

A TRUE GROUNDBREAKER

Here's how Larry Lazarus has helped shape Phoenix's landscape

By KYLE BACKER



Throughout Larry Lazarus' career as a land use attorney, he has nurtured a critical skill for his occupation — consensus building. It is necessary to balance the desires of the client and other stakeholders, he says, "Because if you just come in as an advocate without being a person who wants to realize a resolution through benefits to both sides, then I think you might as well be a litigator. Don't be a zoning attorney."

For Lazarus, principal at Lazarus & Silvyn, he honed this talent to create positive solutions as a neighborhood activist after moving to Phoenix in 1973. He purchased a house near 32nd Street and Shea Boulevard, but was frustrated by the lack of services in his community.

"I realized that we lived in an area of the City of Phoenix that was called Paradise Valley, but it wasn't in the Town of Paradise Valley. We were on the other side of the mountain," he recalls. "The amount of time it took

for the fire department to come was inadequate for safety purposes, we didn't have libraries, we didn't have anything. We only had a two-lane roadway that was clogged going downtown because it was the only place of employment. There was nothing up there except residential."

Having been involved in politics in college, Lazarus decided to join with neighbors to organize the Paradise Valley Community Council, something he compares to a New England town hall.

"We took the precincts in that area and we had our own form of elections. I was elected chairman," he says. "The idea was to lobby for all these things that we didn't have. And that's when I met Margaret Hance."

Hance was the mayor of Phoenix at the time, and one of the two mentors Lazarus says had a great influence on him.

"Maggie was a tough cookie who told you like it was. And when I came down

to complain to her, she said, 'You don't understand. You want us to provide all these services, and yet there are no tax dollars coming from your area. You have to start thinking of a community that is balanced, not a community that is just taking.'"

During this same period, the Paradise Valley Mall was in the works, and many of the nearby residents who wanted to maintain a quiet bedroom community were against it. Taking Hance's advice to heart, Lazarus began seeking ways to marshal support around the mall's construction and ensure nearby residents' concerns were heard. This effort led him to talk with the second mentor who impacted his career, Rusty Lyon, then-CEO of Westcor.

"Rusty showed me how to listen first, speak second. And not just listen, but hear, and try to understand where people are coming from, even if they don't agree with you. He taught me that this is the magic that builds consensus, and that reputation will

LEGAL GIANT: Larry Lazarus is principal at Lazarus & Silvyn, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary as one of Arizona's most influential land use, land planning, and commercial real estate law firms.

(Photo by Bruce Andersen, AZ Big Media)

carry you through the toughest projects," Lazarus says. "I ended up putting in literally hundreds of hours of negotiation with Rusty and various other people in Westcor talking about how we can develop this mall in a way that would be beneficial to the community."

Lazarus describes the benefits he touted would sprout from the mall's construction — having department stores nearby, tax dollar generation, and opportunities for libraries and bus stops. "We were able to lobby for things along with this development. The mall got built and it was a boom for the community," he says.

It wasn't long before even ardent detractors came around to the upsides

of Paradise Valley Mall's construction. Lazarus recalls seeing one of the project's fiercest opponents at the mall after she swore never to step foot on the property. When he approached her, he says, "she shrugged and said, 'It is what it is.'"

Not too long after, Lazarus was given another opportunity to impact Phoenix's landscape. A general plan was coming together that would provide more direction for the city's future growth. Up until that point, according to Lazarus, Phoenix's general plan was essentially a zoning map instead of a forward-looking document.

After a summit where various options for organizing development were deliberated, a plan using a system of villages within the city was chosen.

"The idea," Lazarus explains, "was that there would be cores, gradients and peripheries in the villages. The core would be the major area of a city where most of the activities were. As you moved away from the core, the densities got less and less, until you hit the peripheries which

were oftentimes determined by canals, major streets or mountain preserves."

There was a backlash, however, because the plan was sponsored by Westcor and the proposed cores were often centered around regional shopping centers — the same type that Westcor developed. The plan was tabled as a result.

"About a year later, we started the program again. We formed committees on topics such as public buildings, parks, transportation, the arts and land use," Lazarus says. "That's when Margaret said, 'You chaired the public building group last go around; will you chair the whole thing?' I agreed, and that's when things really took off."

As chairman of the entire effort, Lazarus met with organizations across the city selling the idea of what was becoming known as the Village Concept Plan. The process of engaging every corner of the community paid off.

"By the time we were ready to take the plan for a public hearing, it passed with no opposition," he notes. "We did our homework."

Putting in the work is a common theme when looking at Lazarus' illustrious career. Not content with simply attending to the everyday demands of his practice, he's consistently been involved in a slew of organizations such as the Phoenix Community Alliance, Greater Phoenix Leadership and the Anti-Defamation League — the latter of which awarded Lazarus with the Leaders of Distinction and Torch of Liberty awards.

"I just believe very strongly in giving back," Lazarus says. "I ask the people I hire to not only show me the hours that they're working on business, but hours they're working in the community that has nothing to do with the business. I think that you're better off being a whole person when you have interests outside of just what you do to make money."

On the topic of retirement, Lazarus concludes, "First of all, I'd drive my wife crazy. Secondly, you got to have purpose. If you don't enjoy what you do, then I understand why you would retire. But there's so much yet to be accomplished. If you're still involved in public policy and in the community like I am, you see what's coming. And I want to be part of that." ■■■