

THE LOBBYIST WHO WASN'T THERE

BROWARD COMMISSIONER
JOSEPHUS EGGETTION
QUIETLY PULLS
POLITICAL STRINGS IN
LAUDERDALE LAKES — AND
PERSONALLY PROFITS
IN THE PROCESS

BY BOB NORMAN

Josephus Eggettion's people wait. The Broward County commissioner has called a town hall meeting at Dillard High School, and about 40 residents have shown up to hear what their man in office is doing for them. The 55-year-old politician, dressed in a gold-colored, U.S. Open golf shirt and black slacks, strolls into the school about 7 p.m., when the thing is supposed to start. Slow and sure, with a slight Everyman's slump in his stride, he glad-hands a couple of constituents, helps himself to an Oreo cookie from a refreshment table, and walks toward the auditorium.

Eggettion plans to talk about street improvement projects in the predominantly black neighborhoods over which he presides. It fits his practiced image. He often portrays himself as the voice of poor minorities. But the former state representative has also become a champion for a decidedly unoppressed demographic group: deep-pocketed and opportunistic Miami developers who've flocked to Broward County during the past few years.

They specialize in affordable housing, which has become increasingly necessary in Broward as median home prices have soared beyond \$300,000. The developers rely on millions of dollars in government subsidies to build apartments — and to bring in hefty profits. Eggettion has been one of their leading advocates, publicly demanding that the Broward County Commission give them more public money.

But Eggettion's interest in the developers isn't selfless. His support,
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"IT WAS ONE OF THE REASONS WE APPROVED IT, BECAUSE OF A COUNTY COMMISSIONER'S CREDIBILITY."

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in fact, seems to originate in an all-too-predictable place: his wallet. Even as he uses his considerable influence to help developers reap windfalls, he's gone on their payroll. A few years ago, when Miami-based Cornerstone Group Development came to Eggleton's district to build a townhome project in Lauderdale Lakes, it hired the commissioner. The county has since given Cornerstone hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant money and millions in tax-exempt bonds.

Though his work for Cornerstone — which earned Eggleton an estimated \$50,000 — never made the newspapers, he did it in the open. His more recent work for another Miami developer, United Homes International, appears to have been done completely behind the scenes. Well-placed sources say United Homes, which has a history marred by corruption, hired the county commissioner to help it secure a \$100 million contract to build a "downtown" for Lauderdale Lakes, where Eggleton once served in public office.

But the county commissioner isn't talking about the deal. For weeks, he didn't return phone messages and detailed, e-mailed questions. Then came the November 30 town hall meeting at Dillard. As he strolled toward the auditorium, he was asked about his employment with United Homes. "I'm not going to answer those questions tonight," he said, quickening his stride.

There's good reason to keep his business with United Homes quiet. The city banned lobbying on the project, and a violation could disqualify the offending firm from competition.

While taking a break from the town hall meeting, he entertained some questions but answered only a few. "I work for a company and provide services for that company," he said cryptically when asked again about United Homes. He evaded specific queries about his work but promised to reply in detail to questions e-mailed to him.

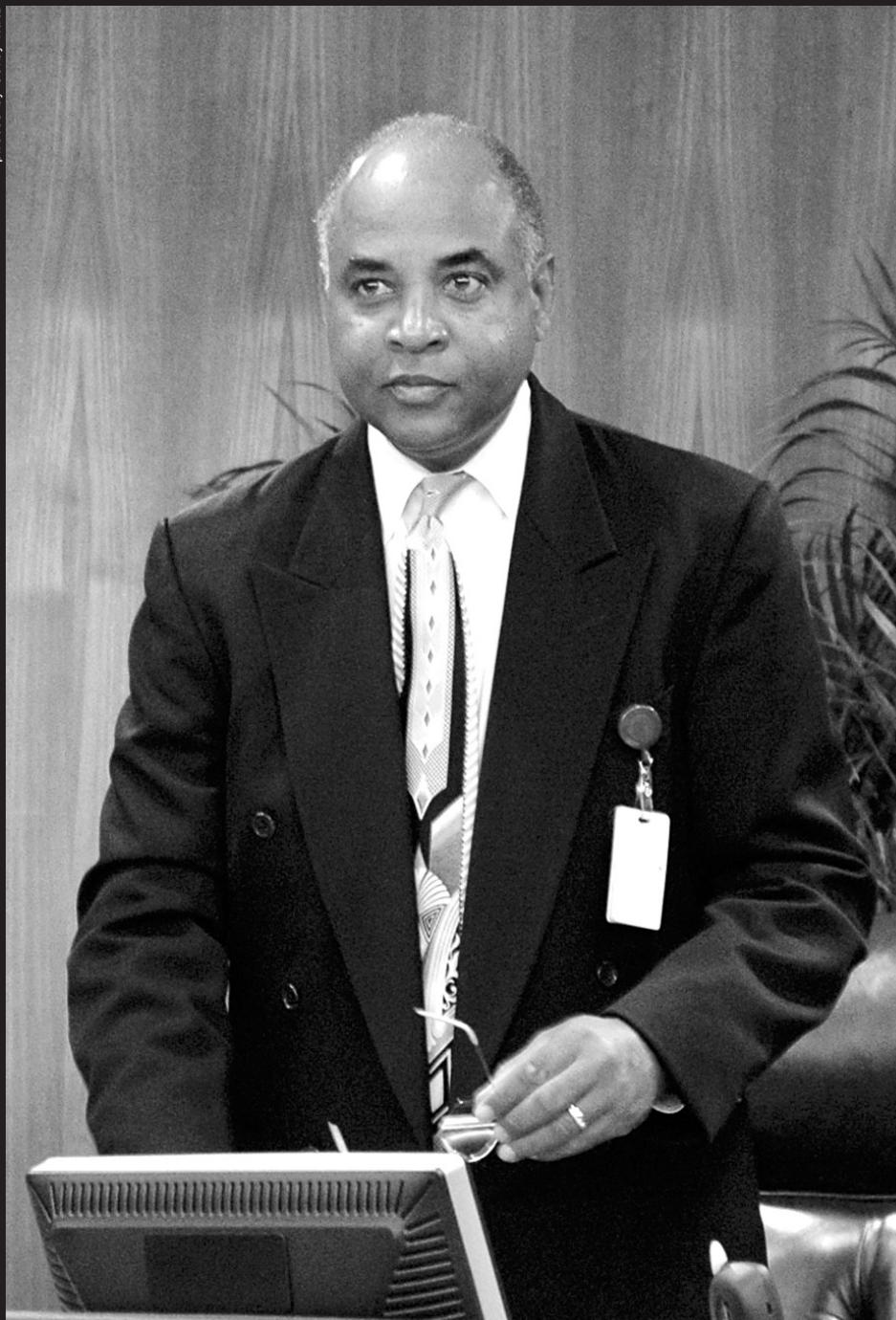
"All I care about is those people in there," he added, motioning to the auditorium. "Those are the people that don't have what you and I have."

When pressed about his work for developers and the potential ethical and legal problems that could come with it, he asked pointedly, "Is it illegal?"

He obviously believes the answer is no. Such work certainly isn't without precedent. Fellow commissioner Ilene Lieberman worked for Pinnacle Housing Group, another well-heeled Miami developer, for at least two years (see "Our Mayor, the Lobbyist," Parts 1-4). However, Florida's unlawful-compensation statute, which forbids politicians from profiting from their public positions, is very broad, and the right answer may be more problematic than either commissioner realizes.

Even if Eggleton's efforts for Cornerstone and United Homes aren't unlawful, several Lauderdale Lakes officials contend it should be. Deputy Vice Mayor Barrington Russell, for one, calls for an investigation of the commissioner's work. "I think it's inappropriate for any elected official to lobby any city," Russell says. "It must be

photos by Colby Katz



Josephus Eggleton (top), like his fellow county commissioner Ilene Lieberman (bottom left), has made good money lobbying for Miami developers. Lauderdale Lakes Commissioner Barrington Russell (bottom right) believes the practice is unethical and should be banned.

prohibited. It's offensive, and it sets a bad example for government... It is morally and ethically wrong and must be legally wrong as well."

Russell is particularly offended that Eggleton appears to have marketed his political influence to a developer at the same time the county commissioner was quietly working to destroy Lauderdale Lakes' effort to annex several predominantly black neighborhoods. Lakes commissioners allege that Eggleton ran a stealth campaign against the city's ambitious plan to expand the city to include some 15,000 residents in the poorest neighborhoods of central Broward.

Annexation is widely perceived as the best way for those areas to achieve self-rule and get the tax dollars the county has long denied them. But Eggleton worked against the measure, which was defeated by voters on November 2. Several black community leaders say Eggleton betrayed them. They wonder if his actions were dictated more by his love of developers than by his dedication to the people. And they're waiting for him to prove otherwise.

Josephus Eggleton's political career was born in Lauderdale Lakes, a city of 32,000 where he raised his two now-grown children and lives to this day. A teacher and barber by trade, the Florida native made his maiden voyage in politics in 1990, when he was elected to the Lakes commission. Just two years later, he ran unopposed for the state legislature, where he spent eight years before term limits forced him from office in 2000. That same year, he won a seat on the County Commission, to which he was reelected in November.

Eggleton has been a successful politician, but he's seen more than his share of controversy. While a state representative, he spoke of championing the poor people in his district but was off-criticized for his coziness with Big Sugar. His populist message also rang hollow in light of the fact that he collected a mid-five-figures Broward County School Board salary despite spending half the school year or more in Tallahassee, where he picked up another paycheck on the public dime. When he became a county commissioner, he made an \$80,000-plus salary in addition to the School Board pay. He defends his extracurricular lobbying work by saying he has a family to support, but his wife, Carolyn, does just fine: She's an elementary-school principal who takes home \$100,000 a year.

But the family salary of more than \$200,000 apparently still wasn't enough for Eggleton to pay his bills. In 2001, he used his county-issued credit card to buy lavish meals, trips abroad, and personal items like a \$659 Bally's leather briefcase. During one sojourn to Brazil, he missed several days of work at the School Board, where he was listed as sick. The State Attorney's Office and the Florida Commission on Ethics each probed the matter, and both cleared him of breaking the law after he paid \$2,600 to the county.

Also in 2001, he made \$15,000 for lobbying the City of Miramar on behalf of Waste Management, the trash-hauling giant. While still contracted with the company in 2002, Eggleton — continued on page 20

letion voted to give Waste Management tens of thousands of dollars in county business. Again, the Commission on Ethics began an investigation, which is ongoing.

“I’ve been investigated by the State Attorney’s Office and the attorney general,” Eggelletion said at Dillard. “And do you know what came of it? Bullshit.”

While the credit card and Waste Management investigations made the newspapers, his work for Cornerstone remained out of the public eye. The developer hired Eggelletion in 2001 to help maneuver its \$26 million project — which was located on State Road 7 near City Hall and dubbed the St. Croix Apartments — through the Lauderdale Lakes commission. Eggelletion won’t say how much he was paid, but his 2001 financial disclosure form shows that his private lobbying firm, Egg Consulting, brought in \$65,000 that year. Minus the \$15,000 from Waste Management and barring any unknown clients, that leaves a potential Cornerstone fee of \$50,000.

On September 28, 2001, Eggelletion appeared before Lakes commissioners to persuade them to approve the Cornerstone project. After he finished speaking, another special visitor addressed the commission on the developer’s behalf: Lennard Robinson, who was then the director of the Broward County Housing Finance Authority (HFA).

The problem is that Robinson’s agency was run by the county and overseen by Eggelletion’s commission. Further, Robinson and Eggelletion happen to be lifelong friends who attend the First Baptist Church of Piney Grove in Fort Lauderdale. That



Hazelle Rogers and Levoyd Williams are both FOEs — Friends of Eggelletion. Rogers is also the only Lakes commissioner who confirms that Eggelletion worked for United Homes.

Robinson is also the stepson of Congressional aide Art Kennedy, an Eggelletion political appointee and campaign contributor, only reinforces the bond.

Like Eggelletion, Robinson is no stranger to trouble. He quit the HFA in December 2002 after a county audit found that the agency had mismanaged funds and that Robinson’s girlfriend and other associates were given HFA grants. Robinson also was investigated by the State Attorney’s Office, which determined that there was no criminal wrongdoing.

If Eggelletion solicited Robinson’s help in representing Cornerstone or if he helped the company obtain county bond financing, it would fly in the face of the state’s unlawful-compensation statute. Robinson initially denied ever attending the meeting or discussing the Cornerstone project with Eggelletion. After he was told that Lauderdale Lakes commission meeting minutes showed he was there, Robinson acknowledged his attendance. “I had forgotten about it,” Robinson explained.

He insisted that his city hall visit had nothing to do with Eggelletion. “Any time a developer came and asked me to explain bond financing, I would do it,” he said. “I wasn’t there on [Eggelletion’s] behalf. I was there on behalf of a developer. Most government entities don’t understand what bond financing is, and I went there to explain it. I wasn’t aware that [Eggelletion] was a lobbyist for the developer at the time, if he was.”

“The only reason I would talk to [Eggelletion] about it was because it was in his district,” he continued. “He never talked to me as a lobbyist about the project. He basically wanted to talk about projects in his district. I know that Commissioner Eggelletion has always had an interest in affordable housing, and I saw [St. Croix] as a good, affordable-housing project.”

Lakes commissioners voted unanimously to approve the site plan. “Eggelletion promoted Cornerstone both publicly and privately,” long-time Lakes Commissioner David Shomers says. “It was one of the reasons we approved it, because of our reliance on a county commissioner’s credibility. I didn’t think it was appropriate. It just didn’t feel right to me. But this gave Cornerstone some instant credibility with us since a county commissioner had vetted them.”

Several months after the meeting, the HFA, under Robinson’s direction, fortified the St. Croix project with \$18.5 million in tax-exempt bonds, which helped Cornerstone receive millions more in federal tax credits, state grant money, and about \$500,000 from the County Commission.

On more than 15 occasions, the commission has voted to approve and finance the

St. Croix project and other Cornerstone developments. Eggelletion has recused himself from those votes. During the past six weeks alone, he's abstained five times over Cornerstone, which would seem to be in violation of the Florida Code of Ethics ban on politicians engaging in recurring conflicts of interest. But he says he doesn't work for the company anymore, so there's no problem. "I do not have a conflict on these items," he said at the meeting December 7. "However, to avoid even the appearance of a conflict, I wish to abstain from voting."

Eggelletion worked for Cornerstone until at least the beginning of 2003, when the company decided it didn't want to provide the apartments with balconies, as promised, but rather with nonfunctioning "balconettes" that would serve, literally, as window dressing. The issue went for a vote before the commission in March 2003.

Lauderdale Lakes City Manager Anita Fain Taylor says Eggelletion contacted her about the change. "[Eggelletion] called me to make sure we were not dragging our feet and the item would move forward for commission consideration," recalls Taylor, who left the deputy manager's job in North Miami for the Lakes position in January 2003.

Taylor recalls that Eggelletion tried to make it clear that he was acting as a lobbyist rather than as a commissioner, but she found the distinction rather difficult. "My issue is I have to be able to see the change in hats," she says, "but I never experienced that when I worked in Dade County. It was hard for me, but I guess because that occurs here, I guess I have to adjust.

"I'm amazed that it hasn't come up as a legal or ethical issue in the state. A county commissioner really does have the ability to influence a city or do a city harm."

Eggelletion showed just how much harm he could do the Lakes when he undermined its historic bid for annexation. Even as he was profiting from his power in the city, many elected leaders say he betrayed it in a way that can never be forgiven.

Annexation became a power struggle between the city and Eggelletion — and the Lakes didn't stand a chance.

Vice Mayor Russell, who is president of the local Kiwanis Club, found out what he was up against when he first ran for the commission early this year. Eggelletion tried to persuade him to oppose the Lakes' effort to annex seven central neighborhoods, including Broward Estates, Franklin Park, and Roosevelt Gardens. But when that didn't work, the county commissioner played hardball.

Russell says that after a January 29 gala held by the newly formed 100 Black Men of Greater Fort Lauderdale at the posh Hyatt Pier 66 hotel, he was led by Maria Kong, wife of Lauderdale Commissioner Dale Holness, to a conference room where he found Eggelletion holding court with numerous leading black officials. Among them were Hazelle Rogers and Levoyd Williams, Eggelletion's two closest allies on the Lauderdale Lakes commission. Also present was Miramar commissioner George Pedlar, Plantation political aspirant Eric Hammond, and Holness. (Williams and Rogers didn't return phone calls about the meeting.)

"They were all sitting at the table, and Joe said to me, 'I don't normally endorse candidates, but I want to know your position on annexation, because I live in Lauderdale Lakes, and I don't want my taxes increased,'" Russell recounts.

"I said to him, 'What is this meeting about? Obviously you guys had this planned,

and the only person who didn't know about it was me. As far as I'm concerned, this is an ambush, and you are very rude and disrespectful to me.'"

An offended Eggelletion rose from the table and walked off, Russell recalls. Rogers, meanwhile, tried to explain the county commissioner's stance on annexation. Russell says he excused himself from the table and left.

Russell says he deplores secretive, back-room politics — and has since concluded that the meeting was in violation of Florida's Sunshine Law, which forbids elected officials who sit on the same governmental body from discussing public business outside public view.

"They obviously did this to set me up," he asserts.

Of Russell's account, Eggelletion says, without elaboration, "Russell is a liar."

Yet the vice mayor isn't the only elected Lakes official who claims that Eggelletion tried to strong-arm him into opposing annexation. Commissioner Shomers recalls a chance encounter at the Office Depot store in Lauderdale Lakes several months ago.

"If any commissioner votes for annexation and raises my taxes, I will campaign against them," Shomers recalls Eggelletion telling him.

"Well, Joe, I have good news for you," Shomers replied. "I am in favor of annexation, but I will not vote in favor of raising taxes."

Shomers' sunny response belied what he felt was an unfair and inappropriate tactic. "I took that as a threat," the veteran commissioner says.

Pressuring city officials was just the beginning of Eggelletion's efforts to kill annexation. He also joined Swap Shop owner Preston Henn in painting Lauderdale Lakes

as a city in financial crisis. The Swap Shop owner and the commissioner were bound not only by an issue but also by the dollar: Henn, his wife, and his Tallahassee lobbyist, Dave Ericks, each contributed the maximum \$500 to Eggelletion's reelection campaign on August 11, 2004.

Henn's 78-acre flea market, circus, and movie drive-in was the linchpin of the annexation effort. It was needed to physically link several of the neighborhoods and add crucial tax revenue to city coffers. But Henn, a prolific campaign contributor who has forged close relationships with county commissioners, wanted to join Lauderdale Lakes, which is also near his property.

Russell and other officials countered that the two cities' tax rates are almost identical and pointed to auditors' reports that show Lauderdale Lakes to be in solid financial condition. Joe Major, a **continued on page 22**

vociferous community activist and president of the Broward County Civic Association, says that his neighborhood, Broward Estates, has long awaited annexation and that the opposition was a “menace to the grassroots community.”

“He doesn’t care about anybody but himself,” Major says of Eggelletion. “He didn’t come to any of the neighborhood meetings on annexation that I know of. We can’t find him. There is no responsiveness from his office when we try to contact him.”

Major, who works closely with several neighborhood leaders, contends that Eggelletion wants the area to remain under county control so he will retain power over them as a commissioner and be able to leverage that power for more jobs with developers. “It’s the start of the disruption and corruption and taking advantage of the black community,” the activist claims.

Eggelletion counters that even if the area were ceded to Lauderdale Lakes, the county would still have power over future developments. “It just shows that he doesn’t understand politics,” Eggelletion says of Major.

The activist, however, points at Eggelletion’s cozy relationship with developers as proof that he doesn’t have the people’s best interest at heart.

“We are not getting help, and we believe it is because all Eggelletion cares about is the developers and the good old boys,” Major says. “He’s lobbying for developers. No elected official should be allowed to do that, but we know others do it, like Lieberman.”

Major would like to see a criminal investigation. “[Broward State Attorney] Michael Satz needs to get on that, but he’s a public official himself and doesn’t want to make waves,” Major says. “If Satz did, he wouldn’t be in office as long as he has been.”

Satz’s office wouldn’t comment on whether it intended to investigate the lobbying activities of Eggelletion and Lieberman. When Satz spokesman Ron Ishoy was asked about it, he replied that the office wasn’t “in a position to discuss what’s going on.”

While Eggelletion has recused himself from voting on Cornerstone matters, he has used his office to push for that company and other developers to be given more tax money. During the May 25 County Commission meeting this year, after the United Homes bid for the Lauderdale Lakes town center project was under way, he made a passionate plea for his benefactors.

United Homes’ Chairman Tony Mijares traveled to the Broward government building in downtown Fort Lauderdale on May 25, where he planned to plead his case before Eggelletion and the rest of the commissioners.

Such a visit was nothing new to Mijares, an old pro at working the halls of power. The developer boasts that he’s done more than \$400 million worth of deals during the past quarter century, all of them with his long-time partner, company President Silvio Cardoso. That success, however, hasn’t come without spectacular scandal.

Cardoso, for his part, was convicted of bribing an undercover FBI agent in the early 1990s but avoided prison time by cooperating with the federal government in a 1991 racketeering and extortion case against then-Hialeah Mayor Raul Martinez. A former Hialeah commissioner himself, Cardoso testified that he paid more than \$100,000 to Martinez as a “gift” and admitted to paying



John Billingsley paid a political price for deigning to publicly criticize Eggelletion.

bribes to another Hialeah councilman, Andy Mejides, in various housing deals.

In 1993, Mijares’ name surfaced in, of all things, an illegal Iraqi arms deal. Some development companies associated with him were implicated by the federal government in a plan to smuggle fuses and weapons-grade zirconium — for use in cluster bombs and chemical weapons — to Saddam Hussein, according to reports published at the time. Several indictments were issued, but Mijares was never charged in the case and has denied wrongdoing.

While one might suppose that such scandals would slow their careers, Mijares and Cardoso have not only survived in South Florida but have prospered enormously. In the late 1990s, the pair branched out to Broward County. In 1997, Mijares bought a home in the posh Rio Vista neighborhood of Fort Lauderdale that is now assessed at about \$2.6 million (he also owns a \$1 million condo in Miami). Cardoso followed his partner to Rio Vista in 2000, buying a \$900,000 home that is now assessed at more than \$2.1 million. By 2002, they had begun a strong push into Broward’s housing market during which they poured tens of thousands of dollars into politicians’ coffers. Mijares also became well-known in power circles for the lavish parties he threw at his house for local officials.

The hospitality clearly paid off. By the beginning of 2004, the company had won approval to build several projects worth at least \$100 million in Broward. When he walked up to the podium to address the County Commission on May 25, Mijares not only was adept at wooing commissioners but he also considered many — including Eggelletion, Lieberman, Diana Wasserman-Rubin, and John Rodstrom — his personal friends.

Mijares didn’t come alone. With him was Lieberman’s boss at the time, Pinnacle Housing Group President Michael Wohl, and Eggelletion’s former employer, Cornerstone President Lenny Wolfe. It isn’t known whether United Homes had hired the county commissioner by that time. Eggelletion, skating close to the legal edge, would enthusiastically and unabashedly support all three of them at the meeting. And in so doing, he proved just

how questionable his work for them really is.

On the commission agenda that day was an item filed by Rodstrom — at Wolfe’s behest — to pay \$1.2 million to help finance four affordable-housing developments, three of them by Cornerstone and one by Pinnacle. Mijares didn’t have a project to tout. He was just there to make a general plea for more development dough.

“With all due respect to you,” the United Homes chairman told commissioners, “in Miami-Dade, we have several affordable projects... and [Miami-Dade County] steps up to the plate and gives us \$2 million... If [Broward County] cannot in some form or fashion step up to the plate, it’s over.”

Eggelletion followed Mijares by urging the commission to lobby the state Legislature to pass a law that would allow Broward, like Miami, to levy a new fee on commercial building sales. The millions in proceeds would then go to the developers before the commission. “Dade County had, I believe, \$30 million to play with as a result of that,” Eggelletion announced. “And they fund a lot of these projects in Dade County [from] that money, and I’m telling you, unless we create another revenue source, we aren’t going to get there.”

But as the meeting progressed, Rodstrom realized he was making a mistake; he thought his motion was to fund four *new* projects but learned they had either already been built or were near completion. Not only that but the county had already shelled out \$200,000 or more for each one the previous year. In other words, the \$1.2 million was headed right into the developers’ pockets. “I need to amend my motion because it was not my intent that we would be funding a project that was already under construction,” Rodstrom announced to the dismay of the developers.

Eggelletion leaped to the companies’ defense, saying they needed more money from the county to make a profit. And, though he contends he no longer works for Cornerstone, he exhibited a continuing expertise of the company’s finances during the meeting. “I want y’all to think back, when these projects came before us and we decided to fund them...,” Eggelletion said. “The point I’m trying to make is the budget for all these projects ran far over, and [the developers] felt

they could come back and get the additional funds they needed.”

Mijares also took the podium again, complaining that his colleagues had taken a “massive haircut.”

“The developers in this case, there’s a good chance they will not make a dime on this project, zero, no developer’s fee...,” he told Rodstrom. “Now, as you know, no one likes to do a project and not make any money. Nobody.”

“But you have to understand the hat I wear, Tony,” Rodstrom replied. “And that is that it’s not our job as county commissioners to guarantee that developers make money.”

Eggelletion disagreed.

“I know the developers probably don’t mind if you examine their books,” he pleaded. “You’re going to see that they are not making money.”

He said he wanted the commission to find a way to fund the projects, even if Rodstrom was dropping his motion. “There’s no money-making here; there’s a loss of money,” Eggelletion insisted. “So I don’t want these developers to go to other counties because they are losing money.”

After Rodstrom killed his motion, Eggelletion made a new one. Admitting that giving the money to developers “doesn’t look good,” he suggested that the county try to fund the projects in another way. “I would like to see the administrator at least come back with another way to get to this by building a better mousetrap,” he said.

At the very time Eggelletion was going to bat for the developers, United Homes had its eyes on one of the largest housing and commercial developments in his district’s history: the Lauderdale Lakes town center. And Eggelletion, if he wasn’t already on board, would soon join the firm’s development team.

Listen to city officials talk about the proposed town center, which will be built near State Road 7 and Oakland Park Boulevard on a 25-acre site that once included a golf driving range and auto auction house:

“It’s the biggest project ever in the city’s history,” avers Neil Appel, the city’s purchasing officer. “It will rejuvenate the city.”

“This project is going to change the face of Lauderdale Lakes,” city manager Taylor states.

“This is our roadmap to the future,” redevelopment administrator Gary Rogers says. “It’s the tip of the spear. This is a chance to literally change the form and function of an entire city, a way to reinvent America’s suburbs.”

Not surprisingly, the momentous \$100 million plan attracted several potential developers when the city requested proposals in March. United Homes, however, held up the process by demanding that the company’s financial disclosure forms be kept out of public view, according to city officials.

Eggelletion, then, was apparently wrong about the company’s willingness to have its books examined. The city’s Community Redevelopment Agency, which is overseeing the project, has refused to release United Homes’ financial forms, claiming that they don’t fall under Florida’s Sunshine Laws. But Lauderdale Lakes own city attorney, James Brady, disagrees with the redevelopment agency. He wrote in a May memo that all financial info submitted to the city by the developer is “public information for those who request it.”

Redevelopment administrator Rogers tried to justify the city’s refusal to release the documents by explaining that United Homes is strictly a private firm. “This is a company

that's never publicly financed any projects before," he explained. "They've never shared their financials with anybody. That's the comments they've made at public meetings. All the stuff they've done is completely private."

Rogers, however, is mistaken. The company's developments have received millions in federal tax credits and grants, and Mijares admitted as much at the May 25 Broward commission meeting. But in Rogers' defense, he heard the false information straight from Mijares' mouth during the company's October 5 pitch to the Lakes commission. "We have always funded 100 percent of every last item on the job," the developer assured the elected officials that day. "This would be no different."

Granted, Mijares was under some pressure. The odds seemed to be against United Homes' getting the \$100 million plum. The two other developers that made the short list for the town center project, Lennar and a company formed by veteran Fort Lauderdale builder Milton Jones, were both rated more financially able than United Homes. In August, an evaluation committee made up of four city officials also ranked Lennar as the most qualified and experienced.

But the final decision was up to the Lakes commission. Mijares, who made the first presentation, concluded by telling the commissioners he hoped to be as close to them as he is to his long-time partner, Cardoso, the former bribery defendant and federal corruption witness. "That same friendship we are hopeful will extend to the City of Lauderdale Lakes... that could turn into an extremely profitable relationship," he told the commission.

The commissioners apparently were sold; five of six voted for United Homes. But Eggelletion's role in that process is still unclear. Like his participation in the annexation issue, it was shielded from public view. A query of United Homes lawyer Jim Cole, a friend and frequent golfing partner of Eggelletion's, drew a typically vague response. Cole admits that Eggelletion "consulted" him on the project but won't elaborate. When asked whether Eggelletion worked for the company, Cole says, "I'm not sure whether he was or not."

Mijares, when asked directly why he hired Eggelletion, responded, rather tellingly, "Our company policy for years is we never comment on any business that we do, period."

Even the promised e-mail from Eggelletion, which he said would provide details, had no answers regarding United Homes. "I have always represented my district to the best of my ability," Eggelletion wrote inscrutably. "Additionally, I have always taken pride in my ability to provide for my family... During my tenure as an elected official taking care of my family's needs, I have always taken into consideration my elected position and have never used it in any way to trample on the public's trust."

So it's left to conjecture exactly what he did for United Homes. Lakes' insiders say the county commissioner's political influence would likely have been limited to a few commissioners, most notably Hazelle Rogers and Levoyd Williams, who flanked him at Pier 66 and were the only ones who opposed annexation. Both gave United Homes the nod. Rogers, who is Eggelletion's appointee on the county's powerful Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, admits that she was aware of the county commissioner's employment with United Homes. But she says it had no impact on her vote. In fact, she says, he never lobbied her. "There's certain projects I don't need anyone to tell me how to vote," Rogers insists. "And I don't always vote for what Joe Eggelletion wants."

Williams claims he had no idea that his political mentor was aligned with the developer. "My decision was based solely on the presentation," he says. "We're looking at a \$100 million project, and you have to look at their track records and their generating tax base."

It was Jones' project, however, that would have generated the most tax dollars for the city, officials say. It had the highest housing density and, unlike the other two projects, was planned to have both office and retail space. "I was surprised" by the vote, says redevelopment director Gary Rogers, who was complimentary of all three companies but conceded that he believed Jones gave the strongest presentation.

Within a few weeks of the United Homes vote, Eggelletion was branded a traitor by the City Commission because of the annexation issue. Only Williams and Rogers defended their county rep.

On October 26, Lakes commissioners publicly excoriated Eggelletion, who they believed was likely behind a well-financed smear campaign to discredit the city. Mayor Samuel Brown, a bespectacled and normally reserved man, told his city that he had been "wounded" by Eggelletion, though he didn't mention him by name. "I did not expect to be this hurt," Brown said gravely. "I'm wounded because of what our commissioner has done."

Referring to Eggelletion, he added, "This is a place that gives you your start in life, and then you turn around and try to destroy it."

Then, one by one, each commissioner spoke on the matter. Vice Mayor Eric Haynes decried the "lies and deceit" of the anti-annexation crowd. John Billingsley, an Eggelletion appointee on the Broward County Planning Council, said it was a "disgust" that an elected official would spread damaging rumors about his city.

Shomers then recounted his chance meeting with Eggelletion at Office Depot. About that time, Eggelletion walked into City Hall. He sat down and stared at those who criticized him, not uttering a word. But his presence only seemed to intensify the criticism. A deeply upset Russell pointed out that Eggelletion was in the audience and then proceeded to tell the story of the ambush meeting. Then he gave an impassioned speech about political responsibility — aimed squarely at the man staring at him.

"There is nothing in politics that requires you to be dishonorable...," he declared. "We have no right to be here [in public office]. It's a privilege, and we need to execute this privilege with care and decency. Come what may, the truth will always prevail."

Rogers and Williams defended the target of the criticism. "Commissioner Eggelletion, everyone knows, is a friend of mine...," Williams said. "In America, people are innocent until proven guilty... Let's not denigrate someone's character when you do not know where it's coming from."

One week later, the residents of the unincorporated areas voted by a two-to-one margin against annexation.

But that wasn't the only victory for Eggelletion. On November 16, he ejected Billingsley from the county planning board and replaced him with a more friendly Lakes commissioner: Levoyd Williams. And with that, Eggelletion once again proved his clout both in Broward County and in his home city, Lauderdale Lakes.

**Contact the author to discuss the story:
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