

# The Washington Post

## In neighborhood beefs, they bring the muscle

A Glen Echo entrepreneur smacks up against the wall of D.C. area's political and media elite

By Steve Hendrix  
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Nancy Schwartz Bloom's modest proposal was a hit when she posted it on her neighborhood e-mail group list in Glen Echo. The idea: Open a small, high-end market in the Sycamore Store, an unoccupied building at MacArthur Boulevard and Walhonding Road that had served for decades as the local grocery shop.

The reaction: More than a dozen you-go-girl missives piled up, with no dissents. Participants were soon marveling at the rare surge of neighborhood unity. "Within 20 minutes, everybody was like, hell, yeah," resident John Weaver said.

Then came the response from former White House press secretary Ron Nessen, who lives within sight of the store in Montgomery County: "We have retained a lawyer highly experienced in such cases. He is gearing up to defeat your effort. I assume you have hired a lawyer to represent you in what will be a long, nasty, and expensive zoning battle."

Astonished to suddenly find herself threatened with legal action by a man she remembered seeing standing at the White House podium,

Bloom was experiencing a classic only-in-Washington moment: A neighborhood scrap balloons when a boldface name from the area's political and media castes bursts into the fray.

There's a rich tradition of the mighty, or once mighty, intervening in neighborhood squabbles. Former ABC News anchorman Ted Koppel sued over the size of houses being built near his Potomac estate, and Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) lined up against a proposal to pave over old trolley tracks near his Georgetown home.

"It's something that happens more here than in other cities," said Phil Feola, a Washington real estate lawyer who handles fractious neighborhood disputes. "We probably have a higher number of VIPs per capita, and between the members of Congress, their chiefs of staff, the big media organizations and the ambassadors of the world, it can make it interesting."

NAACP Chairman Julian Bond appeared at a

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public meeting to oppose nighttime baseball lights at a park near his house in Chevy Chase.

And in an ongoing dispute over whether to build a Wal-Mart at the entrance to Wilderness Battlefield National Park near Fredericksburg, the pro side has support from former attorney general Edwin Meese. Opponents hope they can trump politics with star power in actor Robert Duvall.

In Glen Echo, Nessen's e-mail instantly heated up the discussion, residents said, with critiques of his bigfoot tone mixing with musings over his role in the Ford White House.

Nessen said he was not trying to leverage his political heft when he sent his message, which made no mention of his résumé. In fact, whatever influence he had as a White House spokesman who once appeared on "Saturday Night Live" has long since evaporated, he said.

"If you're younger than about 50, you might not even remember President Ford," said Nessen, a former NBC News correspondent who is a resident journalist at the Brookings Institution.

Bigwigs don't automatically prevail in such squabbles. But development lawyers and zoning officials say big names often unleash the same hardball tactics that made them successful in much fiercer

arenas, including hair-trigger lawyering and sophisticated message management.

When officials in McLean recently sought to install a sidewalk along Spring Hill Road, neighbors said the opponent who turned out to be best able to tie up the process was one who had honed his negotiating skills over arms-control talks: former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Greg Craig, who defended President Bill Clinton during his impeachment trial and recently resigned as White House counsel, took time off from work to oppose expansion of an elite preschool in his Cleveland Park neighborhood.

"It was intense," said Carrie Chimerine Irvin, who headed the board of the National Child Research Center in 2005 when the two sides agreed on a modified expansion.

When high-profile figures get mixed up in

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small-scale quarrels, two things usually happen, development experts say: There will be pockets deep enough to fund a long battle, and an especially bright spotlight will compel bureaucrats to go by the book.

"The local governing bodies will apply a higher scrutiny so they are not criticized," Feola said. "If you or I went and said, 'This is going to make my property value go down,' they are going to say, 'Thank you very much.' If Senator X says it, they may ask for a study."

For the bigwigs, name recognition isn't always welcome. It's unlikely that the McLean sidewalk spat would have generated a front-page story in The Washington Post if not for Brzezinski's unmistakable surname.

"People thought it was interesting, and that's perfectly all right with me," Brzezinski said, adding that he was frustrated that coverage of the sidewalk dispute focused more on his celebrity than on more substantive issues of development and county policy.

Those on the losing side are often quick to assume that a backroom deal has been cut when the side with the most hotshots prevails. In the years-long fight over whether to reopen Northwest Washington's Klinge Road after it was damaged by flooding, the high-profile opponents of bringing back cars included the late NBC

anchorman Tim Russert and the late Post columnist Mary McGrory.

D.C. officials said they played no favorites, but Joseph Hairston, who was chairman of the local Advisory Neighborhood Commission, said road supporters felt outgunned by fancy firepower. "It was all behind the scenes," he said. "We were up against people who had more power than we did."

In Glen Echo, Nessen said his intervention was meant only to make it clear that he and some of his neighbors would vigorously challenge any effort to open a store in an area zoned for residences.

"I didn't word it very diplomatically," Nessen said. "Maybe I was little grouchy that day. I am working on a book and trying to take care of my 98-year-old mother."

Whatever the intent, the prospect of a

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pricey, ugly legal battle is not sitting well with Bloom, the entrepreneur who, with her husband, owns the Broad Branch Market in Chevy Chase. She said they had not decided whether to proceed with the Glen Echo proposal.

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