

Councilman Sal DiCiccio Purges Two Planning Committees of Their Skeptics. Bring on the Developers!

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Lynn Heath had been a member of the Camelback East Village Planning Committee for 10 years, two months, and roughly one-half of a meeting when her tenure came to an end last month.



It did not end in any of the usual ways: a fruit basket, a proclamation commending Heath's service to the city, or even a thank-you note. It ended with a request to get off the dais, pronto.

As it turns out, Phoenix Councilman Sal DiCiccio has been systematically removing longtime members from the two village planning committees under his control. He's not getting rid of everyone, mind you — just the

more outspoken members and the people who refuse to rubber-stamp the plans of developers.

But even though it's part of a trend, Heath's removal was singularly stunning in its awkwardness. At the committee's February 2 meeting, Heath was seated at a table with her fellow members, participating as usual, when she noticed a young aide to Councilman DiCiccio entering the room.

The city planner who helps run the meetings asked the aide if he wanted to speak. He declined.

But, a few minutes later, the aide approached Heath awkwardly and asked her to step outside for a minute.

Outside, in the hallway, he dropped a bombshell.

She was no longer on the committee, he told her. She should have gotten a letter. She hadn't? Well, regardless, Councilman DiCiccio had declined to reappoint her when her term expired a few months back. She had to stop participating — immediately.

"You're not allowed to vote," he explained. "You can keep sitting up there, but you need to realize, it's going to get very embarrassing when it's time to vote."

The whole thing was so weird, and so awkward, that Heath acquiesced without a fight. (She's never gotten any letter, she insists.)

"I should have said, 'I've been a member for nearly 11 years, and I've just been kicked off the committee,'" she told me a few weeks later. "But I just excused myself and went to sit out in the audience."

Almost immediately, though, it became clear why the aide had confronted Heath in the middle of the meeting, rather than address the apparent oversight at a less-awkward time.

In the months leading up to the February meeting, DiCiccio had been stacking the Camelback East committee. The committee, which represents the area just west of Arcadia, lost a handful of longtime members and gained, instead, eight newbies. And the new members were ready for change: Just after Heath was unceremoniously removed from the dais, the committee voted on a new chairman and vice chairman.

Typically, such officers serve two terms, and incumbents are rarely challenged. But even though both the current chair and vice chair were running for a second term, and there'd never been a hint of controversy surrounding either man, DiCiccio's new appointees voted to topple them.

Voting as a bloc, they provided just enough votes to halt the incumbents' re-election. Then, they elected two members, Jay Swart and Michael Maledon, with the barest majorities. (In Maledon's case, the vote was 9-8.)

It was both Swart and Maledon's first village committee meeting.

Like most of DiCiccio's appointees, the two Biltmore residents donated money to his recent re-election campaign. But that may not be the only reason for their overnight success.

Both Swart and Maledon are friendly with Scott Schirmer, another Biltmore resident. More importantly, Schirmer is a broker who hopes to rezone the corner of 44th Street and Camelback. His Camel Square proposal would allow a 465,000-square-foot office complex with buildings as high as 11 stories.

The neighborhood strongly opposed the Camel Square rezoning the last time Schirmer pitched it, and the village planning committee voted to oppose the project.

But Schirmer threw a fundraiser in support of DiCiccio's election bid in November. And though he wouldn't call me back, members tell me Schirmer was in attendance at the February village planning committee meeting, watching the proceedings with great interest.

Phoenix's village planning committees rarely get much media attention, for good reason. Their members are volunteers, who agree to serve because they care about development in their neighborhood. While the issues are important to anyone whose backyard is affected, the debate over a set of plans can be tedious.

And a village committee is only the first step in a long process. After the committee, developers must go to both the citywide planning commission and the City Council. The committee vote is only advisory; even if a committee rejects a project, the council can still say yes.

But committees still have a surprising amount of clout. Traditionally, the council defers to them in deciding what projects to green-light. If a developer can't persuade the local village committee to say yes, he'll probably run into bigger problems at City Hall eventually. (See: Trump, Donald.)

And that's why the Camelback East meeting in February has shaken the neighborhood leaders who worry about developers' growing clout in the city — and who increasingly regret their early support of DiCiccio.

Those people say they are troubled by the changes at Camelback East and, to a lesser extent, the other village planning committee under DiCiccio's control, in Ahwatukee. They note that most of his new appointees are directly involved in development. They also make troubling allegations about the backroom deals that DiCiccio attempted to make to gain control of the committee.

Indeed, *New Times* has been able to confirm that DiCiccio ousted more than a dozen longtime members in the days just before his re-election and the months immediately following.

He's stated that he didn't reappoint the members because they never indicated they were interested in staying on. But after talking to seven ousted members, it's clear that the councilman's claims are misleading, at best.

Village planning committees long have been handled in a disorganized fashion. A number of members, including Lynn Heath, told me they were originally appointed to a two-year term and stayed on for years on end without being asked to reapply, much less being warned at any point that their term was set to expire. All seven members told me that, had they been given a choice, they would have stayed on.

And there's a common thread in the people who were asked to leave the committees. They tend to listen to neighborhood interests, not just side with the developers.

Here's a good example:

Jill Harris and Laurel Arndt were members of the Ahwatukee committee. Both women pressed DiCiccio at a meeting in February 2009 to take a stand one way or another on the Loop 202 extension proposed for their neighborhood. He declined to answer yes or no, according to those in attendance. (Only later did the members learn that the councilman actually has a development lease of his own that would benefit from the freeway extension.)

Just a few days before DiCiccio's election in November, both women were informed their services were no longer needed.

"I was told that, technically, my term is up, which is true," Harris told me. "When I asked why they didn't give me an opportunity to reapply, they told me they had 'other people' in mind."

The councilman claimed to the *Arizona Republic* at one point that he's looking for "dynamos," but Harris and Arndt would certainly meet that description. Both have master's degrees in planning from ASU, as Harris confirmed to me last week. Other ousted members include architects, lawyers, and even a pilot.

Meanwhile, DiCiccio chose to reappoint an elderly member of the committee, who often sleeps through the meetings. He also reappointed another 10-year veteran, a childhood friend.

And the decisions made regarding the Camelback East committee are potentially even more troubling. DiCiccio, strangely, has appointed a high school student to the committee: The Xavier student can't even vote in a city election, but DiCiccio wants her voting on development projects.

His other appointees? The CEO of a construction management firm, a lobbyist for the Phoenix Association of Realtors, and a commercial broker with retail giant DeRito Partners. All of them, it should be noted, have jobs that tie them directly to development interests.

Interestingly, I learned that DiCiccio once hoped to place even more of his people on the committee. Neighborhood activists can thank his fellow councilman, Michael Johnson, for scuttling that deal.

Johnson's district also includes a small part of the Camelback East Village. That gives him the right to appoint four members to the committee — far fewer than DiCiccio's 13, but still enough to make a dent.

Johnson confirmed that DiCiccio asked him whether he'd give up his Camelback East appointments. DiCiccio suggested a "swap": Johnson would agree to appoint DiCiccio's people, in exchange for DiCiccio's appointing Johnson's picks on the Ahwatukee committee.

Johnson said no.

"It's known that Sal DiCiccio and I have two different philosophies about what we need do with our community and development," Johnson told me. (Suffice it to say, Johnson is notoriously less friendly to developers bearing checkbooks.)

"I have a responsibility to see that the people who elected me are assigned to the village planning committees," Johnson continued, "so that people who share my views have a voice."

Indeed, DiCiccio's plans upset his colleague enough that Johnson quickly filled two vacancies on the committee with neighborhood-friendly people.

DiCiccio didn't respond to my request for comment.

But I know I'm not alone in wondering just what DiCiccio's end game is. One of the ousted Ahwatukee committee members told me that he suspects the councilman sees a committee appointment much like an ambassadorship: He's less interested in the result than the chance to reward financial supporters.

That may well be true in Ahwatukee. (After all, DiCiccio was willing to barter away his slots there.) But in Camelback East, I suspect DiCiccio has a plan.

Why else send an aide to make it clear to Lynn Heath that she had to stop voting immediately? Why else establish rookies as chair and vice chair at their very first meeting?

The neighborhood activists who fought so hard against Scott Schirmer's plans for 44th Street and Camelback worry that Schirmer ultimately has little interest in developing the property. They managed to dig up minutes from the group that actually owns the acreage in question, the Dallas Police and Fire Department Pension Plan. Those minutes clearly show that, at least in 2006, the group wanted to "get entitlements for the Camel Square property and then sell it." A more commercial zoning, of course, would greatly increase the property's value.

Today, of course, development is on life support across Phoenix. There's too much vacant office space and too many empty houses already.

But what better time to slip through a zoning change, hoping to sell the property at a profit when the economy improves?

Could that be what Scott Schirmer is up to?

Could that be what Sal DiCiccio is up to, too?

"Over the next few months, it's going to be interesting to see what comes before that village planning committee," Councilman Johnson says. "Then we'll have a better idea of what's going on."

That, I'm afraid, could prove the understatement of the year.

<http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/2010-03-18/news/phoenix-city-councilman-sal-diccio-purges-the-camelback-east-and-ahwatukee-village-planning-committees-of-their-skeptics-bring-on-the-developers/>