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Plenty to build on

The incoming president of the Collier Building Industry Association says the group needs to be more vocal

By GINA EDWARDS, gvedwards@naplesnews.com

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Passionate is the word that most colleagues use to describe Al Zichella, the incoming president of the Collier Building Industry Association.

Few, if any, doubt that Zichella will bring passion to his advocacy on behalf of home builders and developers here and all those they employ.

Zichella said his first mission as CBIA president will be to give his industry a greater voice in politics.

Right now, Zichella believes that Collier's building industry needs and deserves a seat at the political table.

"I think sometimes we are characterized as the root of the problem, when the truth is we may be the root of the solution," Zichella said.

Collier County Commissioner Fred Coyle said builders have a seat at the table — and a voice — now.

"We have the opportunity for builders and developers to be heard on every land-use decision we make," Coyle said.

That Zichella wants the 1,400-member CBIA to be even more vocal in its advocacy is saying a lot, considering the organization has challenged Collier County's latest impact fee on new construction — one designated for government buildings — in court.



Lexey Swall/Staff

Al Zichella, left, is the incoming president of the Collier Building Industry Association, taking over for Bill Varian, right.

The lawsuit is now in the evidence-trading phase called discovery. County attorneys recently handed over some 26,000 pages of documents to CBIA's attorney.

Filing a lawsuit isn't the only way CBIA is exercising activism.

CBIA provided the seed money and organization to start a new political action group, the Collier County Business Community Political Action Committee, which includes support from CBIA, the Naples Area Board of Realtors and the Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce.

Zichella has earned respect in the building industry, in Collier County and statewide.

He's been tapped by House Speaker Allan Bense, R-Panama City, to represent builders on the 15-member Florida Impact Fee Review Task Force that was created by the growth management bill passed in the past legislative session.

The growth management bill and the impact fee task force have ignited controversy locally. Collier commissioners have voiced concern that the bill will water down the county's ability to manage growth. A suggestion floated at the task force meeting to cap impact fees on new construction also has Collier commissioners concerned.

Commissioner Donna Fiala suggested last week that the county push to have its own representative on the task force, saying Zichella doesn't represent the community at large. She said she'll attend the task force meeting in Jacksonville next week.

"I just want to tell them there's another point of view," Fiala said.

Zichella though, said he hopes that Collier's elected leaders in the coming year will realize that CBIA is a part of the community.

"We're more than straight industry advocacy," Zichella said. "We live here, too."

Zichella has been a familiar face locally. He's lived and worked in the area since 1986.

Prior to coming to Southwest Florida, Zichella cut his teeth in the New York City high-rise construction business, working at one time on Trump Tower. A twin, he is one of five siblings who grew up in the Bronx.

In the past decade, Zichella has spent most his time working for Bonita Springs-based luxury home builder WCI Communities. He was manager of the tower division.

Zichella has overseen many well-known local projects, such as Borghese at Hammock Bay, Belize at Cape Marco, the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point in Estero and the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort in Naples, just to name a few local landmarks.

A year ago, Zichella left WCI to become general communities director for Elias Brothers Communities, a North Naples-based real estate developer and home builder.

Besides his leadership role in CBIA, Zichella is a board member of the Florida Home Builders Association and has been since 2002. He's been an executive committee member at FHBA since 2004 and a member of FHBA's Governmental Affairs Committee since 2002. Zichella is chairman of FHBA's Developers Council for 2005 and he's also chairman of the FHBA foundation.

As chairman of the FHBA foundation, Zichella now oversees the statewide activities of Future Builders of America, a program that encourages students to pursue careers in construction.

Lely High School, where CBIA has its Lely Construction Academy, started the state's inaugural chapter of Future Builders of America.

Zichella also has been active in pushing the state to create an associate's degree program for those who want to go into careers in construction.

Zichella received the CBIA President's Award in 2002 and 2003 and was named CBIA's "Builder of the Year" in 2004.

He's been married to wife, Kate, for 28 years. They have two children, daughter Rachel, 27, and son Eric, 25.

Zichella will take over the volunteer job as president Jan. 1.

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