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George Pennington oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, August 22, 2005

George H. Pennington (Interviewee)

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RK: This is an interview with Mr. George Pennington, who was Sandy Freedman’s Chief of Staff. Thanks for talking, sir.

GP: Well I’m glad to be here. Especially for Sandy.

RK: You were also a Chief of Staff for the previous administration [for] Mr. Bob Martinez?

GP: That’s true.

RK: Can you give us some background in how you started in that position?

GP: Well, I had known Mr. Martinez, Bobby, as we called him then, through the school system. He was… the head of the HCTA. And I was in the school system and was a negotiator for the school board and the superintendent. And that’s how we got to know each other, along with some of his friends at CTA—Kathleen Betancourt for one. And we became associates—or friends, at that time. And then when I left the school system and went to Berkley, about the same time, he went into private business at a restaurant. And I used to see him out there, and we kept our friendship up. So when he wanted to run for Mayor in ’79, he called and asked me to join the team, and I did.

RK: And did you play an active role in his campaign?

GP: Yes, yes, I was with him… it’s not like it is today where you have somebody locked in there to be the runner of the campaign. Bobby was politically astute, very thorough in what he wanted. He had run for mayor before. So I took over the role of Campaign Coordinator. Along with his guidance and some of my input—and so that’s how we worked it. He was of course the boss, the chief candidate, and I was the worker-bee. And we put a good team together—Kathleen Betancourt again, and a few other good friends were a part of that team, so it was fun.
RK: And you stayed on throughout his time in office?

GP: Throughout his time. All through here, and his time that he ran for Governor. I elected to—I had to stay here in Tampa. There wasn’t really an option of wanting to go, even if he needed me desperately, which he didn’t at that time. I had a father-in-law that was living with us, and I declined, I stayed.

And [I] stayed on, and then Sandy of course did get kind of a leg up on the way, [because of] how Bobby left. She was able to get organized and have a campaign that really favored her. And that’s the way it should have been. She had been on Council and [had] been the Chairwoman, and had been supportive of most everything we wanted. So it was a good transition I thought. I thought it was ideal at the time. You had a homegrown product who was an excellent politician locally, made an excellent mayor, [and] who was going to be Governor in the State of Florida. And they had the transition of a woman who had spent a long time on City Council, was ably qualified in government and in knowing what the city needs and what it should do was going to follow him. You couldn’t ask for a better twosome I thought.

RK: So the Mayor, Mayor Freedman asked you to stay in the same position that you had?

GP: [Yes.] I’m very thankful for that.

RK: And what about the other top administrators? Was there much of a change or was there continuity?

GP: It was pretty much continuity. Kathleen Betancourt stayed on for a while with us, and then, and then went with USF of course. There were, there were a couple of more folks who, who went up there. Joe Spicola, one of our—who was our Chief City Attorney, joined Bobby for a while on the lottery campaign I think. Bob Morrison had a stint, or had an opportunity to do some things; he was one of our top young executives up there at the time. And, but there were—as in all campaigns, you don’t always take from the dance the person you took. So, since he became a partisan, became a Republican, he had a raft of people that sought positions, and he had a lot to choose from.

RK: What does Chief of Staff do? What did you do with the Freedman administration? What were your responsibilities?

GP: Well, primarily—Sandy used to ask me that, what do you do? What you do is to make sure that the other top administrators don’t get into fist fights, arguments, or off on witch hunts. Now that’s a little too colorful of course. But at any large organization, you’ve got to keep on track, on focus, on point. And if you don’t, you lose step. And the person that suffers is that elected city official that happens to be the mayor. And whether it’s the police department, fire department, public works, whatever it may be, we wanted to make sure that everybody was on the same page everyday. And so I did that. And that’s the way I think it really has to be in a big organization like that.
Sandy had a little bit different take on how she ran staff meetings and that was fine. She ran her staff meetings. Bobby ran his. I had an agenda, he had an agenda, and we kind of Huntley-and-Brinkley’d-it, if you want to go back to the ‘60s. But Sandy’s style was a little bit more roundtable, in the big office with a lot of heads talking and a lot of chins wagging. And so it was different as far as that goes. But then when her conversation was over, what did we say? How do we say it? What are we going to do and what’s going to be the end result? And that’s what I wanted to make sure was on focus.

RK: Did the administration, Mayor Freedman’s administration, reorganize to some extent? Who were the Super Chiefs?

GP: Well, the Super Chiefs came really before she did. We had brought fire and police under one shoulder, and that was Bob Smith, who had been Police Chief. We also, and then after, after he left, anyway—he was working closely with both fire and police. You had, Mike Salmon who had all the work departments under him. He was the Coordinator of Public Works and a few other things. But he had, according to him, pure public works, waste, water, storm water, traffic engineering, so forth and so on. And then we had Joe Abrams, who administered over the parks and recreation program and the, some of the other facilities such as the new Performing Arts Hall—not the Performing Arts Hall, but the new Convention Center and things like that. So she, she had a structure to where you had five or six people who could touch all the departments all the time. And, and that worked quite well. It was an offshoot of what we had there, and she just polished the stone a little bit.

RK: Some cities are known for having a—quite a professional bureaucracy in terms of rank and file and leadership. Others are known for being more, for lack of a better term, machine like—kind of people’s friends get jobs and so on. Where did Tampa fit in during the Freedman administration?

GP: I think with, I think with her most of the top—I used to teasingly call them top dogs and doggettes—were, were in place, they had been professionals. The head of our personnel department was a strong professional woman. Our parks department man who did a lot of work here at the University of Tampa, Ross Ferlita, had been there for years [and] moved up through the ranks. Don Saltzman who was the head of our recreation department had had an extensive background; they were all pros in their, in their league. She interviewed and got a brand new fire chief from outside—the first time that had ever happened that we got a fire chief from outside of Hillsborough County. She also interviewed and—or, through Bob and the others interviewed, got a new police chief at one time, Eduardo Gonzalez—I’m sorry, I could be wrong. But Eduardo came in out of Miami. He had been born and raised in Tampa, but spent his—a large police career in Miami. I had been there, and of course my background had been both in public and private education, and the preceding years with Bobby, so you know, it was nothing. Lou Russo, who remained as Director of Finance, an outstanding job for both Bobby and Sandy, and had been a high ranking fiscal leader in the school system for years. And had voted, did a wonderful job for Bobby and when we went in, in ’79, he stayed. So she had a pretty good cadre of people around her.
At the other ranks it was just like it should be in a law and government organization. If public works needed the new super, new high level engineer in traffic or something, they went through the proper roles and we interviewed, and we had selection committees, and we did what we thought was right. She made the selections.

Some of her closer staff, one that you mentioned, Steve LaBour; she wanted Steve LaBour on board. She wanted Bob Buckhorn on board, he was her right hand young man when he first came to town, and supported her; he worked for the Homebuilders or something and drove her around when she campaigned for mayor. And campaigned for— I guess, was it City Council at the same time, or did she run for mayor?

RK: She ran for mayor in 1987 after already being in office since….

GP: No, no, no. Well, she was still, she was going around as head of City Council, I guess. Because Bob was with her as soon as she got in the office, Bob came in. So there were, there were some hires. There was a lady that she brought in who had been here as, as a TV announcer—as a TV person—and moved to California. And she brought her back at her work with WEDU and so forth. So she had some numerous hires, and so did Bobby, but nothing, nothing for the range of Boss Tweed.

RK: Another distinction some people make in looking at an administration is whether it’s kind of a top-down arrangement, or bottom-up, or something in between. How did it tend to work? In other words, were decisions made at upper levels and then filtered down through the departments?

GP: Both ways, both ways. We had some very bright folks at those, in those work departments: engineers, five year engineer graduates, some of them almost with PhD’s. [They] had great ideas, and they would swatch these things to, up the channel. Then we ordered this one over here is just, well, that’s not in the well—talk about the budget and all of our requests and what we needed, which lines had to be replaced, which had to be circumvented. So it went both ways.

If she went out, as any mayor, you’re in charge, you’re the mayor of the City of Tampa. If you go out and find that there is a great big reverse elevation, which is a hole [laughs] in the middle of your street, and you got a pretty good idea it’s probably a caved in sanitary or a wastewater sewer line. She may say, George, or Mike, she may call Mike directly—and I’ll get into that in a minute—this has to be fixed! But first, first of all, yes it does. Do they know about it? They probably do. Is it high on their priority list? Might not be as high, but when she sees it, it becomes high. And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.

First of all it tests her ability as a mayor to seek out and change things immediately if she can. If she can’t, she’s not much of a mayor. Number two, it means that that office that has to fix that line has got to have the flexibility and the good sense to know what comes first at certain times. Now there may be a reason that that hole can’t be fixed that week; it
has to wait eight days, and she might buy off on that. But that’s the kind of conversation—and because of the kind of person she was, she always asked questions.

Her ability on City Council, as I saw her as a City Council person—first of all she was exceptionally perceptive about what the needs were among staff and employees around her, around the, the Council. So in, in that sense, she got tremendous feedback from all kinds of people on all kinds of issues, all the time, which she enjoyed, and which she used effectively. Some folks let it go in one ear and out the other, and don’t react to it. But she also knew which buttons to push to find out what was going on as a Council leader in the various departments. So she was no stranger to somebody in traffic engineering saying, *hi this is Sandy Freedman. You know, I saw this traffic signal out there close to where I live, it was going crazy.* And because of the way she handled it, that would not get so much, *oh, just throw it away, I ain’t worried about that.* It would probably get done.

I can’t think of any particular thing that she wanted done that we didn’t want to do. And it didn’t always come up to me or to some high level administrator to say, *you tell that Council person to wait or I’ll call it to Sandy, we can’t do it; but we’ll do it soon.* That very rarely, I can’t think of a time it happened.

Back to the point of her perceptiveness. This carried over when, when she became mayor. She wanted input from everybody and his brother and his sister. And she’ll admit to this. Now when you’re in there for a while, and you say to yourself, *why did I start that?* I know that Bobby had a meeting right after we got into office, of some of our top people who supported him and had big ideas and so forth, and they just about drove him buggy. And when that meeting was over he said, *I’m not going to have that anymore.* And she in her own way kind of did the same thing. But the staff, whereas we would meet in the little backroom at a table a little bit bigger than this one, in that back conference room upstairs where they’re not now anymore. She moved into her office and I would be arranging chairs [laughs], your chair would happen, we’d have chairs all circled around, we had a heck of a party. And we got a lot done, and sometimes we got nothing done. But that’s life, and that’s what happens in a large organization. But the core thread that runs through it is that she wanted to know, wanted to be informed, and wanted to know what the decisions or what the opportunities were.

RK: One issue in administration in many cities during the period that you were in office with Mayor Freedman was affirmative action.

GP: Yes.

RK: Did issues of race and gender come into play in your decision making in the administration?

GP: I guess you always have to say—you talk about it, you think about it. Our, our policies at that time were set and blessed by the feds, hooray for that. But even with that said you have to be a little bit more proactive. The thing that kind of messed it up a little
bit at the outset is because of her tenure on City Council. And because of this ability to get feedback from all kinds of folks, all ethnicities, all stations, she could talk to anybody—the high roller or the low roller, black or white. She was one of those politicians that did not make gross promises, and I promise you so and so, or I promise you this, or I promise you that. Now I don’t know this for a fact, and I don’t—I haven’t arm-wrestled her to get the true fact on this ever. But in knowing how the Council worked and knowing some of our black members on the Council, it was evident that they expected more from her immediately than she was willing to give.

RK: Would that be Perry Harvey in particular?

GP: Very perceptive, that’s why you have a doctorate degree. Now, Perry was a smart man, and in many of our big efforts, [he was] a big supporter. No doubt about it for the city and for the black community. But there were things on his agenda that he wanted on her agenda, and she never, ever indicated that they were on her agenda. And it wasn’t the case of hiring nine nephews, that’s not the point, it was certain things that he alleged in his own comments back and forward—boop-be-de-boop—that he would like to have done, and it was just not going to be.

Now whether or not she could have curtailed that early on, I don’t know—hard to say, I doubt it. A lot of this push on her became, now that you’re not on Council, and you’re the mayor, you can do something. And you better do something because you’re short, and you’re female, and you’re Jewish, and you’re new, and this is your opportunity. And all those qualities she has: short, and Jewish, and female, are blended by a very tenacious character that she had. She was a little competitor from the time she could grab a tennis racket. So she was a little battler. And when she got her dander up on this thing, it never went down. We didn’t do anything anti- to trying to discriminate, of course not. But we didn’t move very quickly, as quickly enough as some of those Council people thought we ought to do. Whether she agrees with that, I don’t know. But it’s my feeling. And there will be something else I’ll cover in a minute, that to me, washes away every item of criticism that any black ought to have of her.

RK: And what is that?

GP: Well, as you know, during her tenure, we got cross-wise with the Krewe, at [City] Hall, about the Gasparilla. The Krewe had done what they had done since 1905. She wasn’t a member of the Krewe; her little daddy wasn’t a member of the Krewe; many of her friends weren’t members of Krewe—however many of her friends were members of the Krewe. But the bottom line is this. Whatever is happening now that you get nice reports in the paper about the fifteen overstating—the multi Krewes they have: the different colors of the Krewe, the different attitudes of the Krewe, the varying natures of the Krewes—this is plural, female, male, mixed. If it weren’t for Sandy Freedman and her stubbornness and hard-headedness… You have to give those traits a quality of standing firm and I’m not going to give into this, I don’t care if they lose their sabers. [Those traits of hers] caused this to happen, and caused her great, great pain from friends, and those who were not friends. And nobody felt the swell as some of us knew—I knew
and some of my close personal friends knew—of how much it meant in forming the new attitude of this great big social activity that we call Gasparilla. And she did it.

The Gasparilla Krewe, thanks to Dr. Reddy, who nobody, nobody disloved—if that’s a word—Fred Reddy, and a few others that joined the Krewe, and did this, and did that [and] the plethora of the other Krewes that formed. You even had a Krewe from the University of Tampa! [Laughs] So that in itself put women and minorities on the social page of Tampa where they hadn’t been before thanks to her. Not [because of] her negotiation skills, [and] not her ability to be able to sweet talk those people—but digging in her heels and standing firm, and letting the obvious take place. And then the ground swell. And I told her that a couple of times, and she [said], oh, well… It was big. I don’t want her to think maybe it was the biggest thing in her administration, but to me, it was one of the biggest social activities that affected hundreds and hundreds of Tampans, of what she did and what she stood for. Everybody like it? No.

RK: That was a major issue during the administration—integration of the Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla. What other major issues do you recall from the administration?

GP: Well, I can recall one. Well, yeah, one I’ll just signal out. She had done a marvelous job of wrapping up what had been started under Bobby as far as the Performing Arts hall. Bobby was Governor, there was a little bit of give and take coming in. H.L. and other folks who were working strongly with Bobby in Tallahassee trying to get their—our share over if we could for the hall.

RK: Who’s H.L.?

GP: H.L. Culbreath. [He] was a good advisor to her and a good friend.

RK: And he was…?

GP: He was with the Performing Arts Center, he was the Chairman. And he was working—he and a big Republican—so he was our tie into Bobby in Tallahassee during these times. So that got finished off. You have to give her good laudings for that. With the thing that kind of started out in her administration was this thing about the Convention Center. Looking for sites, looking for sites… We started looking for sites before she came in. And it was determined that I was part of this whole thing—forcefully or unforcefully. [We found] the best site—we could not be the biggest, because of land mass. We’re just not going compete with Orlando, or Las Vegas—you’re just not going to do it. But you, if you had something of quality, had a nice position, with hotels and access to it, blah, blah, blah.

So, we selected that site, where it is on the water, and the old customs house was down there and a few other activities. And we bought some land, and did this and structured this, and moved the customs house out and so forth and so on. Well, in her negotiations with the Mack Family who had built—Bill Mack and et al.—other folks had built the building over there, and was building another building. Our negotiations for them to do
this design, build and place and all this sort of stuff went south, and got very, very
cantankerous. And to make a long story short, it got to the point where, gee, we’ve spent
a lot of money on this land [and] the negotiation with the Mack Family was not going
well at all. We would have proposals, I’d run them over—Louie and I would run them
over. They’d be rejected, we’d come back, and she’d blow her stack. Well, she had to get
involved. Well, not did she want to get—she was in it, involved of course, but she had—
we had to make a decision. And our decision was, we had to settle with these people, they
had us over a barrel for the tune of maybe $750,000. And so she had to go and hammer
their heads and finally settle with these people for something in I think in the range of
$700,000.

In the meantime, we had this property and we didn't have anything built down there, and
she was getting frustrated. We all were. And she, loud as hell, well, maybe I’ll just back
out of it. Oh! Lou Russo and I, oh, my goodness gracious! We said, Mayor, we’ve got
over 2 million dollars tied up in that land down there. We can’t go anywhere but
Leavenworth. We’ve got to do something with that land. And her negotiations with both
H.L. and Hinks Shimberg was—Hinks and H.L. were doing some shuttle diplomacy—
was that she was going to terminate. Well, they both were just crystal, and oh, no for—
can’t—we’ll see what we can do. Not that we changed her mind but she thought about it,
we cogitated, and finally we all hugged and all four of us, and said, let’s go on. And the
rest is history.

We took a little flack—is it the right place? Right, about as right as we can get. We can
get in there, we can build it, we can have access to hotels across the street if they ever get
built, blah, blah, blah. And it’s a very fine Convention Center of a great size. And it
served us well. But—and she put it—she almost popped it, and she uncorked it and made
it work. And I’m extremely proud of her for that. It was tough, tough business. Because
these guys, the Mack folks, had not played fair and square with us. I can’t remember all
the intricacies of them having access to certain parcels on the land, or what they were
going to do, and what they didn’t do, and that they didn’t want to do. And then we had to
buy them out. It was all the money….

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

RK: So the Convention Center was difficult but it finally worked out OK?

GP: It worked out fine, it worked out fine. Long hard push and did a wonderful job.

On the Aquarium she made it quite clear from the outset—I first had heard that
somebody wanted to put the Aquarium in Tampa. I met with Chuck Smith and another
gentleman out of Clearwater….
RK: Who was Chuck Smith?

GP: Chuck was with the Gasparilla group for a long time but he was a builder in town and a friend of Sandy’s. And he was on the Downtown Development Authority with Hinks (Shimberg) and the rest of them. At that time he was working for—I guess he was still with the downtown partnership or something. But somebody had approached him about the Aquarium coming and their initial thoughts, that it either ought to [be] on the Hillsborough River, or they would build a great big thing at the end of Bayshore Boulevard. So after I listened to this [about] the river, we were talking and [said], what about Harbour Island? Oh! Well, Chuck and other folks, the fellow who owned Harbour Island at the time, I’m trying to think of his name…

RK: Was it Finn Casperson?

GP: …Finn. Would that be a good place for it? We of course had gone through the Convention Center, and ending up the Performing Arts hall. And our plate was full. Her plate was full. So her feeling was, well, let’s show enthusiasm and support, but we don’t have anything to offer or jump up and down over right now. And that was true.

It didn’t take long for them to decide that the north edge of Harbour Island, where all the shops wound up was not the place for it. Or nor on the other side where those big apartments are that now face the hotel, that really wasn’t the place for it. And in all the conversation, how about over there in the Port? Well, everybody kind of liked that spot. And she didn’t dislike it, and so it kind of built its own momentum. They did the ground work with the populace, they went to the Tribune company [and] got all kinds of editorial support for this thing, and [the] downtown group thought it was a great idea if there was an Aquarium, blah, blah, blah. Well, the thing that she told Mr. Russo, or that Mr. Russo and she agreed to, was that we’re not going to give—we’re not going to do a lot of backing on this thing. This has to be something that is proven, that these people who are saying that they’re going to give money, give their money. The pledges are going to come up. You know there was a million dollars here, a million dollars there, but you’re talking about a multimillion dollar building. But the idea of having a, having an Aquarium built was solid. And folks went out to look at various Aquariums around the country and some enthusiasm grew for it and so forth.

Anyway, her, her push was, the city will certainly back it and support it, but we’re not going to be funding that thing to keep it going until we—we’re just not going to do it. What happened is that she was absolutely right. Some of the major fundraising for it fell apart. It didn’t all come together as quickly as anybody wanted. And she somewhat was pressured into doing a little bit more than she wanted to at the outset. Nothing wrong with it, a little bit more, because a little bit more, more of nothing was not too much, so…. But, there was something and there was that support and that enthusiasm, and her own ability to talk and to edify the whole program. So that was good.

Some of the fundraisers for that got a little bit snicky that they couldn’t get bailed out or somebody wouldn’t take over quickly. Or they really had to pony up [laughs]. It really
wasn’t a clean situation. But it stumbled along and it got built. And as you know it had some very, very rough times as it opened, and the city did have to commit other funding things, other bonding capabilities to keep it rotating and floating. But it was a grand vision. It does tell a Florida story, and that’s the whole purpose of it. For the educational purpose and to be able to draw people back—you don’t just go to see a shark, you go to see other things, and next time you’ll see a shark and his third cousin, but it’s a draw back condition.

And as it’s happening now with Thom Stork down there, he’s a great promoter, and they’re doing a lot better on being able to bring in better ticket sales and so forth. Whether or not the so called wonderful fundraisers and folks who were going to give them the big money came through—don’t know. There was some personalities involved that would cross lines with her and with us, and they’re no longer there, haven’t been there. So I don’t say it was messy, but it wasn’t [as] clean as she would like it. And, but I think now that if she, if she takes her eight grandchildren she’s got—I teased her the other day, eight?! How could you do that? I think it’s eight that she has. I think they’ll find it a wonderful, wonderful spot. And she hasn’t disliked it at all, always been in support of it. And so forth.

RK: Was one of the rationales for the Aquarium tourism? Was there a thinking that more tourists would…

GP: Oh sure, oh sure.

RK: …come to Tampa?

GP: Oh sure. Just like they say Super Bowl will bring in eight dollars and it only brings in one dollar. But the biggest thing you get from Super Bowls is the publicity nationally and worldwide. You have spin offs, and always spin offs, but nothing to write home about. And I think this has been proven over the last ten to twelve Super Bowls.

But this one, but there was a rush to build [the] Aquarium in the United States of America. Chattanooga, Tennessee—on the Tennessee River I guess. It’s supposed to be a grand one. The one we looked at, or the ones that we had looked at, were the Monterey Aquarium, that’s where our first director came from, and the one in Baltimore—it’s right on the water. But this one was different in that it had the theme. New Orleans has one. It has a theme, where you start in the swamps and move out, or you start in the wetlands and move out. So yeah, it’s tourism. And you can certainly see what’s happening now, except now your buildings are so high that your, your little short condo people are having problems seeing some of the beautiful sights!

RK: The Aquarium was one project that was criticized by some. Do you recall any of the major critics, on what basis they criticized it?
GP: The figures of getting tourism in here were too high. They were fabricated—not fabricated, but inflated greatly. *Never going to get that many tourists*, and they were right; they were inflated. How much I don’t know—that’s a fact.

RK: In looking at any mayor’s administration, the one thing some people look at is who the mayor and top staff people interacted with in the private sector, major corporate heads for example. Who was closest to your administration, to the Freedman administration in the private sector, as far as working with the mayor to try to accomplish certain goals?

GP: Well, two stand out, of course, that were always there. That was Hinks Shimberg and H.L. Culbreathe. Now H.L., while he was there, Tim Guzzle came in. Jerry Anderson who was on the board here was always under Tim and H.L. of course. But, so the working relationship with Guzzle was not very smooth. But H.L. made it as smooth as he could, that’s generally. But prior to Guzzle, of course, strongly with H.L. The downtown partnership, downtown developing group—Hinks [was a] strong supporter all the way; there were others. Byrne Litschgi was very supportive; Byrne was a right hand close buddy of Bill Poe’s, did so much for him and did so much for the City of Tampa. Chuck Smith, who was an enthusiastic, great big, 6’8” fellow, very supportive; Dick Beard, Dick was building buildings [as] fast as he could in those days. Dick was very supportive of her, very, very, very nice. Dick was the kind of a developer that he said what he did and did what he said. So if you had a deal, you were trying to do something on a Washington Street to help his, if he had to give up something, he told you what he had to give up to make it work, [and] you could count on it. And you could count on Dick Beard. I’m not saying that he was, secretly, politicking for her or against her, but in his role as a business community leader, Chamber of Commerce of course, he worked—she worked very well with these folks.

She, as we all, we don’t always know who our closest supporters are. And she, I’ll make a comparison with Dick Greco. Dick Greco tried to make a friend a day. Sandy didn’t. She made friends because of what she did and what she believed, and what history proved to her. And friends had to be friends. Now you could say, Dick, Dickie made a friend a day and she lost a friend a day—not so. But she didn’t gain a friend a day in the political sense because her stance of what—of the things I’ve talked about—bled throughout the entire community, with this Gasparilla stuff or with this stuff through Perry and some of the black community. Not all, but some. And her certain stance on certain things which were right, had they been made by Bobby or Greco or anybody else, nobody [would] give it a time of day.

But because she was [a] "she", she was constantly challenged, Bob. As a female and as a mayor. Now we don’t know how that feels, but she does. She was elected to City Council and given nothing but pats on the back. Nobody gave her a hard time, accepted her everywhere. She became mayor; the tide had changed a little bit. And those who expected so much from her couldn’t get it. And she wasn’t about to change her stance on what’s right and what’s wrong. And that’s what makes a difference. She is a rightful politician for all the right reasons. So I give her great credit for that—she’s tough. She’s also sweet,
and she’s unassuming to the point that she has great feelings for the people around her. But she won’t budge on her core beliefs. And what is wrong with that? Nothing.

RK: You mentioned Hinks Shimberg a couple of times as a close supporter and advisor….

GP: Yes, yes.

RK: …can you say a little bit more about who he is?

GP: Well Mandell Hinks Shimberg and his wife, Elaine, came to Tampa many years ago; [they] have a bunch of kids. He’s a developer, he and his brother, Jim Shimberg. Jim Shimberg has been a great supporter of the University of South Florida, and of the Building Housing Association all over Florida, they’ve made a great impact. They, the early developers went to LaMonte of the Town and Country area. A lot of the work in Brandon—Fish Hawk Creek is an offshoot of some of their development work. Hinks has branched out over the years into play production—New York production of plays and things. An entrepreneur of great ability; has been close to Sandy and Mike for, for years, so….

RK: Did he have a special interest in any particular issues during your administration?

GP: Just what’s right. He was working, he worked strongly for the Performing Arts hall with Bobby and with her [Freedman]; strongly for what’s right for downtown. What’s right for downtown is right for the city, and right for the county. Don’t tell that County Commissioner that, but it’s true. You’ve got to have a crown jewel. Yes, big supporter.

RK: You spoke about the Convention Center earlier and how negotiations went awry with the Martinez administration, with the goal of getting a convention center and a hotel built, negotiations with Mack Company fell apart. With the Freedman administration there were several efforts to attract a hotel near the Convention Center [that were] unsuccessful. Can you say a little bit about the difficulty of the hotel Convention Center?

GP: Bob I—that may have come—that didn’t get on my radar screen too much. We owned a piece of property—the city owned a building and a half down there that we had some offices in over the years. And Joe Taggart owned a little hunk down there. But there wasn’t a lot that we did at that time that I recall. We weren’t going to give away the store; we always knew what we—the bigger thing is we knew what we couldn’t do. And we just kind of held back, we didn’t, we were glad enough to have that thing built, have the people mover functioning and so forth and so on. So I don’t have a really a lot to talk about on that one. It’s just not that depthful in my memory bank.

RK: Sure. During several years when the Freedman administration was in office, the economy nationwide was not strong. Did this impact what you were able to do?

GP: Well, we did kind of what we did when Bobby was in there, we built all the growth.
We kept taxes low—same old story—tried to do more with less. Of course you have a increased tax base so you had a little bit more money to work with. But we didn’t increase taxes, and so forth and so on. I don’t know that the effect was that big. Didn’t seem to be that big; it wasn’t that topic of conversation, well, you know this economy is really affecting the nation. It never got that big in our staff meetings that I can recall.

Her staff and her push was to keep things chugging along. And that’s what we’re there for. Pick up garbage, make the water, make the toilets flush, be safe and put out fires. When you get past those things, you’re an entrepreneur, but that’s what cities do. Now they do of course considerably more, no doubt about it and should. But the basic is to make that thing run, keep down the, keep down the chaff; have a fire department that is responsive and well equipped and so forth. Just trying to keep these, the increases of the price of these fire engines and these rescue vehicles and changing from one model Ford to another model Ford, is millions of dollars of activity talked about. There was a time the police department wanted Tauruses. Taurus was the car, Taurus was the car. And all of a sudden, the Taurus is not really what we want, we need that Crown Vic [Victoria] back, and here we go again. So the day to day routine of making sure the city kept going was what she did. And I thought she did a marvelous job, marvelous job.

RK: One of the goals of the Freedman administration, especially I think in her second term was to foster neighborhood organizations.

GP: LaBour was charged with that—I say charged, it was part of his enthusiasm. We used to go out to these neighborhood meetings, and Louie—Louie Russo and I, we’d tried to get over in the corner so we could snicker and talk. She’d catch us every now and then. But we’d show up. Yes, there was no doubt about it. She wanted to make sure. And you’d see these little signs popped up all over these neighborhoods; that was an outgrowth of what these neighborhoods were, and whether it’s Culbreath Park or Culbreath Isles or “so and so Way”, those signs were put up after it was designated that that truly was the area. And we met at various places, churches, schools, and so forth to talk, in the black community and all over. And just like this current mayor’s talking about, neighborhoods, neighborhoods, neighborhoods, that’s fine.

I do think that Sandy’s history of the neighborhoods is solid. Plus, the streets were paved. We seemed to have a real high incidence of unpaved streets being an old city person, so…. I don’t know. It’s a great thing, she again talks to people, listened to people, and we got some feedback. Some of the feedback was good. And you probably know this—you’d have a—we'd have a meeting, there would be a—somebody would stand up, Mayor, the speeding in my neighborhood—we need these speed tables, or these speed humps and so forth. Well, our public works people they would get agitated as all heck, speed bumps cause more accidents than they do curtailing accidents. Now you see things called speed tables, which are a little less intrusive to making a car fly off the road and drive into your driveway or your living room. So we had great restrictions on where we would put these things and so forth. And they’re speeding, and the police never help, blah, blah, blah. You’d look over to Bob Smith, and Bob would stand up, we’ll have a.... Well no, every time you do that, the speeders you catch are the people who are at the
meeting! So we’d have people say, I got arrested! [Replies,] were you speeding? [Answers,] yes. [Responds,] You going to do it again? [Answers] No! That was funny, but it’s also very specific. Neighborhood—it’s like anything. Politics is all local. Local, local, local. But [if] the neighborhood is happy, in theory, you’re going to be happy. And you try to make that happen. So with our, especially with our paving programs and things like that.

The thing that we could never push across is—we’ve got enough to do it and will never do it, is in storm drainage. Because of the way that we’re situated, because of the peninsular setting and because of the tides coming in off Westshore. Some of those areas are not drainable! [Laughs] You can’t drain them! But, you can do a lot of things to help increase them. I know that during her time many of those canals and those estuaries had got filled up with everything from ice boxes to tires [and they] were cleaned and she felt good about that--I did too.

Plus the other thing that she got done, and we got through fighting for it, is the Bayshore walkway. And she took a lot of flack for that and I took a lot of head-hitting with City Council, bringing it up, what we were going to do, so forth and so on. But it worked out. And it would be nice if it could be, if the median could be twice as big, and the sidewalks twice as big. But the way that thing is built, you can’t do it. Bayshore Boulevard has always been a main artery south. And now that the growth has impacted down there so heavily, and unfortunately deaths have happened. I think people are driving better, and they’re doing a little better job on there. They’re keeping more and more police on the job. But starting with her, our effort to improve that Bayshore and spend that money to secure those balustrades, and to pull that sidewalk, and put in a little bike line—of course I wouldn’t ride a bike on there anyway, it’s just too much volume. We got a lot more activity on that Bayshore. So that was a good positive, no doubt about that.

RK: One of the bureaucracies that the mayor sometimes was criticized by, at least informally, was the police department.

GP: Sure.

RK: Did you get involved in any of the relationships there?

GP: Well, we always let the police you know, I was “up there” of course. But we let them do their own battling back and forth, and Bob (Smith) would handle that. I would be involved too, but they—some of them didn’t want to be bossed by a woman. Simple as that. Call it what it is. They didn’t want that little lady telling them what to do. And she reached at them, and brought a black man to the police chief’s role. It was a good move. He stayed there a long time. Had a good career, solid career really.

Things were pretty smooth in the fire department at the time. But, you know, again, when she was on Council, she knew the cops’ babies’ names. She knew the majors and the captains and the this and the that. And nothing was promised. [No] Hi lieutenant, you’re going to be a captain. Or, hi sergeant, you’re going to be a lieutenant. But they all
thought she was neat, and she was. She became mayor. She’s going to be a mayor. Well [mumbles], same old story.

And then, the pipeline was always open. Because of her feelings that she, and rightly so, that she needed security. And we changed the security tag out there. Not tag, but the, you know, the system. And she had a driver, and she had this and she had that. It was different. Bobby didn’t have that. Poe didn’t have that. Greco didn’t want it—he didn’t have it either. She had it. And that of course gives a—not that her individual assignees would talk, but they do. So here she was with all these friends out there who, many of them still were, and now she was mayor and now she had to be secure, and now we that we had this going, why do we have to do. And that was that.

She went with her gut on that police chief and her gut was right. He proved alright. He mumbled some words when he first started; his suits looked like they came from John Gotti the mobster. But he changed and grew, and did a fine job.

RK: Was the issue of take home police cars a major factor in the…

GP: Big factor, big factor.

RK: And what drove the mayor’s decision not to allow police officers…

GP: Save money.

RK: …to take home the cars. Money?

GP: Save money. We pushed it. We—Lou Russo, myself, Bob—Bob was a little reluctant, [he would say] well, you know we could say. And then when you look at the numbers at that point, you had folks driving all this way and you’ve got these cars. It didn’t make a lot of sense. And we tried to get a system of rotating these cars back in and getting new vehicles, and it just caused a lot of consternation. Now, on hindsight, I wouldn’t touch it with a ten foot pole. But we did. And we got some pretty good action out of the cost savings, but [also] a lot of complaints.

RK: Most citizens get information about the mayor and administration from the newspaper. What was the relationship between the mayor, and at that time, the dominant newspaper, The Tampa Tribune?

GP: Well, I think that was good. And I have to digress—I don’t want to digress too long, because I’m going leave, but… When she first came in office she brought in someone else from the Tribune. You know his name? Wade Stevens, editorial writer. A very strong willed, opinionated, a University of South Carolina graduate. Left the Tribune, left the editorial boards to come work for her. Well that was probably one of our—that was her first failure.

[End Tape 1, Side B]
RK: So the mayor brought in Wade Stevens from the \textit{Tribune}?

GP: Yes. And the assumption was [that] he was going to be a writer and a counselor and a helper and a seer of all seers, I guess. And we were, we were surprised but welcomed to the family. Well, it didn’t take long to figure out that Wade was there for his own reasons—nobody knew what those reasons were. So eventually she had to make up her mind that Wade was not good for the city or for her. And it was up to me to give him the word that the mayor had no longer wanted his services. Well, he was an unhappy camper. But he did leave, and that was the end of that. And just something we don’t talk about. He came in, I don’t know how long Wade was there. I don’t know if he was there five, six months before he was off and gone. Could have been longer but I don’t think so. But in fact I’ve never teased her about that. Because they had—we had so many other more important things to do.

But her association with the paper, generally at that time I thought was solid. I can’t recall the editorial push, and it would be interesting to know of what they said at the time about the curtailment of Gasparilla Day and of course that weird Bambaleo that took its place. We won’t take credit for that, so I don’t know whether there was a strong structure. But I think generally they had good things to say. And she had a good feeling when she’d go before the editorial board.

There was one little sidebar I thought was cute. We were over there early on talking about the Aquarium. And I won’t tell you which editorial writer asked this question, talking about the environment, the story it would tell and we’d go from the flatlands, sand hills and the flat woods to the this, to the that, to the ocean, to the coral reefs and all. And this one editorial writer said, \textit{well how are they going to, how are they going to mine that coral and have it positioned in these tanks?} And our answer was, \textit{it’s prefab coral}. So with that, is the happy ending.

RK: If I can ask just one final question, sir.

GP: Yes.

RK: What, as you look back on your years in the Freedman administration, what do you remember most fervently about it? What, what really did you take away from it?

GP: Well, I’ve taken away from the mayors I’ve known. I have to, I have to think about the person. Billy Poe, I was a fraternity brother with at the University of Florida. I knew him as a young man and saw him grow up. I never served under him, but had to transition with him when Bobby came into office. Bobby was an excellent mayor and had all the criteria to be a successful governor. Unfortunately it didn’t pan out, but he’s been a success in life.
Sandy was a success from the day she picked up a tennis racket. She made her own success. And her enthusiasm for her job, and for the people she served impressed me and still does. Her thoughts about the city, her home, what’s good for it, what can be better… I carry away great enthusiasm for her enthusiasm. There’s no despondency, there’s no negativism, there’s no loss of hope. Hope she has, and I like that. So that would be it.

RK: Thank you very, very much for taking this time and speaking with me. I appreciate it.

GP: I’ve enjoyed it, Dr. Bob.