November 2005

Steve LaBour oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, November 19, 2005

Steven LaBour (Interviewee)

Robert J. Kerstein (Interviewer)

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RK: This is an interview with Steve LaBour. Thank you for speaking with me.

SL: You’re welcome.

RK: What was your position with the Freedman administration?

SL: Actually I had two titles. I was the Deputy Director of Communications, and I was the Mayor’s Liaison to Neighborhoods.

RK: We’ll get to what you did in those positions shortly. I’d just like to ask a little about your background if I could?

SL: Sure.

RK: Where were you born?

SL: I was born in Seneca Falls, New York. Small, very small town [in] upstate New York. Some people might recognize it as being the birthplace of women’s rights. So that’s our claim to fame.

RK: And where did you go to college?

SL: [I] went to Rochester Institute of Technology. I started out at University of Tampa, went there for two years, and then transferred to the Rochester Institute of Technology.

RK: And then after you graduated from college did you move to Tampa right away?

SL: Not right away. I actually put off going to law school and worked for a private law firm and then I went in to become a paralegal with the Legal Aid Society in Rochester, and worked there at that position for four years. And then went to, back to the private sector in a private law firm. And then I got a call from my father who had moved to
Florida after my parents’ divorce and had started a construction—development company here in Tampa. And he called me and said, would you be willing to put off law school to come down to help me kind of get to the next plateau, so that I could retire early, and enjoy life? And I need to bring somebody in the office I can trust and actually has your, has your skills—and would you consider it? And I said, sure, in a heartbeat. I mean, moving to Florida was a, was a good thing from Rochester, on the average of 93 inches of snow a year.

RK: Do you remember what year that was?


RK: And when did you first meet Sandy Freedman?

SL: I’m sorry, ’83, I moved down in ’83. I first met Sandy Freedman—she probably was the second elected official I met when I got here. Before I had left Rochester, I had, had become politically active, in that I was very interested in the political process and was very interested in good government. So I, I kind of signed on as a volunteer and worked on a couple of campaigns up in Rochester. So when I came to Florida, I really wanted to get involved, and somebody had said to me, you really need to meet Sandy Freedman, she’s you know, she’s probably going to be mayor one day. And through—I had met Bob Buckhorn working on another campaign, and doing some work for the Democrats, and so he introduced me. We had lunch, and we chatted, and I was impressed from the very first day. I was excited about the fact that she might become mayor one day.

RK: She became mayor in 1986 when Bob Martinez stepped down to run for Governor. Did you get involved with her administration that early?

SL: No. She moved up to the mayor’s position as you said, and there was a time in which she had to run. I think that was in 1988, I think she had—’87, when she had to run. So I didn’t, really wasn’t involved in her administration per se because she was—I think appropriately so, there was a lot of people who were concerned that she might make a lot of changes and then run, and then you know, god forbid what would happen if she lost, and then she had made all these changes. So she was very true to the office, right from the beginning. She was very, she was very concerned about you know, doing what was right for the Office of Mayor as opposed to Sandy Freedman, you know, personally or politically. So I—she didn’t really talk with me about anything that was going on in City Hall, she was gearing up for the campaign, and she said that she needed to bring in some good people to help her and I told her, I’ll do whatever you need me to do. And so I became the volunteer coordinator for the campaign. It was [an] unpaid position and I volunteered, volunteered my time—put together the, you know, the talks, and the phone banks and you know, just really helped around the office, campaign office.

RK: And when did you join the administration?

RK: And what were your initial marching orders, which isn’t the best term to use, but in other words, what your initial responsibilities?

SL: Well after she won, you know won the seat, if you will—she was you know, already mayor, but she won the election. I had decided that I was going to go to law school again, and had applied and had gotten accepted. And in the meantime, just trying to—and my father had sold the business, he was able to retire early like he wanted to. And it was interesting, because I was kind of figuring out what am I going to do right before I go to law school? in that fall. And a local politician, Pat Frank, who was a state senator, had decided to run for the US Senate. And so just, everyone was fairly realistic about her chances and everybody suspected she probably wouldn’t make it through the primary. But I had known Pat for many years, so I had signed on voluntarily to work on her campaign. I worked full time on her US Senate campaign.

When she lost the first—in the first primary, which was August, Buddy MacKay, who had come in second at the time, she endorsed him, and he asked me if I would come, come on board—and actually was paid. And [I] put going off to law school to January, and did that campaign, and we lost a very, very close election in November, very heartbreaking.

And so I came back to Tampa and Sandy Freedman—I stopped in to see Sandy, and she said let’s have lunch. And so it must have been like three weeks later, given her schedule, [and] we had lunch, and after the end of a very, you know, nice lunch of catching up on, on what was going on, she said, have you ever thought about working for government? And I said, no, not really. And she said, well, I’ve got this position and I’ve been wrestling with—I’ve been trying to, to—to figure out who would be a good fit, and it’s a position that would, that would help us with internal communications and do some communications work; but more importantly, would reach out to neighborhood associations, help start them, work with ones that already existed, show them that I am interested in making sure that they are brought into the process. This person would also have to work internally with departments and convince them that I was serious about this work. She said, it’s a crazy job, someone would be nuts to take it, I can’t pay them very much—are you interested? And I said, well, I’d like to hear a little bit more, and you know, I think it plays to my skill sets, and she agreed. She said, that’s exactly—it dawned on me that you were probably the person that I needed to bring into this position. And it was a brand new position, it never, it never—the city had never had that position. So, I thought about it for one day, and called her up and said, I’m game, I’m willing to do it. And she said, great, let’s see, you know, what I can offer you and we’ll go from there. And I think it was like, three weeks later, I was walking in City Hall.

RK: And you reported directly to the Mayor?

SL: I had two reports. On the communications—internal communications tasks, I reported to John Dunn, who was the Director of Communications. But on all the neighborhood stuff I reported directly to Sandy.
RK: What did you end up spending most of your time on, neighborhood…?

SL: Oh, there was no question it was neighborhood. I mean it was, probably a 90-10 percent—you know a 90%, 10% split.

RK: Some cities are known for having strong neighborhood organizations, and in some cases have gone back you know, decades. When you first entered City Hall, how would you characterize the level of neighborhood organization in Tampa? Was it well organized, the neighborhoods?

SL: No. It was very primitive in the sense that the, we had about 20 organized groups. And quite frankly, they were organized mainly—some of them had been around for quite a while, Wellswood, for instance, [a] very old neighborhood association. But a lot of the neighborhood associations had formed because of the concern of—in 1985 the state passing the Growth Management Act. And so it meant that each jurisdiction, Tampa included, had to come up with a comprehensive plan—a land use plan—and had to come up with zoning to match that. And neighborhoods had been fighting you know, the encroachment of commercial development, especially at Westshore.

When Westshore was allowed to develop, a lot of those neighborhoods felt that that was, [or] could be the beginning to the end of their neighborhood, so they were very concerned about that. So the strongest neighborhood associations had been formed around growth management issues or zoning issues, land use issues, and not what you would think—you know, crime or drugs, or that kind of thing.

So when I came on board, that was really an education for me—that we only had 20 organized neighborhood associations. They weren’t necessarily in the worst sections of town, or the sections that had the most challenges, they were mainly in South Tampa, although there were certainly a few. Old Seminole Heights was already formed because they were very concerned about the widening of Hillsborough [Avenue] and what that impact might have on them. So they were smart to organize.

So I kind of came in with—I remember the very first day I started, late afternoon, you know the first part of the day you’re filling out papers and you know, finding out where everything is, so late afternoon, the Mayor had said, stop, stop on by before the end of the day, I’d like to say hello, so I did, and she said, what do you think? And I said, I’m ready to go to work, and she said, that’s great, and I said, where do I find the list of neighborhood associations? And she looked up over her half glasses to me and she said, why do you think I hired you? So I realized, ok, this is a little more basic than I thought. So, that was my first task, was actually to try to find out, where the heck are these neighborhoods and which ones are organized? And then find out where they weren’t, and then, and then—that’s how we got started.

RK: Was there any umbrella organization that the neighborhood organizations belonged to at that time?
Yeah, actually because of the growth management issues, Park Wright III, who had been a—interestingly enough was a real strong Chamber guy—I mean, he was a downtown guy, a South Tampa guy, had the respect of you know, all of the movers and shakers if you will of that time. But he was very—he lived in Beach Park. And he was very concerned about this growth management stuff. And so he had talked to a few people who had gone down to City Council that were clearly from organized groups. And one of those persons was Margaret Vizzi from Beach Park, his neighborhood. And he talked to Margaret, and he said, *Margaret, do you think that of the groups that are organized, there would be any need or use, or would it be helpful if there were an umbrella group?* And she said, *oh, I think, I think that’s a great idea.* So he actually hosted the very first lunch, and invited all the known—at that time—organized neighborhood associations to the, brought them to the table. And I think they might have had a couple meetings that he kind of facilitated after that, but then he stepped back and he let them, let them move forward. And they were, they were becoming stronger and more solidified right when I was coming on board and working for Sandy.

So Sandy had told me about them, she said *there is this umbrella group, I don’t know much about them, but you need to call Margaret Vizzi, she’s the one who is the president, and she knows all about them, but we need to find out about them and support them, and they probably can be of some help to you.* So I contacted Margaret, and you know, she was just you know, very pleased to think that the administration was reaching out them—I think a little skeptical, which was normal, and I got a lot of that at first. But they invited me to everyone of their meetings, and, and it was a wonderful learning experience for me because I could tell first hand you know, directly from them, what the issues were and what their concerns were.

**RK:** What was the name of the organization?

**SL:** The organization was THAN, which was Tampa Homeowners, an Association of Neighborhoods.

**RK:** And in reality, was it primarily neighborhoods where most people owned homes as opposed to being renters?

**SL:** Yes, they were—and they weren’t, they weren’t bashful about that. They, they were there to protect their property values, to protect their neighborhoods from commercial encroachment. They were not, at that point, they really hadn’t been involved in any other issue other than, pretty much, land use. However, Carver City/Lincoln Gardens was one of the founding neighborhoods and at the time there was a wonderful woman—a lot of people didn’t think she was so wonderful—but she actually really was a treasure for Carver City/Lincoln Gardens, and that was Loretta Ingraham. And at the time, Carver City/Lincoln Gardens had a county jail, right smack in the middle of their neighborhood. And so she was smart enough to realize *I need to hitch my wagon onto THAN, and those neighborhoods, because they probably can help me,* and it was just a wonderful connection for them. Because they ended up, they end up helping one another as well.
Because Carver City Lincoln Gardens is physically located pretty close to Westshore, and the property—I mean, it, it’s a tough struggling neighborhood, and the fear was that the developers would just go in and just buy up this land and turn it into commercial or office, or anything but residential. And so Loretta said, *I need your help, THAN, to help me, and I’ll help you*, and it was a good partnership right from the very beginning.

RK: Is that primarily an African American neighborhood?

SL: Yes. It was primarily, from my understanding, and I’ll leave it to the historians to say if this is accurate or not—but my understanding, it was, when the urban renewal took place, in Ybor, and I think somewhat in West Tampa as well, that this was the place that they were going to, you know, they could show that they were not just displacing these people and they were, you know, they couldn’t go anywhere. But this was the community that they could, they could, they could buy a house and live in. And the reality is, it was literally built out of a swamp. It was a place that a lot of people wouldn’t have imagined that they would want to live. But they quickly turned it into, two communities: Carver City and Lincoln Gardens. And very predominately African American.

RK: What would you say was the social class of those neighborhoods?

SL: They were lower working class, I mean, you know—husband and wife both worked, were very proud, I mean, took great pride in their little, you know, little houses, and really made that neighborhood. I mean, it’s really a testament to them that they, that they said, *even though they gave us a swamp, we’re going to make it home,* and they have. And they’re still active today, and still you know, fighting for their neighborhood. And if, and if they hadn’t, quite frankly, I suspected [it] probably ultimately would have been taken over by developers.

RK: Of the neighborhood organizations in existence when you first started with the administration, was that the only predominantly African American one?

SL: Yes, yes. Now the housing authority, with College Hill and a couple of others had, technically, HUD requirements—required them to have associations. But they really dealt with the conditions within the Housing Authority property. They didn’t really look at the bigger picture of *how does my community fit you know into the whole of Tampa?* So while I certainly you know, contacted them and they worked with me and I worked with them a little, at first it was really not a neighborhood association in the way you would think of a neighborhood association.

RK: Now when you first started, were the plans still being formulated under the 1985 act? Or were they already completed?

SL: When I had started they had—Tampa was actually one of the first communities, if not the first, if I remember correctly that actually successfully completed its comprehensive plan process. I think it was the first jurisdiction to be accepted by the state. And they had already done zoning compliance, which was the second phase. You
set the land use first, and then you had to make sure your zoning complied. And it was, it
was an incredible, you know, incredible process. You know, very painstakingly done and
you know, a lot of meetings; and City Council had to sit through a lot of hearings that
were at times difficult. But by the time I came on board, that had just been completed.

RK: Now did you get the impression that they—the organizations in THAN believed they
had real input into the process?

SL: I think they felt at the end that they had the best that they could expect. One of the
things that Sandy had told me—when Sandy Freedman became mayor, she [had] already
been on City Council for 12 year prior to that, and had been Chairman. And, in a matter
of fact, she might have even mentioned this at the lunch that we had when she first
floated the idea—in fact, I know she did. She said her frustration of 12 years sitting on
City Council was that the only time there seemed to be public—an opportunity for public
input was at the public hearing. And she said that’s when it’s too late. They’re given
three minutes. And she said, and quite frankly, those meetings are tough because they’re,
they’re frustrated, you know, they don’t have all the information; you know, it’s—
because they don’t have all the information the, you know, the representatives who
represent the applicants who are trying to make these you know, land use changes or
zoning changes, would use that against the neighborhoods, but you know they don’t know
what they’re talking about. We’ve done that study, we’ve done this. And she said it was
very frustrating to her because she couldn’t get the administration to get these, especially
the organized groups, the information plugged in, you know, earlier in the process.

And so she made it—that was one of my absolute, you know, number one responsibilities
was to make sure that we were trying to get them information as early as we possibly
could. And so that’s really what I started on. Was, how do we do that, and for what
issues? You know, clearly, zonings or land use changes would be something we want to
make sure we did early, make sure they were plugged in early. But what about if we were
going to change out their water main? Or we were going to improve an intersection, or
we were going to clamp down on crack dealers or prostitutes? Shouldn’t they be brought
in to what we’re going to do, how we’re going to do it, and get their input? And it was
clear to the Mayor that she said, yes, yes, yes, yes to all of that, and said, you know, this is
a full program, this is not just on rezonings and wet zones.

RK: And that means, I assume, that you had to be in touch with several of the city
bureaucracies?

SL: Yes.

RK: And was that difficult in the sense that they weren’t used [to] perhaps, to sharing
information with people outside their bureaucracy?

SL: Not only were they—not only were they not used to it, but they absolutely said it was
not their responsibility to do it. The irony is, when I first started, I thought the toughest,
the toughest part of my job was, was going to the neighborhood associations for the first
time—and going to their meeting, you know, because City Hall had really never reached out to them proactively. It only had been doing it reactively. And those meetings were tough, I mean, don’t get me wrong. I always had the two meeting rule, by the way. The first meeting, even though they introduced me as a special guest speaker, I would tell them that I was really a special guest listener. Because I had a feeling that they probably had a lot of things they wanted to tell me. And sure enough, they would unload, from the real serious to the benign. I heard it all. And what I did was I promised them I was coming back you know, within 60 to 90 days; I would come back to their meeting, and then let’s have a dialogue. Let’s start talking about how we’re going to be able to tackle some of these issues. So I thought that was going to be the toughest part of my job. And I found people to be—neighborhood associations to be incredibly receptive. Especially the leadership. You might have some of the citizens who were very skeptical, but I mean, I met usually with the leadership before I ever actually went to one of their meetings. But they were very receptive and I was very pleased.

So when I went to the departments to get them plugged in and say, great news, you know, I want to take you to this next meeting at you know, South Seminole Heights or wherever it might be, and they said, no way. That’s your job. They, you know—transportation people would tell me, we’re transportation engineers, we don’t do PR. And so I went to the mayor and I said, boy, this is—this is tougher than I thought it was going to be. And she said, well, you’ve got to get them to do it. And I, I was lucky and fortunate because I had a mayor that was obviously behind it—behind this culture change. And she was the one that was actually instituting it.

So I had the ability of being able to have my phone calls returned by directors if I called them. Well what I did was I actually met with them, I said, tell me why, you know why don’t you want—why is it tough for you to go out to these meetings? And they would say, you know, Steve, you know, how it’s worked is that we would get a call from the mayor’s office, and they would say, you know, these people are really angry, they’re having a special meeting next Wednesday, you’ve got to go. You know make sure you tell them what you’re doing, why you’re doing it. You know, and you got to—and you’re going to have to go to that meeting. And so they said, you know we walked into a, you know, hornet’s nest. I mean, they weren’t happy with us, they wouldn’t listen to what we had to say. You know we really had good news to deliver them—to them often times, you know, we’re going to fix that water pressure problem by replacing the water main; but they didn’t want to hear it, they were just mad at us, and it was, quite frankly, it was just not very pleasant. And we would walk away thinking, we didn’t do any good here. And under that scenario, that is absolutely correct. You don’t do any good there. You don’t serve anyone’s purpose, theirs or the city’s.

So what I tried to come up with was ways that I could get the department to go to a neighborhood meeting in a proactive way. I’ll give you an example. If we were doing a water main project, it’s more than just digging up the street and replacing a water main. You literally are inconveniencing people, and you probably have to do a detour, which means the Transportation Department has to work closely with the Water Department to figure out where that detour is going to be, and you know those kinds of things. And so I
would take the Water Department Director, and I’d take the Transportation Department Director, and I’d—I’d call up the neighborhood association leadership and say, we’d like to come and talk to you about...can we have just 10 minutes on your agenda, we’ve got something we want to talk to you about. And they would say sure. And so they would unveil the plan, and the good news is we’re going to—this is, you know, this pipe has been there since you know, 60, 70 years, and we’re going to replace it. You’re going to have better water pressure. The bad news is that it’s really going to be an inconvenience, but by the way, all during the construction, here’s a number you can call, contact you can make [if] you want to know about what our contractor’s doing right or wrong. And by the way, we’ve got to do a detour, and that’s why we’ve got the Transportation Department... And so they would say, you know, this is the detour, you know, take a look at it, let us know if you think this is going to work. And we got incredible feedback. I mean, we’d get invariably, you know, someone would raise their hand and they’d say, well, what are you going to do about the bus stop on the corner there? That’s, that’s a big bus stop. And the transportation would say, oh, well we do check with the school district, but I’m glad we heard that now, because Hmm, maybe we need to, you know, figure this out differently. For instance, if the project was going to extend from a school year into the summer, they might reverse how they were going to do it, so the bus stop during school session wouldn’t be impacted, and you know, try and work those things out.

I remember one meeting, I loved it—there was a detour route that was going to a corner with a gas station, and they were only going to let people turn one direction, I forgot what it was. And everybody just kind of chuckled to themselves, and they said, nobody waits at that light, they all cut through the gas station now. And so the Transportation Department said, oh, well you can’t do that, that’s illegal, you can’t do that. And they said, well, go look for yourself, but that’s what everybody does. As soon as four cars stack up, they start going through the gas station, so you’re going to have to deal with that.

The bottom line is after we would have those meetings, the people would go up to the department head and they would say, wow, thank you for coming out, would you like some punch? You want some cake? I mean, a whole different kind of atmosphere. And by the way, as I introduced them to the group, I would tell them you know, how long they worked with the city, where they had graduated, that they had family, you know—tried to humanize City Hall for the people as well. Because our directors, you know, they—they did a lot of tough work, and you know, they needed—the citizens needed to know, know they were people too so to speak. And the department has loved it, and I think we showed that when you do it proactively it’s just, you know it’s just—more positive things can happen.

RK: Were priorities ever changed after a neighborhood meeting—in other words, the citizens saying, instead of this program, we want another program or something along those lines?

SL: Absolutely. And department heads though, I mean they, they do believe they do their
work well, so they believe that you know, they gather all the information and they come up with their work programs, and that they believe that citizens will be pleased with the choices that they made. What Sandy would say to department heads, *that could very well be true, I’m not suggesting you’re not making good choices, but I want them to hear what those choices are, and before you make your final decision, I want, I want them to weigh in on it.* And yeah, several times, I mean, they, people would say, *you know what? You know that sidewalk you want to put over there? That’s fine and dandy, but we really need it over here.* And the Transportation Department would say, *really? We would have thought you would have really wanted that sidewalk...* [neighborhood reply] *No, no, it’s important, we’d love to have it, but man, if you’re only going to do one, do it over here.*

Or certainly in Code Enforcement, which was, which was a very high priority for Sandy, we used citizen input a lot in trying to figure out what was the best way to get through a very complex due process ridden, you know, process of Code Enforcement.

**RK:** What’s Code Enforcement?

**SL:** Code Enforcement is if you, you do not keep your, your residence up to “code,” you can be cited. Shortly after Sandy became Mayor, it was during a time in which everyone was fleeing from the city and they were going to the suburbs. And so our property tax base was diminishing.

Plus the neighborhoods that had, you know, the higher crime, etcetera, you know, they were being impacted the most. And so she was curious to find out you know, if we—if we were able to bring people back or bring new people into the city, where would they live? And what was the, the condition of the housing stock? So she had a survey done, and it came back and said that 25% of our housing stock was substandard—didn’t meet code. And she knew right away that that was killing neighborhoods, because it was concentrated in mostly East Tampa, Sulphur Springs area, Ybor. And we didn’t have that problem, you know, south of Kennedy [Blvd]; we didn’t have that problem in Seminole Heights, in Forest Hills, those kinds of places. The problem was clearly localized in East Tampa. So—and Sulphur Springs, they—they had had, they were really hurting bad, badly. And they marched on City Hall right about the same time I started, and said, *we’ve had it. You better start doing something because we’re going to come down and we’re going to harass you every single week until you do something.* And so that was one of the great success stories. I don’t think that we would have been able to turn code enforcement around without the commitment of the citizens. They were just phenomenal. They would even put themselves in physical risk to make sure that certain properties got condemned or were cited. I mean it was really incredible. A couple of them had been threatened actually.

**RK:** I know it’s hard to generalize, but how many people would often show up at these neighborhood meetings that you attended?

**SL:** Well it depends. If there was a real hot button issue, you could pack a room with 70-100 people. If it was a neighborhood that was you know, doing pretty well, you know,
they were curious to meet the city staff or meet, you know, you might get 20, 50 people. I’ve been to meetings [where] there were as few as 20. It didn’t mean that they didn’t have issues, it just often times, when you first start, you know, that’s what you have.

In the City of Tampa, I think it’s important to point out, unlike the County, all of our neighborhood associations with the exceptions of the ones in New Tampa, are all volunteer neighborhood associations. Somebody got up one day and in talking with their neighbor said, you know? We really need to keep meeting. You know, we really need to make sure we bring our neighbors together and we need to be strong because we’re on—we could be under attack. In the county, most of the neighborhood associations are legal entities that are put together because of subdivision requirements that they have to have a homeowners association. And the reason you have to have a homeowners association is because they have common areas that they actually collect money that they have to maintain. You don’t have that in the City of Tampa.

So it was always, when I would walk into a room of just 20, I would, you know, I would be thrilled because it meant that 20 people cared enough to take their time—and we’re talking about people who were retired, young couples, you know, people who, you know, had busy lives, but had decided that that was a commitment that they wanted to make. And then when I would walk into a room that had 100, I mean, take like an old Seminole Heights—it’s incredibly well organized, and strong, strong group. Or Sulphur Springs, and then—I mean, Sulphur Springs you have to have a dish to pass, I’m not sure half the people weren’t there for just dinner—a good dinner—but it was just so heart…

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[End Tape 1, Side B]

RK: So you were pleased that citizens came to meetings concerned for their neighborhoods?

SL: Certainly pleased. It made my life easier believe it or not. But also, amazed. You know that, that, you know—that people would care that much.

RK: Did you ever have a situation where others in the neighborhood who didn’t generally attend the meetings would at some point believe that the neighborhood organization wasn’t adequately representing them, so you got a split in the neighborhood?

SL: Sure. I mean, I wouldn’t say a split neighborhood, but I certainly would get calls from some folks that felt that maybe their issues or their area might not be adequately represented by the formal group. And, and that was fine. I mean, we took everybody’s calls and everybody’s needs. I would, I would strongly urge them to work through the neighborhood association, and actually on their behalf, I would contact the leadership of that particular organization and I wouldn’t mention names, you know, I was always you
know, wanted to keep the confidence of the person that might call me. But I would say to
them, you know, I got a call from someone who was concerned, and usually, 99% of the
time they were, they said, well gee, we’re—you know, let’s talk to that person, let’s you
know, we don’t need them to feel that way, and we want to make sure that they feel
welcome.

So there was—the only time in my tenure, Tampa Heights was going through a lot of
growing pains, and we were, we were really targeting a lot of our affordable housing in
Tampa Heights, and we really needed them to be organized and helpful. And there
became a, kind of a split between those who had moved into the area that had bought the
properties that were fixing them up, that you know, for obvious reasons wanted to make
sure their investment was safe. But yet there was the core people who had lived there,
you know, through the good times, and then it slid back to the bad times, and now there
seemed to be hope. They felt that there was not, you know, maybe this organized group
was not representing them. And I remember you know, they were adamant about, we
want two different groups. They’re not representing us. And the other group would say,
you know, they’re not representing us either. So I—and they wanted me to make a
decision, you know, the City to make the decision. And by the way, one thing the city did
not do, that quite frankly was by accident, [was] that I kind of set this policy—and later
realized after talking to people who do neighborhood work that this is a good policy and
everybody, anyone who does neighborhood work successfully follows—and that is you
never set the boundaries of a neighborhood association for them. They need to come to
you. Now it didn’t mean that at times they might come with boundaries that were a little
unrealistic, or I might have to say, hmm, that’s interesting—why aren’t you stopping at
such and such, and why are you going over to such and such—or why don’t you go to the
interstate, all the way to the interstate? Why are you kind of lopping off these three
blocks? So it was always [an] interesting discussion.

But back to Tampa Heights. They wanted me to make a definitive decision where the
boundaries would be for each of these groups, and it clearly overlapped. And I said, no,
I’m not doing that. I will host a meeting in which I will bring you to the table, and you
guys can talk about it, and I hope that by the time we leave that you will have agreed on
what those boundaries would be. And it was at times a very—we had that meeting, at
times it was a very heated discussion. At one point, I said, I’m going to leave the room,
because there might be some things you might want to say that you might not want to
have me here, and you know, I’ll come back in 15 minutes and see how we’re doing. And
I came back and they clearly had—they were very quiet when I walked in the room so
they clearly had had some, some tough discussions, but I was proud of them, because at
the end they had decided not—they had started the meeting with saying, how are we
going to work out two separate boundaries? They left the meeting by saying, how can we
work together? And I personally, I can’t tell you how relieved I was. I didn’t try to show
it to them, that I just simply said, well, that’s great, super, well we’ll do whatever we can
to help that happen. And I went out and said you know, thank you lord. Because it just
would have been sad, it would have, it would have really turned them back. We would
have, we would have lost ground. Matter of fact, we probably, given the financial
commitment that the mayor had made to that area through the challenge—the Mayor’s
Challenge Fund. And the amount of money we were spending there, both federal, state and local dollars—we probably would have just had to take it over and say, you know, we just need to keep this going, so sorry you guys can’t get along. So I was very pleased I could report to the mayor that they had worked out their differences for now, and they were still a viable group, and we still need to work with them.

RK: When you went before the neighborhood associations, went to their meetings, spoke with them, you were representing the administration…

SL: Right.

RK: …and when the bureaucratic heads would do the same, they as well I think we representing the administration….

SL: Right.

RK: …What about City Council? Did the neighborhood leaders often go to City Council and what type of response did they get there?

SL: When we were in office, Council was very pleased that Sandy had a very strong neighborhood program and [that] I was the guy that was, you know, the liaison. I worked with the single-member district councilpersons fairly closely. It was important that they knew, you know, what we were doing, and I tried to keep them plugged in. Candidly there were a couple that didn’t care and just were very—actually I shouldn’t say didn’t care, they trusted the administration to do the right thing. While there were others that were you know, very concerned [about] what we were doing.

And you know the disappointing times for me was when they wouldn’t contact me, they would wait until a City Council meeting and then they would pound on the dais and say, the city’s not doing anything out there. And I was, you know, I was, I was young and you know, [a] young lad and I used to get pretty upset about it, and go back and vent to the mayor and the senior staff people, and they pretty much could say, you know, just, you know, don’t worry about it, that’s what they got to do. But it took me a while to get used to that. But for the most part we had, as far as the neighborhood work was concerned, I would say that we had a very good working relationship and they were, they were generally very pleased with what we were doing and keeping them abreast.

I just want to make a side comment—we were in office at a time in which money was not flush. As a matter of fact, there were cities all across the country that literally were shutting down parks and closing zoos and, and you know, a couple—I think a community in Connecticut that declared bankruptcy. You know, so it—those were tough economic times. And by the way that was the other reason Sandy why knew that she had to get supportive citizens because with the limited resources we had, she wanted to make sure that they knew that we were—that we would be spending them in areas that they would want us to spend them in. And if you got that kind of support, then if she had to raise taxes, god forbid, you know, they would—they would understand that there was, you
know, what the bigger picture was. So council knew that we didn’t have a lot of money. They could, you know they could beat on the dais all they wanted, they could try to embarrass the mayor to fund a park or you know, a special program they wanted to do. But she was tough you know, fiscally. And, and if we didn’t have the money, they just knew she wasn’t going to spend it. I think that helped them realize that we need to work with the administration and that might move this project a little higher up on the priority list. Because there was a lot of projects vying for very limited dollars.

RK: Did any of these neighborhood leaders end up running for political office?

SL: You know that’s an interesting question. Rose Ferlita was president of her neighborhood association, and I worked with her when I was the liaison. She was, she was tough on us then, and she’s tough on the city now.

John Dingfelder also was president of Davis Island’s neighborhood associations and kind of came up through the ranks. He was also formerly a county attorney so I think he also understood, you know issues that were involved. Certainly with land use and zoning and that kind of thing. But he had worked very, you know, very hard for his neighborhood as well.

I think those, I think that Shawn Harrison actually is on, is elected to one of the formal or legal boards for his subdivision in New Tampa. I’m not, [I] don’t know if he presently serves in that capacity but I believe he was on the board of directors for his neighborhood association, in a different capacity than, like I said before, than most neighborhood association officers.

But I think those are the—and that happened, you know—you know, when I came on board there wasn’t any neighborhood person you would say that was on City Council. Or even in the planning commission, you know or boards in general. And that’s one thing that Sandy did—it’s one of the things that I did was whenever we had a vacancy or on the planning commission the mayor might appoint—then it was a Zoning Adjustment Board, now it’s the Variance Review Board; but any of those boards that seats would come open—Code Enforcement certainly—we would send a notice out to neighborhood associations and say, is there someone that you know, you would like to see or think might be interested in volunteering? And we were, we actually placed for the very first time, a lot of real citizen neighborhood people on those boards.

RK: I think you said there were about 20 neighborhood organizations when you started with the city…

SL: Yeah, when I started, yeah…

RK: …and I know the number increased—to roughly how many?

SL: We went over 50. You know, and when I say 50, I’m talking about solid neighborhood associations that had a track record of actually either incorporating—if
they did incorporate they actually had been in existence for more than a year, had a formal board of directors. There was probably about 20 that would kind of float in and out. That if there was an issue before City Council, then they would say, _OK, I guess all need to get together and we need to go down to City Hall._ We were able to—and by the way, when I started, and we had those 20, you know, organized groups, there was probably about 30 floaters that would float in and out. And I literally would go—I also was the mayor’s liaison to City Council. And I would sit there at City Council, and I literally would run after a couple people who might have come down to speak out against a wet zoning or a rezoning or the way the city was handling something. And I’d run out and I’d find them, and I would know that they were not in a organized group, and I would you know, give them my card and say, _I’m going to call you—can I call you? We need to get you organized. We need to get an organization together._

And through the help of THAN, THAN was a wonderful mentor for a lot of start up groups. They were never, never shy to help anybody. And, [as] a matter of fact, put together a kind of a starter kit if you will, that had like a, a draft set of incorporation papers. We were very supportive of a group actually becoming incorporated. Because when you become incorporated it, it lessens the liability of each of the individuals who might volunteer to become officers or be involved. It also enables them to possibly apply for monies and grant dollars that they wouldn’t be able to normally apply for if the were not organized or incorporated. So we strongly supported that and really, THAN was the one that—I mean I would call THAN up and say, you know, call up Margaret Vizzi and _you need to call you know, Suzy Smith, they don’t really want to incorporate but you really need to help them do that. They really need it._ And they would [say], _oh absolutely._ And they would, you know, they would call them, and help them. So THAN helped us with that organizing as well.

RK: As the numbers increased, did you have a greater variety of neighborhoods in terms of class composition, race and so on?

SL: Absolutely. I mean we went—by the time we left on April—our last day was March 31, 1995—we had, of the 50 some neighborhood associations that existed, it literally was the length and breadth of the city. And when I started, the first day of my job, the 20 were almost exclusively, with the exception of I think three, were exclusively south of Kennedy Boulevard.

RK: Can you make any generalizations about the types of concerns of neighborhoods for example in East Tampa, primarily African American and moderate income, compared to those in South Tampa for example?

SL: Well what was interesting was when we worked with East Tampa and also West Tampa, obviously issues of crime, drugs; Sandy had bad timing if you will, when she became mayor, in that something hit the streets that had never hit the streets before, and that was crack cocaine. It was, it was a horrible, horrible drug, not just for the user, but the impact it had on our neighborhoods, especially our low income, struggling neighborhoods. When you can sell that drug on the corner, when the police arrive, you
can get rid of it quickly with, in you know, it just, it was—it had this incredibly horrible effect [and] impact. By the time we left office, we really had gotten a handle on that, that problem. And so what I was finding, and it was really kind of refreshing—when I would go to their neighborhood association meetings, remembering you know, years before that every single one was, you know, *this is a crack house. This is prostitution on this corner. This is, you know, they’re selling crack, drugs, right out of this grocery store. To issues of you know, people are speeding our streets. You know, I was sitting on the front porch, and a car just you know, car after car just flew by my house. And I would just smile to myself—the Transportation Director wouldn’t be happy—but I’d smile to myself because what that told me was a couple things. One, they felt safe enough to sit on their front porch. Because that was not happening [before]. [When] we had meetings in those tougher neighborhoods, if you will, [they] were never at night. They refused to come. *You’re going to have them in the afternoon or we’re not coming.* And they went home and they’d button themselves up inside their house and pretend that they didn’t hear the gunshots. By the time we left, they were sitting on their front porches and they were…

And the second thing it told me was, they realized that there was other factors that impacted their neighborhood other than those tough things like drugs. And that was, you know, if *people are speeding down my road—street,* that’s a quality of life issue. Because *if my kids now who suddenly are grandkids can suddenly play out in front of my house, which they—I certainly wouldn’t have allowed them to do it before—now they’re going to get hit by a car. So we need sidewalks.* So I mean, it was just, it was just—for me, it was a wonderful, you know feeling, to see how these neighborhoods were transformed given the work that we were doing and the commitment they were making.

**RK:** Was there a relationship between these newer neighborhood organizations and crime watch efforts?

**SL:** Absolutely, absolutely. As a matter of fact, it was very interesting that there were—crime watch people were often times very suspicious of neighborhood association people, and neighborhood association people were not suspicious of crime watch people, but they didn’t want to share the power. You know, they, you know, and we had some neighborhoods that you know, the crime watch said, *fine, you guys can do whatever you want, but we’re still going to be the crime watch.* And we did not recognize one group over the other, I mean we would, we would make sure that the crime watch people were informed if they were not a part of the neighborhood association.

But by the time we left office, most neighborhoods welcomed the crime watch folks in, and they shared leadership and responsibility. There was a requirement, for instance to give an example, one tactic I used to try and bring them together was—there was a requirement for crime watch, that you had to have a neighborhood wide meeting—I think it might have been twice a year if I remember correctly. And it was tough sometimes to get people to those meetings. So I would say, *well, why don’t you have it the same time you have your neighborhood association meeting?* And so that would kind of get them to talk, and so *OK, well, we’ll get together in that meeting, and that way it will, it will satisfy our requirement of the two meetings.* But once they got there they realized that
there was a lot more in common. And the crime watch people realized now, how Code Enforcement, how Transportation, how a lot of things, zoning, would impact, you know the crime in their communities. So they, they came to work together realizing that they were helping each other out by doing it.

RK: There’s also a few organizations in Tampa that we call Community Development Corporations that tried to sometimes, for example, sponsor affordable housing projects. Did you work with them? There’s one in East Tampa, and I believe Tampa Heights.

SL: Yes. When we left office, that was the natural, you know neighborhood work has a natural evolution. And just as we were leaving—and that was the most disappointing thing for me, was that we were not going to see the city move to the next level. And that was clearly the next level, that they would be able to form one of these community development groups and actually take a very active part in their redevelopment. And get dollars back for it that they could spend in their community. And [in] Tampa Heights, we had started the very first one when we left. And I was very proud of them for doing it, and it was very hopeful as to you know, how that would help them.

RK: The city’s Department of Affairs works primarily with lower-income neighborhoods in Tampa.

SL: Yes.

RK: Did you interact with them, what is their responsibility?

SL: I did interact with them quite a bit. You might recall that when Sandy became mayor before her election—actually it was during her election, or during the campaign, there was, as everybody liked to say, “disturbances” in Ybor City. And she mobilized that department probably better and in a way that had never been mobilized before. She said, you know you, (the department), you need to be our eyes and ears. You need to be in the community, not in your offices. You need to be out there, interacting in these very tough, especially minority neighborhoods. Because they’re unhappy. And you know, she would just get so mad when she would have a meeting with some community leaders, business, leaders, and they would say, Sandy, we don’t get it—why are they burning their own grocery stores? And she would just say, you don’t get it. You know, that’s how frustrated they are. That it—it’s not their community anymore. They don’t look at their grocery stores as their store anymore, they look around and don’t see their community—the same community that they lived in 20 years ago. You know, it has changed and we have failed them, and we need to change that. And everybody needs to be a part of it.

And so, I guess back to your question….?

RK: Department of Community Affairs…
SL: Oh!

RK: …did they work with the neighborhood organizations?

SL: So, yeah, so what—they were very helpful to me in that they were our eyes and ears. And they would say, boy, you know we really need to get a neighborhood association established here, and we think we can identify a couple leaders for you. And so I would work with them, we’d develop that leadership as best we could, convince them that they needed to take this crazy next step and actually organize. And then I would utilize—work with the Community Affairs, that they would actually help—for instance, you wouldn’t think it would have much of an impact, but if you can’t, if you can’t type up agendas or meeting notices, or distribute meeting notices and then type up minutes and agendas and then distribute them afterwards, you would think, well, you know, OK, so what? Well it’s incredibly important to try to keep a group organized, or make them believe that they’re organized. So they didn’t have the resources or the ability to be able to do that, so the Community Affairs would, would take them under their wing so to speak, and they would send out the notices, and they would come up with—I mean, they would tell them what they wanted to put on it; they would develop it; they would help pass them out; they would take minutes at the meeting; you know they really were there to support them and prop them up to make sure that they, you know they got on their—you know, got a good start.

RK: You mentioned disturbances in Ybor City. Were they in Ybor City or were they in College Hill?

SL: I’m sorry, they were in College Hill. Yeah, College Hill.

RK: Can you tell me something about the organization named HOPE?

SL: HOPE was an organization that had come into Tampa. They had been, I think originally formed in—while it could very well be a national movement, of that I’m not sure—I do know that they were, had had some success of changing some bad problems in Miami, the Miami area. And so they had come to Tampa. And what the group does is organize; it organizes around African American churches, and gets ministers and their congregations involved. And HOPE came into Tampa and really, not to their fault—I think they were innocent in it, [but] they came into our community believing that our mayor was probably like any other mayor, you know didn’t care, gave lip service to the poor areas of the community. And it came in and started organizing these folks and then demanding that City Hall show up to their meetings, and they were tough. I mean, they would put chairs in the front of the congregation with a balloon with your name on it, and make you sit there. And then they would give a, a slide show presentation and show the worst of the worst in the neighborhood. And you had people in the audience saying, amen, absolutely—you know, that’s right, that’s right! And then they would go to the question and answer period, in which they didn’t let the citizens ask the question. The ministers or the HOPE organizers would just grill the department heads, and me, on issues. And you could only answer yes or no. And the questions, as you can well imagine
you know, were you know, you know, very slanted in the sense [that] they would say, you know, yes or no: we’re never going to see you know, this ever happen, because of such and such and such and such and because you won’t do such and such and such and such. And you, you just want to say, you know, that’s not a yes or no answer, and as soon as you try to say anything but yes or no, they’d stop you and you know, you’d get a demerit, and I mean, it was...

But God love them, and they were certainly God fearing people, at the end of the meeting, they did a remarkable thing, they would get department heads all worked up because they were so—I mean, to make a department head sit on their hands and only say yes or no—I say sit on their hands figuratively—just killed them. I mean, we had one department head, I won’t say who, would get so angry and he would just, he relished saying no, you know, No. No. But at the end of the meeting they would come full circle and they would say, first of all, let’s give a round of applause to these people who are public servants, who have come out here tonight to meet with us. You know, that’s, that’s you know, that’s great, that’s, you know, that’s something special we need to acknowledge. And then they’d say, we make a commitment that we will work with you if you’ll work with us. And so the next time we have one of these meetings, we hope it will go better. And everyone would walk out.

My challenge was to meet with the HOPE organization and try to let them understand, make them understand, or at least explain to them how they really could plug in and really help us. I mean, by then we had you know, I think over 44 neighborhood partnership programs that—and the irony is I would sit and I’d look in the audience, which was made up of these congregations, and I would see people, matter of fact they’d look at me, and they’d kind of smile and wave—that I would be working with on a day to day basis on just these issues that they were grilling us about. And I knew that they knew the answer. Because they were out there working with us. So I certainly didn’t begrudge them of organizing because quite frankly the history in the African American community of trying to get government to be responsive was not a good history. And it took, you know, it took them to raise their voices and use those tactics, in their opinion, to try to get our attention. The reality is that they really had our attention before that. But they made it better, they made the process better, there’s no question.

RK: Have they remained active do you know?

SL: They have been, they have remained active and matter of fact, my life outside of City Hall, they were always, they were always cordial to meet with me, but there was always kind of an us and them, and I’ve actually, since then have actually gotten to know the Executive Director, Sharon Streeter, who remains the Executive Director today who was Executive Director back then. And now I, you know I call her a friend. And actually have helped her get over some issues that they, that they promote.

Actually when they first came to town, they were very interested in the quality of life issues in the community which they still are today. But to their benefit, they’ve actually branched out and now they’re dealing with things like living wage and, and more social
issues. And I think, I’d like to believe that it’s because we were able to deal with some of those neighborhood quality of life issues that they were able to, you know, to move on to some other things.

RK: Was ACORN in the community when you were at the administration?

SL: I never worked with them. They were here, but they didn’t seem to be, they didn’t seem to be incredibly active. Now there might be others that would suggest otherwise perhaps, but they didn’t seem—they were not a group that certainly, that reached out to me or I reached out to them or really had any interaction with.

RK: You mentioned the Growth Management Act of 1985 and the comprehensive plans that had to be adopted by local government. I know during your administration, you, I think were the first city—Tampa was the first city in Florida if I’m not mistaken to work on a neighborhood element for the comprehensive plan.

SL: That’s correct, first one to adopt one.

RK: OK. Can you speak about that for a little bit?

SL: Yeah, when we got everybody organized and working, and you know, by the time 1995 rolled around, things were working you know, like, you know, like clockwork. I mean don’t get me wrong, there were certainly issues that popped up here and there that, that you know, that you know, the group would love me one day and hate me the next day because of some issue. But the bottom line is that they had been organized long enough, they had been active long enough, that they were appreciative that they now had the ability of being able to plug into City Hall like they had never done before. That they suddenly realized, well, wait a minute, Sandy Freedman is term limited—is this stuff going to go on? And it was THAN and then the president of THAN was a gentleman by the name of Jim Beeler. I met with the president of THAN on a monthly basis, and about every six months the mayor would meet with the president of THAN. And so we were, it was about a year left in our term, maybe a little bit more—Jim Beeler had one of these regular meetings with the mayor and she said you know, is there anything you would like to see us do that we haven’t done? Gosh, it’s like we’ve done everything, but there’s got to be something else.

And he said, and he was very—Jim was very wise about the comprehensive plan and how important that is to a community. Because a comprehensive plan really is the law, you know it’s the rules—the state law if you will—that jurisdictions have to follow. It’s in the comprehensive plan, they have to follow it. The comprehensive plan technically only—I think only has eight required elements. It’d be like your, like storm water, water, oddly enough education isn’t a required element—I’m not even sure public safety is a required element which is kind of odd—but you can, but a jurisdiction can have voluntary elements.
And so Jim Beeler said to the mayor at that meeting, he said, *I would like to see us put together a neighborhood element. An element for the comprehensive plan on neighborhoods.* And she said, *wow, that’s a great idea. I’m not sure there’s enough time that we can get it done that I can get it, you know approved in my term. But certainly if it’s almost done by the time the next mayor comes on board, I would think that you’d be able to sustain that.* But she said, *I’m not going to be the person pushing it, you’re going to have—you’re going to have to push it. I’ll help facilitate it. But if you really want it, you’re going to have to push it.*

So [she] put together a—so she got staff together and said, as she always did, she was just a master of being able to look into issues and determine first whether it’s something we should do, and second of all if we should do it and how we should do it. So the first meetings were with staff, and you know, staff said, *yeah, we could do it—it’s going to be, you know, it’s going to be a lot of work, but we could do it.* And so she put together—she agreed and said *that’s what we’re going to do.* And she put together the process which was, again, you know, typical Sandy Freedman, I remember that meeting as it was yesterday—she called myself and the zoning manager, the planning director, and I believe the city attorney and she said, *OK, here’s the process. You’re not going to write a single word until you have community meetings throughout the community and you ask them what they would like to see in an element—a neighborhood element to the comprehensive plan.* And so we held four meetings around the city, and were very smart to bring on board a facilitator who received no money, that was Robert Kerstein, Bob Kerstein, Dr. Kerstein, and he led the meetings and we were there just to answer questions, and he helped to really ferret out what the issues were, and what we needed to put in that element. And then the planning commission and the city staff met and worked—and some of those meetings were pretty challenging, but we worked through it and actually…

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

SL:…you know ground work done, got them through the public hearings. And it was not technically adopted during our administration, because even though it had been approved, it had to go to Tallahassee through the Department of Community Affairs for them to review it, make comments on it, and send it back. So it actually was formally adopted [in] the early months of the Greco administration, but we actually had gotten it, you know, had gotten it to that point.

RK: Do you remember any of the highlights of the plan?

SL: Yeah, actually, it was, it’s funny I ran across a copy of it a little while ago, and I read through it and it really is an—it was an amazing document. It really codified, and that was the purpose that I think Jim Beeler certainly had in mind when he suggested it to the mayor; and I know it was the mayor’s goal to try to codify certainly the citizen
involvement and to guarantee that citizen involvement—that it would survive no matter who the mayor was, no matter what the issues might be. As long as there was organized neighborhood associations, the city government was going to recognize them and work with them. And while certainly, you know, some things you know probably are dated now, that very basic belief, or, or that very basic need was codified and is in there. And if any mayor wishes to pull it out and take a look at it, you know, they could hand it to a staff member and say, let’s go through this and make sure we’re doing everything that we’re supposed to be doing. It’s a very neat document, matter of fact, by the time we left office, I had calls from not only communities across the state, but across the country that had heard about that we were doing a neighborhood element, and they—they desperately wanted to see our draft and what we were doing.

RK: Were you involved with any national organizations during the time you were with the administration?

SL: Yeah, we were. We applied in 1990, we applied for the “All America City” award, which is run by the National Civic League. And we won. I mean, we were, we were awarded an “All America City” award in 1990 and through that involvement—I didn’t know much about the National Civic League at the time, it’s a very old, national organization that was started by Teddy Roosevelt and Supreme Court Justice Brandeis, and the real— their whole purpose is to make sure that there is citizen involvement in government. And so consequently they were very happy to learn about Tampa and what we were doing; very thrilled about the mayor to the point they actually put her on their Board of Directors—she served on the Board of Directors. So I had a lot of interaction with them, not only through the rest of our administration, but to this day I continue to work with them, you know, on my own time so to speak.

RK: How would you describe Mayor Freedman’s managerial style?

SL: She was very progressive. She was one that wanted to accomplish something. She was not a caretaker. It was clear very early on in her administration that everybody just wasn’t going to sit back and let things happen; that she knew that she had a limited amount of time to be there. She had worked very hard to get there, and knew she had some things that she needed to accomplish. I think her biggest disappointment was the fact that things came on the horizon like tough financial times, crack cocaine, you know things that she really had to devote a lot of time and energy and money towards that she, that she probably hadn’t envisioned.

But as far as how she interacted with each of us, she always asked for our opinion. I never, ever felt that any meeting I had with her that I couldn’t, that I couldn’t say what I really felt, and I did. And three quarters of the time, she would say, well, that’s an interesting perspective, but you know we would move on.

But I remember distinctly—I won’t go into the specific issue—but I remember distinctly that I had been brought in—she had already had a working group that was working on this particular issue, she brought me in, she ran it by me, she wanted—she always
brought me in, I was, I helped her kind of get a first feeling of how maybe the citizens or the neighborhood associations would react to you know, what she was thinking about doing. She never just relied on that solely, she just wanted to get you know, you know, my feedback since I worked for them on a daily basis. So she brought me in on this particular issue, we talked about it, and I was very uncomfortable with the way in which we were going to proceed, and so I spoke up, and I was the only person that felt that way. And she said, well I appreciate, I appreciate what you’re saying, and I understand why you’re saying it, but I, I think we’ve put together a good process. I said, well, I just felt that I wanted to give my two cents and thank you for letting me do that. So she said, I got to go off to lunch you guys, I want you to start putting some meat on the bone so to speak, and when I come back let’s meet again. And so she came back from lunch and she started the meeting, she said while I was at lunch, I was thinking about what Steve said, and I happen to believe that now, I think there’s—I think he has a valid point. And so she took some of what I had suggested and actually changed her mind and changed the plan.

To a lot of outsiders I think people thought that Sandy was this you know, driven woman that made decisions behind closed doors, only brought in a couple of people, you know didn’t reach out to the community or business leaders certainly and ask for their opinion. And certainly on the issues I was involved in, that was not the case.

RK: What was the black book that she kept?

SL: The infamous black book. She had a, she had a little black book, I think it was also maybe, it was her calendar as well, I’m not sure, but it was small enough to fit in her purse, but large enough that she could write volumes in it. And she used it, everything from if she was at a—if she met with some citizens, even at the grocery store—you know it could have been a formal setting or an informal setting. If a citizen said, Sandy, you know, gee, I saw the sprinklers running on Bayshore yesterday and we’ve got you know, these watering restrictions, she would write it in her book so she’d remember it. Because if you can imagine—I can’t imagine—but the amount of information a mayor you know, has to you know hold onto, it was the only way she really could keep it all straight. So she would write things down like that. She would write things down also—she’d be driving, and she’d come up—she’d think about maybe a new process or a new way of doing something, and she’d think to herself, you know, gee, I wonder if we could do this, and she’d write it down in the book. Then depending on what the issue was, was connected to you know a person—if it was a neighborhood issue, she would say, oh, Steve, come in the office for a second. And she’d get out of her little black book and she’d read the line, you know, can you check on such and such And I’d say, sure. And so I’d go off and do my thing, and quite frankly, if something slid, and I didn’t really check on it, sure enough within a couple days, we could be at lunch, we could be at the end of a meeting, and she’d pull out her book and she’d say to whoever was there, wait a minute, don’t go, and she’d flip through the pages of her book, and then she’d flip back and she’d say, Steve—did you ever get a hold of so and so? [Steve replies], no I didn’t, Mayor. [Mayor], I want you to call that person. If I said yes, I’d tell her I’m sorry I forgot to tell you that, you know, this is what happened, and she’d say, great. And she’d cross off that item. Often times it would spur another entry because she’d say, oh, that’s a great idea so
she’d write that down. She never let us see it, she never left it out so that we could steal it. Bob Buckhorn always used to tease that he was going to do us all a favor and grab that black book and throw it away, or we were all going to read it. But she, to the very last day she was in office, I have never seen the inside of that black book that certainly was a, was a privy to a lot of the entries that were in that black book, and she shared them with me as to [they] became tasks for me to accomplish.

RK: You were with the administration for several years, what you would you say was your greatest accomplishment?

SL: I’m not sure that there’s a single greatest accomplishment. I think just in—very generalities is the fact that when I first started with Sandy, you know, talking about getting real citizen involvement, and real neighborhood involvement was something we certainly talked about, but I quite frankly, I just didn’t know if that was going to—that we’d ever get there. And I will say that when I walked out of that door, and literally, I was the last person in her administration to walk out of office—I promised I’d be there to turn off the light at 5 o’clock and walk out. When I did that and reflected back on it, I will tell you that I felt very proud of the fact that we really did accomplish that. That that was a real thing. That citizens were for the very first time, actively involved in issues that impacted their neighborhoods, whether it be crime, whether it be Code Enforcement, transportation, zoning.

By the time we left, Sandy for instance, has required every department, when they put together their budgets, that there was now a section that was called “neighborhood.” And that they actually had to write for her, in the budget what were they going to do in the next year to make neighborhoods more involved in their work program and how they were going to meet neighborhood needs. I mean, it was required. So I mean, I think that would probably, I would say is probably the best accomplishment.

But there are hundreds other individuals, I mean we had—the fact that we became an “All America City” because of the work we did. We had the first ever neighborhood convention; we did the “year of the neighborhood”; we wrote the neighborhood element, or you know, facilitated the writing of the neighborhood element. Just the 44 partnership programs we put together. You know all of the big stuff as well as the little stuff. I mean, how—I remember you know, being in City Hall I mean [it] was a tough place. I mean, you’d have a bad day because everything was you know, just not working out right. And I’d look at my schedule and realize that night I would have to go to a neighborhood association meeting and I would think oh, great, you know, it’s the last place I want to go. But I will tell you when I got there, and just seeing them organized and active and a part of you know, what they were doing, and playing a role in their security and in their future. I would tell them at the end, you know, I had a bad day, but man this really was the best way for me to end it, because you guys are just doing great. So it could be something as small as they felt it was a victory that they got the sidewalk in that they wanted. So it was a great experience, a great opportunity that the mayor gave me, and I loved every, every minute of it.
RK: Can you fill us in on what you’ve done since you left City Hall?

SL: I’ve done a lot of public relations, communications work. Both in the public sector with the State Attorney’s Office, as well as the private sector. [I] facilitated a visioning movement that was a very interesting experience. [I] became the Government Affairs Director for the cable company and now presently am the Local Government Affairs Director for a national homebuilder that’s building homes in our community, and we cover six counties.

RK: This final question might be unfair, and that is—too difficult to answer just off the top of your head. But you’ve worked for the public sector, now you’re working for home building, work in the private sector. Can you make any generalizations about the differences?

SL: I found it interesting that when I went to the private sector that they have a very strong belief that when you’re in government—if you worked in government—I mean for instance I remember when I first was employed by the cable company and then later with the home builder, both my bosses in both those jobs said to me, this is not like the government sector, you know you probably will be working after 5 o’clock. And I would just chuckle to myself, I wish there would have been a day in which I could have walked out of the office at 5 o’clock. Sandy Freedman she wanted to do what she wanted to accomplish. And she really brought out the best in all of us, and the real true people that wanted to serve people—and I think that’s who she brought into government and who she kept in the government were people who truly wanted to do the right thing and serve. You didn’t worry about having to work in the evenings, or you didn’t have to worry about going you know, you doing something on the weekends. It was, it was expected of you but you also knew you wanted to do that. So there was great passion in what we were able to accomplish and she really set the standard.

I remember to give an example, the very last week we were in office. Now mind you, most of the senior staff had left to go to other jobs so we were a skeleton staff, trying to get her packed up, you know, trying to get our administration, you know kind of put aside to let the new administration come in. The last senior staff meeting she came up with a new idea, and she said, what do you think? You think we could do this? And we said, Mayor, you’re leaving office on Friday. And she said, well yeah, you’re right but I just thought that maybe if we got started maybe, you know, that Greco would want to continue it. Right up to the last day she was thinking about what we could do differently, how we could change.

With the private sector, there’s no question that you know, it’s the bottom line, it’s you know, you’ve got to make money, we’ve got to make money ourselves and for our shareholders, stockholders. But there was a real passion in working in government. I’m not sure that’s true with every mayor for you know, the City of Tampa, or every jurisdiction across the country, but it certainly was true for Sandy Freedman.

RK: Thank you very much Steve, I greatly appreciate you speaking with us.
SL: This has been fun, thanks.