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Bob Buckhorn oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, May 13, 2005

Bob Buckhorn (Interviewee)
Robert J. Kerstein (Interviewer)
RK: This is an interview with Bob Buckhorn, a Special Assistant to Mayor Freedman during her entire administration. Thank you for speaking with me Bob.

BB: Sure.

RK: I’d like to ask some questions about yourself first if you don’t mind.

BB: Yeah.

RK: When did you move to Tampa?


RK: 1982. From where?

BB: From Falls Church, Virginia.

RK: And that’s where you grew up?

BB: Yes sir, yeah.

RK: And I know you went to Penn State University, my alma mater.

BB: Yes. Your Alma Mater!

RK: And why did you move to Tampa?

BB: I had been selected for Aviation Officer Candidate School, which is a precursor to flying for the Navy. It’s where you go through—to get your commission before you start flight school. And when I got down to Pensacola, which is where Naval Aviation Officer
Candidate is, I was diagnosed as having a degeneration in one of my corneas, and was discharged. And I had a fraternity brother who lived in Tampa, and drove from Pensacola to Tampa in my ’66 Dodge Dart, and never left. And that was how I started. He moved six months later, and then I didn’t know a soul in this town. And that was how it began.

RK: When did you first meet Sandy Freedman?

BB: I met Sandy almost immediately after I got down here. I started volunteering in political campaigns. My degree is in Political Science. And I met Pat Frank, who was a state senator at the time through the John Glenn presidential effort in 1984—’83. And she introduced me to Sandy Freedman, and Sandy was contemplating running for mayor at the time—she was chairman of the City Council. And for two years, pretty much from late ’84 through about ’86, Sandy and I just traveled around the city, you know, getting ready for the mayor’s race. And I would usually—I was single at the time, was always available, and so whenever she needed someone to go with her to an event or to a function, I would go.

And in 1985, I started working for the Builders Association of Greater Tampa as their Director of Governmental Affairs—was with Sandy during that whole time. And then Sandy became the Mayor in July of 1986, when Bob Martinez went to assume the Governor’s—or to run for Governor. She was Chairman of the City Council and took over at the time, and I stayed on with the Builders until I think December of 1986, at which point I left to help coordinate the campaign.

RK: Were you the campaign manager?

BB: She was funny about that because she didn’t want anybody to ever say that she was—that somebody else was the manager of the campaign. She wanted to be the manager of her own campaign. So I think my title was Campaign Coordinator.

RK: You ran a campaign for mayor in a medium sized city that is relatively diverse. Do you remember what your general strategy was?

BB: Well, I think based on her history, her relationships, the polling data that we had at the time, she enjoyed tremendous support in a couple of the key groups. And if you assume that the City of Tampa is primarily a three-legged stool: it’s Anglo, it’s Hispanic, and it’s African American. She enjoyed tremendous support particularly in the African American community, and in West Tampa, which is predominately Hispanic. Did very well as well in the Anglo community, but those were really strong numbers for her.

So obviously the strategy was, first and foremost, raise the money, which she did very successfully from the business community. And then focus on the neighborhoods and the grassroots side of it, which tended to be in African American and Hispanic neighborhoods. And so we sort of built that three-legged stool. She enjoyed support across the board, from every segment, but the numbers in those two communities were particularly strong.
RK: You know why she had that response from—

BB: Well, I think she had a history of always standing up for the little guy. I think that was sort of what people knew her for. She took some tough stands during the course of her City Council career that involved issues that were important to the African American community. She was very, very active in terms of neighborhood empowerment—actually the whole trend that we see now towards empowering neighborhoods and civic associations and giving folks a voice at City Council were really things that she was at the forefront of. And as a result of that there was a wellspring of affection for her out there.

I mean in addition to the community that she grew up in, which was predominately white, South Tampa. She was a tennis star growing up; her family was very, very well known. Her, her dad had a store on Franklin Street Mall. Obviously within the Jewish community her family was very, very popular and so it was a wonderful chance to have a candidate that was universally liked. [The] business community rallied behind her. She was the clear frontrunner. She had little difficulty raising the money that it took to be competitive. I think we ended up raising close to half a million dollars.

RK: Was it true that that was considerably more than in the previous races?

BB: Yes, it was, it was. I think probably the highest was Bob Martinez before that, and his was probably two or three hundred thousand. I mean, he could have done more in his re-elect, but he didn’t need to. But she was very good at raising money. And the business community, particularly after Bruce Sampson decided not to run, saw her as a clear frontrunner with very little alternatives. And so they rallied behind her, as you know, as the business community tends to do.

RK: Who would you say were the major figures in the business community in Tampa at that point?

BB: Oh, I would say folks like Hinks and Jim Shimberg, Jack Wilson. The Levys. Dick Beard. You know at the time, the development community was really starting to take its place in this town. Because the economy was booming, downtown was coming alive. So developers tended to be at the forefront of political givers and folks who were making things happen. People like Joe Taggart—there were a number of other folks who have moved on since then. But it was predominately developers that were the face of the Tampa Business Community. In addition to some of the old, the old—I say the old guard: Parke Wright and the Lykes family, Stella Thayer, Bronson Thayer. H. L. Culbreath, who was Tampa—President of Tampa Electric at the time. You know, Jim Ferman obviously. So there were—the existing business cadre in addition to the new blood that was predominately the development community tended to be the folks that pretty much wrote the checks and made the decisions.
RK: And were they involved in any particular organization that kind of mobilized them, for example, the Chamber of—

BB: Yeah, I mean, not that mobilized them necessarily, they were small enough at the time that they all knew each other, they all interacted with each other, they all socialized with each other. So they knew what each other were doing. There was no group that channeled the energy of the business community. The Chamber was fairly powerful because it was made up of a lot of the largest employers, some of whom have ceased to exist at this particular time, but they all knew each other. It was a small circle. I mean it wasn’t nearly what you see now, and much less diverse. They were all white, all male, for the most parts. And it was a small group.

RK: Did they belong to certain clubs?

BB: Oh, sure. I mean, you know, it was the predictable: the Tampa Yacht Club, Krewe Gasparilla, Palma Ceia Golf and Country Club, University Club. Those were the four.

RK: And at that point did most live in South Tampa?

BB: Yes. Virtually all. I mean, New Tampa didn’t exist. So it was virtually all South Tampa, with maybe a scattering of two in Carrollwood or Avila. But by and large it was all South Tampa.

RK: Did you know many of these people because you had been with the Home Builders?

BB: I knew a lot of the Home Builders. You know, the Bobby Suarezes, and the Jack Suarezes of the world. The Shimbergs obviously, who had built an awful lot of homes in this community. But most of the commercial developers, the guys who were putting up the towers downtown for example, were not members of the Builders Association. Because the Builders Association tended to be homebuilders, and then suppliers of homebuilders. You know the engineers were all part of it, but not necessarily the Dick Beards of the world, or the Mike Hogans, or Ron Moore, who is deceased now, or Joe Taggart.

RK: Did Sandy Freedman already know these people?

BB: Yes, yes she knew a lot of them, absolutely. Many of them were from here. So she’s known them—you know, they had appeared before her on City Council. Obviously the Shimbergs and the Freedmans have been friends for decades.

RK: So she won the election relatively easily, is that fair to say?

BB: Yeah, I think the margin was about 75%, 74%. There were five opponents—four—five opponents. The strongest of which was probably a former City Councilmen named Helen Chavez. Also there was a former City Councilmen, Charlie Spicola, in the race. And then there were two minor candidates. One of which was Faye Culp who went on to
win a few elections. There was another young man in the mix too. But yeah, she—you know, we put together a great coalition, we ran a good campaign. This was probably the first campaign that outside consultants had really been a part of in terms of doing the TV, the polling, the mail. It was really a well run campaign. She was a great candidate. She got the endorsement of all the newspapers.

At the time, one of the key things that probably synergized her—or coalesced—the support was, there were some racial disturbances in—I believe it was early 1987. It was December or January of 1987, and the election was in March. Where she really went out and took charge. She had credibility in the African American community that gave her standing, if you will, to help to diffuse the situations. What triggered it was a number of incidents that involved white police officers with young African American males. I think two or three of which died while in the custody of the police. Some of which had to do with natural causes, and things like that. But it was a very, very tense time. And there were a number of civil disturbances in the College Hill area that required a lot of police attention. It was a huge media event. It went on for a couple of nights. And throughout it all, I mean, I think Sandy demonstrated the type of leadership that she demonstrated throughout her career. And I think that sort of cemented that victory.

RK: When you were appointed Special Assistant to the mayor?

BB: Almost immediately after Sandy was elected. I think I started April 1st of 1987.

RK: What were your primary responsibilities?

BB: I did a number of things. One, sort of served as the liaison to other local jurisdictions. Predominately the City Council and also the County Commission. [I] was really there for her in whatever capacity she needed. Because I had been with her for two years prior to that, I was probably the one person that knew, obviously, who had been helpful during the campaign, who her friends were, where—what commitments she had made on the campaign trail, and [I] was familiar with why she was running and the platform on which she was running. Because I had been there, I mean, everyday, for ten hours a day, twelve hours a day.

So a lot of the people that needed access to her, or wanted to get messages to her, or wanted her ear, would call me. Just because you know, they knew me from the campaign and knew my relationship with her. I ended up spending a lot of time focusing on economic development efforts, interacting with the Chamber of Commerce, interacting with neighborhoods. As it evolved, I ended up spending probably a vast majority of three or four years working on MacDill Air Force Base and MacDill related—the closure, the potential closure of MacDill Air Force Base. So it really varied from day to day. I was, for a lack of a better term, an ambassador without a specific portfolio. But you know, the mission changed literally every five minutes depending on what she needed done.
RK: How would you characterize the relationship of the mayor with the City Council during her first term? People always speak of Tampa as having a strong mayor system, but obviously the council plays a role in land use decisions. How would you—?

BB: It’s interesting Bob, because having now lived through a number of administrations, obviously having served on City Council, there’s always going to be tension. It’s the nature of the relationship. Our charter calls for a very, very strong mayoral form of government. City Council is cast with approving a budget, land use, zoning, alcoholic beverage permits. City Council is not involved in day to day operations of the city—the hiring and firing of employees, nor in the setting of policy.

Legislatively, the domain of City Council is absolute. I mean, the mayor doesn’t write laws, doesn’t pass laws, that is solely within purview of City Council. But as council people tend to do, they want to interject themselves often times into the administrative side of the House. And that’s inevitable. It happens every time, with every mayor and every City Council. So for the most part they were very, very supportive. I mean she got virtually all of her agenda passed through City Council. She had some great friends there who were supportive. You know, she had the usual one or two antagonists, one of whom subsequently ran against her in 1991. But by and large, she was immensely popular with them and with the public, and got—I don’t recall her ever losing anything at City Council. Maybe with the exception of an effort to privatize fire inspection, which ended up not, not getting approved, but other than that I think she was tremendously successful.

RK: Who was the City Councilperson who ran against her?

BB: Larry Smith. And remember most of the council members she had either served with or had very long term relationships with. I mean Ronnie Mason came in with her. You know, she had been a friend of Ronnie Mason’s [for] probably thirty years. Perry Harvey had been—you know she had served with Perry Harvey on City Council. You had Tom Vann, first term; you had Lee Duncan who she had served with. Gosh, my memory is going to be tested here. I forget—Linda Saul-Sena, who had been a friend of hers. So I mean it was a very supportive council by and large.

RK: Is there any way you can rate top two or three priorities when Mayor Freedman first took office?

BB: Well, it’s interesting because unfortunately her priorities were not of her making. Often times mayors end up—certainly as the first order of business, dealing with what they’ve been dealt. In this particular case, after Governor Martinez left the Mayors Office and went to run for Governor, there was a significant amount of debt that was left over. He had bonded an awful lot of revenues in order to build things like the Convention Center, and Performing Arts Center and some other things. So the first order of business was to get the fiscal house in shape.

I mean when she took office, the city was significantly in debt—the Convention Center was not yet constructed—Governor Martinez had acquired the land at a very, very
exorbitant price. There was a significant debate internally, about whether or not we should proceed with that building. And in the long run, what was decided was that they had already spent too much for the land, there was no going back on that, and for them to cancel the project would have meant that they would have lost a significant amount of money on the land. So she went forward with that. That was a big, big project that was sitting out there. You obviously had the race relations issue, which took up an awful lot of time in the beginning. And then you had just the normal—even though she had served on City Council, I mean, I can tell you that there is still a significant amount of learning that goes on when you assume a strong executive role as opposed to a legislative role. So you know, just getting used to the players and the individuals and being in charge and figuring out what you were told, and what you weren’t told during the 16 years that she spent on City Council, you know, took up probably—you know, most of your first year is just getting accustomed to being in charge.

RK: Regarding the Convention Center, you had mentioned some major business ventures in Tampa. Did one or more of them get involved in that issue—in other words, wanted to go ahead with the Convention Center or not?

BB: Yeah, well, actually there was a great debate about that because at the time, there were a lot of folks in the business community who thought it was built on the wrong site. They had wanted built on the other side of the Cross Town [Expressway] which would have allowed for expansion, which in hindsight was correct. I mean, when Governor Martinez made the decision to build it where he did, he had in effect land-locked it, and prohibited any significant expansion forever. There were a lot of people who thought that was a much more valuable piece for commercial property. Either a hotel or you know, an office tower, given its position on the waterfront, as opposed to a Convention Center. And so yeah, the business community was split on that. But you know once the decision was made and the land was acquired, there was really no looking back. And so at that point, it became the job of the Mayor to get it done on time and under budget, which she did.

RK: And did the business community urge her to go ahead with it?

BB: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean at that point it was too late. Yeah. It was too late. Then in hindsight, it has turned out to be a wonderful facility. And granted it’s—it is land-locked and perhaps wasn’t built on the best site. But it is a great facility and it’s done a lot of this community.

RK: You mentioned that you served as liaison, at least informally with the Chamber of Commerce, is that correct?

BB: Yes.

RK: How would you characterize their policy orientation? Did they, in other words want, your administration to go in any particular directions? Did they advocate certain policies?
BB: No, not necessarily. I mean the Chamber by and large is you know—it’s difficult for the Chamber to take an active role as a proponent of business because they are wedded to public tax dollars. Currently, the Chamber gets about $700,000 from the city and the county, which makes up probably a third of their entire budget. So they are not particularly aggressive about articulating policies that would cause problems with local jurisdictions. So what you see more of is the Chamber desirous of particularly the Mayor’s involvement in recruiting and economic development efforts. Which Sandy was great at. She would go anywhere, anytime they needed her to recruit businesses to come here.

RK: Now the Chamber wants business in this area, city, county, I don’t know about outside Hillsborough County—

BB: No.

RK: I’d imagine not—

BB: Tampa Bay Partnership does but not the Chamber.

RK: Okay. One would think that the mayor would primarily want businesses to locate in this City of Tampa as opposed to the county. Was that the case or did she have more of a parochial focus?

BB: Yeah, I think she had—I think a recognition for all of us is, I mean sure. I mean it’s great and very easy to be parochial. It’s great to be parochial. But you quickly recognize that even if a, a company has relocated to say Temple Terrace or the county, you know, they’re going to be buying houses in the city, they’re going to be buying cars in the city, they’re kids are going to be going to school in the city—and so we all benefit from the type of development that we were trying to attract. So sure, yeah, we would love to have it all downtown, you know. In hindsight, you know, Westshore never should have been allowed to grow the way it did, and that—those industries and companies should have been induced to come to downtown. But all that being said, a job is a job is a job, and we all benefit from that kind of growth. So, I mean she was less parochial about it than some mayors might have been.

RK: And what about the relationships between the city and [pause]—

BB: County Commissioners?

RK: County Commissioners.

BB: Again, like the relationship between the city and the county, it’s always, I don’t want to say strained, but you have competing interests. You have a board of County Commissioners that really is, is leaderless and powerless by comparison to the mayor. Wherein the Mayor—The Mayor of Tampa has always been the titular head of basically the Bay area—the most recognized politician. The County Commission, because it’s got
a weak form of—it’s got a weak legislative branch and an administrative form of
government, is often times looked up and sometimes, rightfully so, feels, as if they are
the red headed stepchildren. So I mean, you’re going to have that inevitable county-city
clash over funding, over infrastructure, over—over turf, over power, procedure or
otherwise. But you know, it wasn’t to the point where the relationship was dysfunctional,
we got stuff done. It was just painful sometimes. But that happens—you know, I mean, I
lived through it, I mean, it—it’s inevitable. It happens regardless of who the mayor is.

RK: Can you give your best, or one example of having to work with County
Commission?

BB: Well, I mean, I don’t remember Bob, anything, any major issue that wasn’t
ultimately resolved. That, what it got down to was a lot of little issues that sort of added
up to a frustration level. And it could be issues regarding tax increment financing, where
the county has to sign off on, on our ability to implement a tax increment in a financing
district. So it was little stuff like that that ended up—but it was never, you know,
anything that when it was all said and done that we didn’t get done. It was just sometimes
painful going through the process.

RK: I think you played a major role in the hockey arena issue—

BB: Well, not as big as some others, I mean there were others that were much more
involved than I was.

RK: Okay. I was wondering if that was an example of the city and the mayor having to
work with the County Commission.

BB: Yeah, that was, that was a great example of it working. I mean, Ed Turanchik took
the leadership role at the county on that particular deal and did a wonderful job. But you
know it was the city helping to acquire the land, it was the city working with the
downtown partnership and the banks to pull that deal together. I mean, I was not that
particularly involved in, in it—by comparison to say, Bob Harrell, in particular. But
yeah, that was an example of the county and city working together.

RK: What about annexations? Were there any tensions over city annexations for land?

BB: Always, always. You know at the time the county was less urban than it is now, and
probably less prepared to provide the services. So when Ken Goode and the folks at
Hunter’s Green petitioned for annexation—now remember it was all vacant land, there
was nobody living there but cows—so it’s the land owner asking permission, or
requesting annexation, so it didn’t require going to a vote. But I mean, those are the kinds
of the issues that inherently cause problems between cities and counties. I mean, and they
will continue to cause problems for as long as there is two separate jurisdictions. Most of
the developers found the city easier to do business with, and I think that was because the
city has one strong executive who is in charge who could say yes or no, and then back
that up.
The permitting process in the city was easier to get through. We tended to be much more pro-development, pro-growth. Because what, as a mayor, you realize very quickly is if you don’t grow, you die. Because you have a huge segment of the population in the urban core that doesn’t pay any taxes at all. Particularly given homestead exemption and our rate of decline of urban infrastructure and urban housing stock. So in order to, to basically subsidize the urban core, who demands a tremendous amount of services: police, fire, you know, EMS—you’ve got to continue to grow and add revenue to the tax payers. So for cities to not annex, they’re making a tremendous mistake. And so that clash always happens and will continue to happen.

RK: But did some however in the development community feel your administration wasn’t—that the Freedman administration wasn’t pro-growth enough?

BB: Sure, yeah. And in hindsight we probably weren’t. I think we were probably—we could have done a much better job cleaning up the permitting process. To developers, time is money. I mean, when you’re carrying multi-million dollar loan, every day that goes by, you pay interest on it. So the interest carried translates to your ability to make money. Our permitting process at the time was a disaster. And we should have, and could have done a better job eliminating the antiquated regulations, making the permitting process more user friendly, trying to find ways to say yes as opposed to finding ways to put hurdles in front of people.

I mean, Sandy was very cautious with the public money and the tax money. And developers often times will take a run at the city in hopes of getting some incentives or concessions from the city that inevitably means the taxpayers pay. She was very fiscally conservative on that. And would not endorse, nor would participate in development projects that she thought were risky, or fraught with potential disaster for the taxpayers. So you do that enough times, and there will be some who will say that you’re not pro-business, not pro-development. We could have done some stuff to make that—to change that perception. We didn’t, and as a result of that, yeah, there were some who, to this day, don’t look at her as particularly a pro-business development—pro-business mayor.

RK: And as far as—and you had impact fees increase.

BB: Well, impact fees just came to fruition. 1986, statewide. They just came to fruition. So you started to see municipalities all over the country starting to impose impact fees which had never been done before, which caused a huge uproar amongst the development community. She happened to be there at the time, and did impose impact fees. It was the right thing to do. But it did help in terms of the business community perceiving her as being anti-development.

You know and I think one of the—probably the mistakes that we made early on was in her inaugural speech. She talked about “keeping Tampa, Tampa”. Which, for those of us who were there when it was crafted, we understood what it meant, but I don’t think we realized how it would reverberate out there to those that didn’t understand what it meant.
And what it meant was, all of the great things that make this a wonderful place to live—we need to retain. You know, the quality of life, protecting the environment, the diversity. The somewhat small town feel to this city. What it didn’t mean, but was interpreted by some to mean, was we’re going to keep this a small town, we don’t want anybody else here, we don’t want to grow, we don’t want to take that next step to the next tier of cities. That wasn’t what she had in mind, but that’s what was portrayed by some. And that reverberated for a lot of years.

RK: Do you remember who interpreted it that way?

BB: A lot—you know some of the developers. You know, and obviously some people get selective amnesia or selective enhancement of their memories over time. But you know, certainly some of the business community didn’t appreciate that.

RK: How would you characterize the relationship with the Freedman administration with the media? Tribune, St. Pete Times—

BB: I think, I think by and large, it was pretty good. Certainly with the rank and file reporters that covered City Hall—

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

RK: Administration and the media?

BB: I think with the rank and file reporters that covered City Hall it was good. You know, Sandy was a very, competitive, very direct individual, particularly as politicians go. I mean, she would tell it like it is. She wasn’t going to sugar coat it. She didn’t like people speaking for her, which took us a while to get her accustomed to the fact that you know, she couldn’t be up there answering every crazy question all the time—that that is what we were for, as staff.

Her relationship with the Editorial Boards, I mean, St. Pete Times was not really a factor over here at that point. During the first couple of years—you know they became a factor down the road, as they grew and expanded into Hillsborough County. So it was predominately the Tribune. And the Tribune Editorial Board specifically. In hindsight we probably didn’t do as good a job as we should have in cultivating them and in reaching out to them, and—because it was just not her nature. And so she could get pretty combative at times. When Doyle Harvill took over as the Editor of the newspaper she and Doyle were like oil and water. And so I think that was reflected in some of the coverage that we saw during his time there. Much more vicious, much more critical. Which also tended to sour her on her relationship with the Editorial Board. But by and large, you know, every politician is sensitive to criticism. I think, you know, in the long run, she did what she thought was right and didn’t really care what the papers thought.
RK: Can you think of any specific issues where the paper was critical?

BB: You know it’s—I mean, not right off the top of my head. I’d have to go back and really think about it to—but you know they had come off of Mayor Martinez, who was there during a time of great prosperity for the city. The city was just sort of taking on its—a new life if you will, talked about as one of America’s next great cities, the famous Nesbit quote. And so the Editorial Board at the time was very much supportive of that, almost a cheerleader for the Martinez administration.

You know, the economy tanked after Governor Martinez left, it was a much more difficult town to govern. Much tougher decisions had to be made. And as a result of that, the criticism—the coverage was probably much more critical.

RK: What was your biggest challenge in your position?

BB: I think probably ensuring that, you know the relationships that we had in the community, and the strengths that she brought to the table were maintained. And that those folks were cultivated, that they were involved, that we never lost sight of who brought us to the dance, if you will. And that you know, the face of the administration was very much positive, pro-Tampa, pro-growth, you know, pro-progress. So it was, you know, again it was—I was sort of the jack of all trades.

RK: Did you run the ’91 campaign as well?

BB: Yeah.

RK: How had things changed in terms of Hispanics?

BB: Obviously we had a record to run on. You know, during the course of the first four years there had been some decisions made that had made people angry, particularly the police department. The opponent that we had in the ’91 race was a current City Council member, as well as a fellow who ended up going to jail, Charles Eatson. But the race was not necessarily competitive, but at the same time, particularly, the police department at the time, and the police union, really made an effort to try and do some damage. I mean, she won overwhelmingly. I mean, the margin was in the early—in the mid-70s I think, low 70s. So it was clearly a mandate. But any incumbent has to run on a record. And any time you have a record, you’re going to be making decisions that have made people mad over time. But most of the base that elected her—the coalition that elected her for the most part, didn’t stray. I mean, they didn’t have much of an alternative candidate.

RK: Who was the City Councilperson?

BB: Larry Smith. I mean, who was not mayoral material. Not ever remotely close. He was, he had been a thorn in her side for the entire four years that he had been there. He sort of fancied himself a populist, but unfortunately he had no population following him.
But you know, we had to defend a record, and she did, and she won overwhelmingly. You know, and just got ready for the next four years.

RK: Why were the police critical?

BB: During the—one of the things that she had to do—a number of things that she had to do in order to restore the city’s fiscal stability was make a number of cuts. And find ways to sort of, balance the budget and bring us from a deficit to positive cash flow. And in doing so there were a number of personnel decisions that she had to make that affected the police department. The most controversial thing that she did, and probably in hindsight regrets, was she took away—at the time the police had what was called “take home police cars”. Which meant every officer took his uniform patrol car home to his house—his or her house. Obviously it cost the city gas, insurance, wear and tear on the vehicles, etc., etc. The decision that was made, and again in hindsight, the lesson learned was we don’t let personnel and budget people make political decisions for you, was that in order to save, I think it was about a million bucks, they needed to end that take home car policy. Which forced the officers to buy personal cars. Which created a huge, huge uproar, that soured any relationship that she had with rank and file Police Union, forever. Forever—even to this day that relationship is not, not good.

There were some other decisions involving the police department surrounding a policy that was referred to as “B12” which prohibited racial slurs. Given the racial sensitivity at the time, which was in very heightened state, there had been a number of examples where police officers had used racial epitaphs aimed predominately at African Americans. She passed policy that said, you will be fired if you say these things. Which obviously didn’t go over very well with some of the police officers. Obviously the vast majority didn’t ever say—never contemplated saying it, but—

So there were a whole series of events that sort of just destroyed that relationship that she had with the police department. You know and it led to you know, four tough years in negotiating with them. And you, led them to endorse her opponent in the run off—or in the ’91 election.

RK: And what about the firefighters? Were the relationships there better?

BB: They were better, they had a fire chief at the time who was universally disliked by rank and file. He was a competent administrator but his people skills were terrible. And as a result of that rank and file Firefighters really did not like him and blamed her for not getting rid of him.

RK: Had he been, been in prior to her?

BB: Yeah. He had been Bob Martinez’s selection as fire chief. His name was Bill Austin. I mean, [he] instituted a number of wonderful things in the department—professionalized it and he did some things, but was just not liked by rank and file Firefighters. So they—that festered for a number of years, and they never forgave her for not getting rid of him.
And all this came to fruition in her congressional race, when they all came out and worked very hard against her to elect a relatively unknown Jim Davis. Who ended up winning in the run-off. But a lot of that was people that were getting pay back.

RK: That was firefighters and police officers?

BB: Uh-huh, yeah.

RK: Prior to the second election, you had the conference involving the Super Bowl, the Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla. Were you involved in—?

BB: Yeah, I mean, I was involved in everything.

RK: And how do you interpret all that went on involving the Super Bowl and Mystic Krewe?

BB: Well, you know it’s interesting because that, I mean, Tampa during her tenure was going through an awful lot of growing pains. We were going from a small, Southern city to potentially a national player. And you know, under the harsh glare of the national spotlight and that—and that maturing process, there were a lot of fault lines in the city that were exposed. One of which was the state of race relations. I think when Sandy goes down in history, I think she will be judged much more kindly in the long term scheme of things than she has in the short term. I mean her focus throughout her political career has always been on the human infrastructure, the human capital as opposed to bricks and water.

And near and dear to her heart was obviously her relationship with the African American community. But more importantly, the state of the African American community and the desire for the economic progress of this community has achieved to affect everybody, and to empower everybody and to benefit everybody. And so you basically had a city that was controlled by white males, from the Chamber of Commerce to private clubs, to you know, the business leadership, and wasn’t reflective of the 25% of our population that’s African American, predominately. Hispanics were a little bit different because of the immigration going back 100 years, the intermarrying were much more incorporated into the fabric of this city. African Americans were not. I mean, Hispanics had you know, elected mayors, they had elected—you know they were running companies, they were CEOs, they were intermarried into you know, community members of Gasparilla, they had their own Krewes, they had everything. So the Super Bowl really exposed that fault line of racial—I don’t want to say intolerance, but perhaps indifference. Such that we very clearly recognized that we needed to do something about it.

And it meant more than just the Krewe. The Krewe just happened to be the most symbolic example of how far this community had to go. But looking at the Chamber of Commerce which had little if any black representation on the board of Governors to any of the University Club, the Palma Ceia, Tampa Yacht Club, it was a problem—symbolically and substantively—substantively, it was a problem. Super Bowl brought
that to light and there were a number of folks in the African American community who
drew literally, the line in the sand and said, you know this has got to stop. I mean if we
are a part of this community, we deserve to participate and we deserve to reap some of
the benefits. And that became a huge issue during the course of the preparation for the
Super Bowl, in which public money is expended to put on a parade, that is hosted by, at
the time, an all white, all male group. And for some of the members of the leadership, the
African American community, they felt that that was not appropriate, and demanded
change. And so you had this huge—I wouldn’t say uproar, but huge public debate about
the role of the Krewe of Gasparilla, about the need for integration, but the larger issue
was making sure that everyone had a seat at the table, particularly African Americans. So
you know, we went through a whole host of efforts to try and rectify that as best, you
know, as any politician can. The end result was not particularly pretty. The Krewe pulled
out of the parade for the first time in its history because it did not want to be forced to
integrate. I mean it subsequently has, they did the right thing. A substitute parade was put
on, and you know in hindsight, was a disaster.

But out of that came a—an agenda for inclusion I think was the name of it, that really set
in motion, particularly on the part of the Chamber of Commerce and the business
community, that if we’re going to succeed, we’ve all got to be in this boat together. And
so what you saw was significantly more representation at the Chamber of Commerce on
the board of Governors, by African Americans. We as an administration had always
made it a point—in appointments that we had—[to make sure] that those appointments
reflected the diversity of this city. I mean that was a hallmark of ours. But others needed
to do the same thing. And so, you know, appointments to committees and you know,
whatever, charitable things, United Way, needed to reflect this community.

And I think Sandy’s lasting legacy will be is that she is the one that bullied and prodded
and poked and pushed the mainstream community to do the right thing. And now there’s
been some back sliding since then. But she was the mayor that did that. And when you do
that, you often times make people mad. You rattle them out of their comfort zone. And
clearly in some segments of the community, that bothered people. I mean you had [a]
Jewish woman mayor, sort of imposing her value set—which happened to be the correct
one—on folks that would perhaps not choose to do it of their own volition. And so it, you
know, it bothered a lot of people, and for some, again, these are some of the decisions
that they never forgave her for.

RK: Was the appointment of the first African American Police Chief, Mr. Holder, a
response to the controversy over the Krewe?

BB: Well, no, I think that was just Sandy being Sandy. I mean, I think Sandy recognized
that—particularly in our public safety areas, that we needed to reflect a community that
we patrolled and served. Bennie Holder was qualified for the job, he was the best
candidate. For her it wasn’t necessarily a matter of race as it was qualifications, certainly
it was in keeping with her philosophy, and so she did it. And I mean, you know, she
didn’t necessarily give it a second thought. I mean, yeah, it was historic, and it was the
right thing to do, and I’m glad she did it. But she did it for all the right reasons, not to make a political statement.

RK: And what about the WMBE program, was that an initiative of the administration or is that City Council?

BB: No, that is all the administration. I mean, again, and it’s part of—I mean, if we were asking others to do this, then we need to do it as well. And so, you know, African American people and Hispanic folks pay taxes just like you and I do, and they deserve the same opportunity to reap some of the benefits, particularly from public contracts. And so, yeah, I mean, affirmative action is a controversial topic, but it’s the right thing to do. And all it does is level the playing field, that’s it. It doesn’t guarantee outcomes. It just makes sure that everybody has a chance to participate and share. And so, yeah, we were very aggressive about what’s essentially referred to as WMBE—Women and Minority Business Enterprises—we were aggressive about finding qualified African Americans and Hispanics and women to serve on boards and appointments. I mean, if you look at her administration, I think you’d see that she probably hired and promoted and appointed more women and minorities than any mayor—and I mean any mayor. You know, whether it was Pam Aiken being appointed the City Attorney or Bennie Holder as Police Chief, you name it. And what she also did was—and this goes to the long term benefits is, try and grow, within the city staff, a—for lack of a better term, a minority middle class. So that when she was gone, they would be able to move into positions of leadership and eventually assume department chairs and things like that. So, you know, she was sewing the seeds for this community for a long time, and yeah, it wasn’t popular, it wasn’t popular.

RK: On a different topic, did the administration support historic preservation?

BB: They did, I mean it wasn’t necessarily a priority for her. It was something she believed in and did what she could. I mean, a great example was the Lykes Building. Which ended up getting torn down, like the day Mayor Greco took over. But you know, it was not something we spent a great deal of time worried about, because there were other more pressing things that we ended up having to deal with, but yeah, she believed in it.

RK: I guess I was wondering…

BB: Tampa Theatre, she helped to restore.

RK: I was wondering if a conflict with the Lykes business over the historic preservation effort to keep their buildings from being knocked down, was a clear example of tension between the mayor and the business—

BB: Sure. Well, I mean, when it was all said and done, accumulation of eight years of decisions, for some segments of the community were problematic. For some in the business community or in the—in the white community—it all sort of came together in this anti-business, social-liberal [way] that they found unattractive. You know, and again
it played to some of the police department’s animosity towards her, whether it was, you know, the no racial slur policy, the increase in minority hiring. I mean all that for some folks came together in an unholy mix that a lot of them went out and supported others when they got an opportunity against her. Particularly [inaudible].

RK: She focused on neighborhood empowerment to some extent. You mentioned that early on in our discussion—

BB: Yes.

RK: Did you get involved in any of those efforts?

BB: Yes, yes.

RK: And how would you characterize them? What sticks out in your mind?

BB: Well, I think, for the first time, we had an administration—or she had administration that clearly recognized and paid more than lip service to the fact that neighborhoods are the building blocks to any great city. And without a firm foundation, it doesn’t matter what downtown looks like, because ultimately people go home at a night to a neighborhood, they don’t go home to a convention center. And so for her, reaching out, restoring, empowering, [and] engaging neighborhoods was a no-brainer. That to me was one of the hallmarks of her administration. [Which] was that these neighborhoods, if engaged, would help this community move forward in a very, very positive way.

You know, it’s fraught with risk because for some politicians, you know, an advocacy group out there is nothing more than a pain in the neck. But for her it wasn’t. I mean, for her it was, we need to empower these folks to help control their own destiny. Whether it’s engaging them to get hookers off Nebraska Avenue, or lobbying City Council for storm water improvements—I mean, whatever it may be, they can be a force for good. And given enough attention, and given enough resources, they can shape their own destiny and city government will have to do less of it. So what you see now, which is a city with probably 60 or 70 neighborhood associations; I mean when we started, we had maybe ten. And she grew that, she grew that. She trained neighborhood leaders, we set up a neighborhood liaison, Steve LaBour, whose job was to do nothing but help neighborhoods be successful. We institutionalized it so that no mayor could dismantle it after she left. We educated them on the zoning process and land use because that’s by and large what affects them the most. Some of the developers weren’t real happy about it because they often times saw neighborhoods as a built in opposition group to whatever they wanted to do.

So you know, her—you know, again, you ended up having a—by empowering neighborhoods you alienated the business community to some degree. And so then further reinforced in the minds of them that you know, Freedman was anti-business, anti-growth, anti-development, anti-whatever. But again, you know, going back to her legacy of human capital—that plays right along there with it. And going in and rebuilding these
neighborhoods—and out of that came her emphasis on affordable housing, which she became recognized as one of the leaders in the country. And the program that she created was recognized by President Clinton and Vice President Gore, as one of the finest and a role model for other cities all over the country. I mean that all was part of empowering neighborhoods. So, you know, it’s unfortunate that it’s fallen by the wayside in subsequent years, but I think that probably, that housing program and that neighborhood empowerment, in terms of tangible accomplishments, was probably the best thing that she did when she was here.

RK: Was this perspective at all influenced by, or at least compatible with any national movement during the time you were in office, whether it be a neighborhood organization movement, or anything with the Democratic Party?

BB: I don’t think necessarily the Democratic Party, because Sandy was a very practical politician. She was a Democrat, she was proud of being a Democrat, she stood for much of what the Democratic Party stood for. But when you’re a mayor, you’ve got to make things run. That’s your job. You don’t have the opportunity necessarily to be an ideologue. You’ve got to run a city. And so she was very practical in terms of the application of power, she was very fiscally conservative, probably socially liberal, whether it was on things like Human Rights ordinances or race relations or things that tend to—that people tend to tie to the Democratic Party. But I, you know, I think she was more concerned about running an efficient city about reinventing the way we do business—I think if anybody or any movement helped sway with her, it was more David Osborne talking about laboratories of Democracy and reinventing government at the local level than it was, you know, the Democratic Party. I mean, you know, she did her thing as a Democrat, but that wasn’t what she did eight to five. Eight to five she, you know, made the trains run on time, which is what people hired her to do.

RK: Did she support any one Presidential race?

BB: Yeah, she was—in 1987, she supported Dick Gephardt. And then in 1992, she was one of the first mayors to come out publicly for Clinton. [She] came out for Clinton at the Florida Democratic Straw Poll in December of ’91, which was a year before the elections, and worked very hard on his behalf, raised a lot of money for him. You know, still to this day, friendly with him, and you know, she very much believed in his administration and what he was trying to do.

RK: Looking at the administration historically, and you’ve already tried to do this to some extent, how would you place the Freedman administration between the Martinez administration on one hand, and then Greco on the other?

BB: I mean, all three of them were accomplished mayors in their own right, [with] very different styles. And you know it’s interesting, Bob, because as I look back over history, and this is somewhat painful to say, but it seems as though that the voters tend to elect the right mayor for the right time. And you know, Martinez came at a time when the city was starting to emerge as a second tier city. And he brought the rights—and when I say
second tier, I don’t say that in a pejorative sense, because we’re not competing with New York, Chicago, LA, San Francisco, Washington, DC. We were competing with emerging, predominately sun-belt cities in the south and the west. He [Martinez] was a businessman, he brought a businessman’s perspective to it, he served at a time when the economy was booming, when development was just starting to take off here—the first of the real tall towers were being built in the early ‘80s, mid ‘80s. And so he presided over a time of great prosperity, which sort of set Tampa on the map.

Sandy came in, the economy took a downturn, a significant downturn. In the late ‘80s, early ‘90s you had the savings and loan debacle. You had a huge amount of foreclosures and properties being turned over to the banks. The development industry, which fueled, to a large degree Tampa’s economy was sinking fast. And so, you know a lot of people lost their jobs, a lot of people lost an awful lot of money. You had a city that was wrecked by race relations, issues. You had a city that was to some degree left in a great deal of debt, and so it required a different skill set.

She was followed by Greco, who came in at a time when the economy was just starting to pick up—people certainly the business community were tired of Sandy’s style. I’m convinced in about six years, any mayor wears out their welcome, just because the nature of your relationship with the people that you govern in, and the types of decisions you have to make. His [Greco’s] style was more of a cheerleader than as a manager. I mean, he was absolutely hands-off of the administration. But the economy allowed him—the economy and his very pervasive, charismatic attitude allowed him to really capitalize on that, and you know, instill a new sense of optimism, particularly amongst the business community. You know, he neglected the neighborhoods and neglected the human issues, but from a business perspective, Tampa was booming. I mean, most of that was out of his control because the economy was booming. But I mean, as a mayor, timing is everything. And you are either the beneficiary or the recipient of the larger economic cycles. And either you’ll be a hero or star or a goat because of it.

And so huge stylistic differences, and substantive differences between all of the mayors, but you know, when it’s all said and done, you know, each of them did a good job. Each of them had strong points and weak points. Obviously I’m partial to one, but you know, you can’t take away from Greco or Martinez—what they did—because they did a lot of good things.

RK: As far as how people perceived the different administrations, was the fact that Mayor Freedman was a woman—is a woman—did that in itself make a difference for some?

BB: Oh sure, yeah. There were some people who never got over the fact that we elected a five-foot, Jewish, woman mayor. I mean just couldn’t, couldn’t get over it. I mean people’s biases are people’s biases, and there’s nothing we can do to change that. You know, but a lot of it—a lot of perceptions of mayors in the short term are based on the concrete—
RK: You were discussing how Mayor Freedman’s gender might have influenced responses to her—

BB: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think to some degree there have always been biases. I think for the vast, vast majority of people in the community that was not an issue, and for a great many of them it was an asset. I mean she brought a different sensitivity and having worked and served with women, they bring in a different perspective to political discussion that some men don’t. I mean, it’s just life experiences and what not. And it’s a good thing, by and large. But you know, its—you know, she was the first woman that we had ever elected mayor here, so you know, she had to deal with that, and she did. I mean, it didn’t bother her at all.

RK: Were there any women’s groups that she was active in?

BB: She was active with Athena early in her career. I think the League of Women Voters perhaps. I would say probably Athena more so than any. I mean, that’s where you had a lot of the high powered, professional women—her peers if you will, her support group. But you know, Sandy—Sandy was extremely confident and prepared to be mayor. She had trained for it if you will, and it wasn’t a problem for her.

RK: Now one final question. Can you just catch us up on what you have done since you left the administration?

BB: I left in probably the fall of 1994. She was finished in, what, April 1, 1995 was when the new mayor took office. I think I left about maybe, November, December. [I] ran for Tampa City Council, was elected citywide, 1995, served four years, was reelected 1999. Ran for mayor in 2003 and was not successful. [I] joined the Dewey Square Group as a partner here, which is a public affairs firm, a national public affairs firm. And I’ve been here ever since. Ran for County Commission in ’04 and lost as well. Had a bad run at it.

RK: Thank you very, very much for speaking with me Bob.

BB: Yeah, sure. Happy to do it, Bob.