But I can tell you, she and I disagree from time to time. I’m sure some of you have similar relationships. The bottom line is that the county has finally begun to come to the table and put some money into programs to help the cities.”

Then it was the board’s turn to address Lieberman and Gunzburger.

“We have an item on the agenda today that I think we’re going to be looking for your support on at some point with the Broward County Housing Authority and Pinnacle,” Commissioner Beam Furr said. “We’re looking to really profoundly change the look of our area...”

“I’m signed on,” piped up Gunzburger.

“Excellent,” Furr said. “I’m looking for that support, and we need another one.”

He looked directly at Lieberman, who beamed a smile at him. Furr apparently took that as a yes.

“Great,” he said.

Then Gunzburger, who stands about a half-foot taller than the diminutive Lieberman, muttered to her colleague, al-

most under her breath, “I don’t know — you’re not able to vote on it.”

Lieberman replied discreetly, “I’m not able to vote.”

Gunzburger ended this uncomfortable little aside by loudly proclaiming to the commission, “I’m signed on, and I’m one of the cheerleaders.”

Of course, Lieberman couldn’t vote as a county commissioner to approve the projects. She was employed by Pinnacle. And this wasn’t a novel situation: The mayor had recused herself 15 times in 14 months on votes that dealt with Pinnacle, which has received millions of dollars from county government in grants and tax-exempt bond financing.

Soon after Lieberman left the meeting, Pinnacle President Michael Wohl, who was the mayor’s boss at the time, took the podium to talk about his company’s dual projects in Hollywood: the \$20 million redevelopment of the low-income, federally subsidized Crystal Lakes apartments in Liberia and the building of a massive, \$40 million housing and commercial “village” near the Sheridan Tri-Rail station, just west of Interstate 95. “The central theme this afternoon is Pinnacle loves Hollywood...,” Wohl gushed. “It makes my toes tingle.”

Lieberman says she never lobbied any city commissioners regarding either project. Further, she says that county officials scheduled her visit to Hollywood that day and that it was a coincidence the Pinnacle votes were on the agenda. “There was nothing improper about my presentation to the city,” she wrote in an e-mail response to questions from *New Times*.

Whatever her involvement, the commission quickly passed the conceptual plan for that \$20 million Crystal Lakes redevelopment. But Wohl had a more difficult time pitching the Sheridan Tri-Rail project, which involves 450 new apartments in seven-story buildings, commercial space, a parking garage, and possibly even a charter school near residential areas and the already headache-inducing traffic on Sheridan Street.

Sal Oliveri, whose district includes the Tri-Rail station and surrounding neighborhoods, didn’t seem to like the idea. He said he’d been blind-sided by the proposal, since the company hadn’t met with him before publicly announcing its plans on December 16. He angrily complained at the meeting that Wohl had met only with commissioner Keith Wasserstrom and Mayor Mara Giulanti. “Sheridan Street is the worst street that you can have any access to...,” Oliveri said, citing the horrendous traffic. “I don’t need a traffic study because I live there.”

Like his six colleagues, Oliveri ultimately approved the concept, but only



reluctantly. A few months later, however, he began to wholeheartedly support it. He says the developer and consultants addressed his concerns, but there may have been other factors. One possibility: In January and February, Pinnacle gave him \$1,500 in campaign contributions for his successful reelection bid against neighborhood activist Pete Brewer. "I get campaign donations from many people, including developers, and that does not obligate me to do anything," he says. "All I do is give them a consideration, just as I would with any other developer."

Thickening the connection between Oliveri and Pinnacle is the fact that Lieberman served as an attorney for the commissioner in an ethics complaint involving a 2000 trip to Las Vegas that he failed to report as a gift in disclosure forms. The complaint, filed in 2002, wasn't resolved until this past July, when the ethics panel found Oliveri guilty but declined to punish him.

Oliveri insists that the mayor wasn't his attorney, but rather that her husband and law partner, Stuart Michelson, handled the complaint. Ethics commission reports and newspaper clippings — in which Lieberman identified herself as his attorney — refute that claim, though.

The Hollywood commissioner said last week that the only lobbyist who approached him on Pinnacle's behalf was Alan Koslow, an oft-used and highly controversial lawyer with close ties to Giuliani. The commissioner, in fact, said he didn't even know Lieberman was employed by Pinnacle.

Oliveri further denied that his constituents in neighborhoods surrounding the project oppose the development. "No [residents] have called me about this project since we had the [December 17] hearing," he said.

But Ellen Mata, vice president of the North Central Civic Association, says she and several other Hollywood citizens who live in nearby middle-class neighborhoods recently voiced their concerns to Oliveri. Mata and other community activists have also gathered nearly 1,000 signatures in protest. "We had asked that it be owner-occupied, instead of rental," she said last week. "They've got it slated for seven stories when there is nothing in our community that is over four stories. These rentals deteriorate and become places where no one wants to be. They ruin neighborhoods. And there will be a tremendous traffic problem."

Mata said Oliveri's support for the project, which is still in the planning stages and has not been given final approval by the commission, flies in the face of good governance. "I don't know why he's supporting it, but it makes me feel suspicious there are other motives," she said. "Every time we bring up the project with him, he becomes hostile and says the developer won't do anything that is not correct."

She's also not happy that Mayor Lieberman worked for Pinnacle, a company she believes is threatening the quality of her neighborhood. "It shouldn't be that way," Mata said when the issue of the mayor's lobbying work was raised. "I feel that [officials] do exactly what they want regardless of what the people say to them. They are going to do it and that's it."

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