

# Venice Taxpayers League goes under

By GREG GILES NEWS EDITOR VENICE GONDOLIER

The Venice Taxpayers League has folded after 55 years in existence.

Gary Budway, VTL president, blamed the group's demise on lack of interest and an aging membership.

The longtime city fiscal watchdog organization, created by Finn Caspersen in 1955, experienced infighting among its members since Budway took over the reins less than two years ago.

Budway made the announcement Monday after a final meeting at city hall that lasted only 10 minutes.

"Every attempt was made to get more members and directors," Budway said. "With a population that's aging, and the bad taste that the past council left in the mouths of people, they weren't prepared to jump in."

Herb Levine, who passed away last month, ran the organization for a decade before he encouraged Budway to take over the reins. Levine died after a long bout with cancer.

Budway agreed to lead the organization, with one caveat: It wouldn't be a one-man show. He envisioned an organization with subcommittees digging into city finances.

He made an effort to steer the organization away from bickering and partisan politics into an issue-oriented one in hopes of regaining credibility within the community. Without help, however, he said he wasn't able to accomplish that goal.

Instead, he found few willing to get involved to that degree. Many of the aging members came to board meetings out of loyalty, and for Levine's entertaining mannerisms. The board simply wasn't prepared to take over committee duties, Budway said.

Budway made it his personal mission to get more directors and members into the organization. He even made overtures to the Venice Area Young Professionals organization, an offshoot of the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce, but found little interest.

"Herb's (Levine) style attracted people" Budway said. "But at the same time he was isolating a lot of people. VTL suddenly became this combative organization.

"Then there was the lawsuit" initiated by Levine against the city after he was physically ejected from a city council meeting. Budway said the organization became more and more combative.

It wasn't always that way.

Former Mayor Dean Calamaras remembered when Caspersen considered himself the "loyal opposition."

"It was a prestigious organization under Caspersen," Calamaras recalled. "They were pretty powerful in those days. Finn didn't attack people. He talked about tax issues. The city didn't spend any money in those days on anything because you always had Finn complaining over every dollar that ever went out."

In the late 1980s Ed Krebs took over the VTL. His style was more accusatory. Krebs attacked council members, but didn't stick around for council's response, Calamaras said.

"I'll read about it in the tomorrow's papers," he'd say, according to Calamaras.

Chauncy Howard took over as interim VTL president for a year before Levine was elected. "Herb took it to another level," Calamaras said.

Immediately, Levine leveled accusations of council members being on the take or in the pockets of developers. He did it loudly and often. Calamaras said the accusations were false.

He recalled that two former council members, Janice McDermott and Cheryl Battey, joined the VTL only to quit in protest. They held a press conference in which they accused Levine of misstating, misrepresenting and outright lying on issues.

Levine withstood the onslaught, and went on to politicize the organization, eventually creating a political action committee to influence elections.

Calamaras said the VTL didn't have much luck getting its members elected in the early 2000s. Still, Levine's actions spawned another, opposing group — Citizens for Quality Government — which formed its own PAC. "The feeling was we had to counter Herb: 'He's liable to get some of these people elected,'" Calamaras said. The CQG went on to become a powerful influence in city politics. The VTL came out against annexations like the Venetian Golf & River Club, and even beach renourishment. In 2007 the VTL backed Ed Martin, Sue Lang and Ernie Zavodnyik in their campaigns for city council, and they won in a landslide running against perceived overdevelopment. But by 2009 the political winds had changed again, and so did the VTL.

Some aging VTL board members died. Some dropped out or joined other boards after Budway put his foot down and tried to get people to focus on budgetary issues, and not the airport, which by then occupied much of council's time.

By early 2010 Budway found, indeed, he was the head of a "paper tiger."

After the 2010 general election, Budway wanted to take a wait-and-see attitude with the new city council.

"I said, give them a chance. I've been following the (email) servers. The best comment I heard was Holic saying 'check your ego at the door for council meetings,'" Budway said.

"With (Bob) Daniels telling (City Manager Isaac) Turner we want (things) done now, Turner must have been thinking, 'I wish the old VTL crowd was back. At least I could play those people.' He's not going to play this group."

Budway said the VTL's agenda is surprisingly similar to the current council's agenda. He's optimistic this council will give the budget the kind of scrutiny it deserves, even if that means drastic changes at city hall.

"I don't think (the previous city council) knew how to fire anybody, or were scared to death of it. Daniels, Holic and Gates aren't. I don't believe they are going to put up with a lot of crap," Budway said.

A handful of residents showed up at the final VTL board meeting Monday, which consisted of just Budway and treasurer Rosemary Vazaunges. The group's goal: to try to keep VTL alive. Most were former VTL board members who resigned in the past year and a half over the direction Budway took.

Former parks board member Mike Gelormino confirmed Friday a new organization called Venice Taxpayers Inc. will pick up where the VTL left off. Gelormino will serve as president.

"We're going to go a different way," Gelormino said, but he gave no specifics. "That was Herb's and Shirley Levine's wish. She and I go way back. She asked us to carry on the name. That's the only reason I'm doing it. Where it goes, we'll see. We want to make sure citizens of Venice have a say in certain things."

Gelormino said board members will include Jim Leis, former 1-Cent Sales Tax Oversight Committee member; Ted Koszarski, former council candidate and Sarasota County Council of Neighborhood Associations board member; Earl Quandt, former parks board member; Ali Hicks, current 1-Cent Sales Tax Oversight Committee member and treasurer for Sue Lang's re-election campaign; and local Web gadfly John Patten.

Gelormino said at a minimum he doesn't want to see the comprehensive plan changed. He also said he doesn't want the new organization to get into lawsuits.

Budway said he couldn't turn the organization over to Gelormino because he isn't a city of Venice resident, a VTL criterion.

Gelormino lives in South Venice. The others hadn't paid dues in more than a year and were thus not members, Budway said.

"Out of the four of them, none are members," he said. "All four are involved in the Democratic Party. The VTL is not going to be the Democratic Party."

"The same people who now want to run the organization," Budway said, used to call it a "knee-jerk bunch who didn't know what the hell we were doing.

"I wasn't going to hand it over to a bunch of flakes."