

Lomita mayor severs his ties with Ponte Vista developer

Mark Waronek denies that he fears link could hurt his re-election bid.

By Nick Green
Staff Writer

With a Lomita City Council election looming this fall, Mayor Mark Waronek has severed his ties with the developer behind a controversial San Pedro housing development.

Waronek, who owns a consulting firm, has represented Bisno Development Co. since 2005. The company is seeking to build almost 2,000 homes on Western Avenue near the Lomita city limits.

"It gives me more time to campaign and stuff," said the first-term councilman. "I didn't think (the project) would be as controversial or as contentious as it has become. I think it's in the best interests of me and the people of Lomita that I represent the city."

Waronek's decision, which is effective today, comes as community opposition mounts to the development, dubbed Ponte Vista.

He denied, however, that his decision was directly tied to this fall's election.

"I don't think it's going to help me in any way, to be honest," he said. "This is a project outside the city of Lomita."

Still, Waronek's public relations job both with Bisno and other entities that suggest potential conflicts of interest exist has drawn more attention since an April Daily Breeze article outlined many of them.

Waronek is being targeted for defeat this fall by Councilwoman Margaret Estrada and former Councilman Ken Blackwood. Three candidates, including current Councilman Don Suminaga, are contesting two seats.

"It's just wonderful timing for the election," Estrada said of Waronek's decision to cut ties with Bisno. "People have already noticed. The damage has been done. It's too little, too late.

"He doesn't understand why it's a big deal," she added. "I guess after two years with Bisno and supporting Ponte Vista, which drastically would affect the city of Lomita, he can't understand. Well, the residents of Lomita certainly understand."

Estrada, a 10-year council veteran, is a former Waronek supporter who became disillusioned with what she saw as a tangled web of business, political and personal relationships that could influence his position as an elected official.

She stepped down from the council four years ago in part to make way for Waronek.

But Estrada successfully sought re-election two years later, again in part because of concerns over Waronek's conduct as an elected official.

Blackwood, who left two years ago after eight years on the council, is running specifically to unseat Waronek.

He said "quite a number of people" in the community urged him to run again.

"They didn't know who they were talking to," he said. "Were they talking to a council member? Were they talking to a developer's representative? It got to be a perceived conflict of interest because they didn't know who they were talking to."

Waronek has long worked as a lobbyist and cultivated relationships with powerful politicians who some see as helpful to the city.

But he has also represented clients who have had business interests in Lomita and other South Bay cities, including Torrance.

Torrance Mayor Frank Scotto, who is related to Waronek via marriage, has raised concerns about Waronek's relationship with SunCal, which is attempting to redevelop a portion of Del Amo Fashion Center.

And when Waronek came to talk to editors and reporters at sister publication More San Pedro about Ponte Vista last year, he slipped his city business card that described him as mayor pro tem into a glossy packet of information portraying the project in a positive light.

Waronek professes to be genuinely surprised by those who believe he has done more harm than good and calls such charges "ludicrous."

"At the end of the day I've done a great job for the city," he said.

"I busted my butt these last four years, and it hurts I don't have (Estrada's) support," he added. "When you get beat up at council meetings by her, you kind of take it she's not supporting you."

That happened at Lomita's last meeting when Estrada questioned Waronek's role in spending more than \$2,300 to take about 1,000 people on 12 buses to a Dodger game.

The money came from a fund used to finance the city's centennial celebrations.

It was approved after the fact by the City Council, Estrada said. She cast the lone vote against approving the expenditure.

Estrada said Waronek sold \$7 Dodger tickets for \$5, essentially using some money raised from golf tournaments and other events for the centennial to subsidize the Dodger tickets.

"I'm sure it was campaigning," she said.

Waronek said it was simply a community event he played a major role in organizing.

"At the end of the day I was short money and had to take it out of my own pocket," he said.

It isn't the first time Estrada has accused Waronek of playing fast and loose with money from the fund.

She called a special City Council meeting in June to question expenditures made at Waronek's behest at the annual Founder's Day fireworks show.

In the end nothing came of the meeting, although a city employee should have sought competing bids for the \$13,000 show rather than just switching fireworks companies to one the mayor thought would do a better job, officials admitted.

The special meeting wasn't televised. Estrada noted that the City Council has subsequently voted to ensure all meetings are shown on television.

nick.green@dailybreeze.com

nick.green@dailybreeze.com