

On being a councilman

BY ERNIE SOCHIN

Cutler Bay Councilman Seat 2



I am often asked if I enjoy being a councilman. Am I having fun? Why am I doing it? My sarcastic answer is "For the big bucks." I am also asked how much time I spend at my town duties.

Although I have never actually clocked it, I would estimate at somewhere between 40 and 50 hours per week. This figures out to about \$2.30 per hour for those of you looking to hire away council folk. Recently it was fed back to me that someone said that I was a lousy politician. My reply, "Thank You."

I too watch the 6 o'clock news and read the papers every day about the scandals in government. In my many years in the business world, I never managed to spend \$1,500 for a lunch. I understand some people's feelings and frustration towards public officials, but not all of us are that way.

There are indeed times when the job can be very stressful. The recent vote to approve our Comprehensive Development Plan is an example. One of the key issues was building height in the new downtown charrette. I thought it through quite carefully and tried to determine the feelings of my constituents. Some were concerned with height alone; others were bothered by the density issue. Many seemed okay with the height provided that it was GREEN.

The danger is that sometimes a few loud people at a meeting could lead you to believe that everyone feels that way, whereas there may be many thousands at home who would be quite content with whatever is offered. Some of the emails and phone calls I receive try to convince me that they are speaking for the community at large.

Of course, we on the council are elected to serve the will of the people but also to exercise our best judgment on what that will is and how well it will serve the community at large. Not an easy task. I try my best to remain calm during these meetings although sometimes I require a nudge from the vice mayor (who sits next to me) to help me do it.

Being called Nazis, Gestapos, Communists, do-nothings, shills for developers, etc. doesn't feel too good when you are working as hard as we are, but we take it from whence it comes. Unfortunately some people are simply not able to absorb the

many technicalities involved in our decision making but hopefully what we end up doing results in the betterment of our new town.

When you have lived here as long as I have (40 years) you do tend to long for the good old days, when I could ride my bicycle down Old Cutler Road and hardly need to worry about a car coming by. It would be nice to have the pony rides back at Cutler Ridge Mall, but those days are gone forever. More and more people are moving here whether we like it or not. Many of us would like to make sure that there is still space and affordable housing for our next generations. These are all things that we on the council have to consider.

It is quite a task for us to learn all there is to know about building, zoning, water management, code enforcement and the many other things we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

There are, of course, many benefits to being a councilman. I get to go to just too many cocktail parties and lunches, but most of all I have gotten to meet some truly wonderful people who I might not have come into contact with were I not an elected official.

Examples: The warm, charming and extremely intelligent Alex Sink, our state CFO, not to be outdone by Lisa Edgar, chair of the Public Service Commission, whom I recently had the pleasure of meeting with. I have become friends with such great hard-working people as State Representatives Julio Robaina and J.C. Planas. I look forward to my next hug from Sen. Bullard. I received a text message from my friend Mayor Gene Flinn of Palmetto Bay, right in the middle of my impassioned speech at the League of Cities, saying, "Give 'em hell, Ernie." You can't buy that kind of friendship.

Sitting for morning coffee with Commissioner Sorenson and just listening to her brilliant mind offer ideas and help to me is something I had never dreamed of doing. I have been able to call on school board member and former mayor of Pinecrest Evelyn Greer for advice and counsel whenever I need it.

I spent a night (no, not that kind) with Officer Lisa Ferro in her patrol car witnessing first hand just how efficient our new Cutler Bay police department is and how well they respond to calls for help.

I am occasionally asked to speak to middle school students at Cutler Ridge Middle on career days. You ought to see the letters of gratitude I get from these kids. That in itself makes the job worth while. I also have gotten to tell stories to first graders at the library. Talk about fun!

I recently had a friend and Cutler Bay resident, who happens to be the Bishop of a Pentecostal Church in Opa-locka, ask me to attend one of their functions. My wife and I walked gingerly into the back of the church, a place I am not too familiar with, and were immediately ushered to the front. I couldn't keep my hands and feet still listening to the songs and prayers that were taking place. Then there was an interruption and they announced that they had a guest speaker. I looked around to see who it was. It was me. I wasn't at all prepared for this but whatever I said must have been good because I got at least four Amens. The truth is, I did get a strong feeling of warmth and comfort being among these people.

I recently spent time with County Commissioner Moss and Javier Rodriguez, director of the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX), to discuss their (and my) idea to utilize the US 1 busway for express toll lanes and providing overpasses at the major intersections. The existing buses would still make use of it with special turn-offs for picking up and dropping off passengers. This would prove to be a great traffic reliever until the long-awaited Metrorail finally arrives in about 20 or 30 years.

In Tallahassee, I was surprised when asked to speak before a House committee trying to prevent a \$200,000 cut in a water management grant due Cutler Bay. It worked. I got to speak to the Miami-Dade County School Board in requesting part of their bandwidth for our proposed Wi Fi venture. It didn't work.

I was able to have a sit-down with Miami-Dade County Mayor Alvarez to discuss his plans for countywide Wi Fi. Although I was disappointed in the outcome, I did find the mayor to be a warm and sincere person with a most difficult job. I haven't given up on Wi Fi for

Cutler Bay. My hope now is to gradually begin rolling out a system, which eventually will make it available to just about anyone who wants it. Plans are underway and once details are worked out I hope to present it to the town government for approval.

We in all of South Dade have suffered just too much from power interruptions due to trees interfering with the power lines. I seem to remember prior to hurricane Andrew, the Asplundh trucks coming through our neighborhoods like a spring ritual to trim the trees before the coming storm season. Somehow through the efforts of lobbyists and a not-consumer-friendly PSC they were allowed to trim the lateral lines, the ones that supply electricity to your homes and businesses, every SIX years. Even the FPL employees that I have spoken to agree that that is much too long a spell to allow trees to grow.

The new Public Service Commission is said to be more consumer friendly and I hope that my meetings with them will bring about a change to at least a three year trim cycle.

The need for a Cutler Bay Charter High School is one thing that I have heard loud and clear from our people. I already have begun forming a committee to start evaluating the process and procedures for accomplishing this.

Another question that I have been asked lately is if I intend to run for office again. I was one of the two offices with a two-year first term. The other is the vice mayor. The next term would be four years so that the council will have chance to alternate every two years. Yes, I feel compelled to run for reelection because I have just too many things started and being the way that I am, I just have to see things through to the end.

I hope to see you all at the polls on Mar. 11, 2008.

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