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He Loves the Law

By David Mongillo
April 24, 2002

According to Vienna Town Council member Steven Briglia, John Gionfriddo is not much of a self-promoter. Briglia, who will take over Gionfriddo's spot as town attorney on July 1, described Gionfriddo as a humble person, reluctant to discuss his accomplishments. Gionfriddo, who is stepping down after 36 years with the town, chuckled to himself when he heard Briglia's comments. "I grew up in a society where you don't blow your own horn," Gionfriddo said.

But, over the course of his career, Gionfriddo has had plenty of reasons to boast. In his private practice, which he closed in 1991, he focused on personal injury, product liability and medical malpractice suites. And even though he said he felt most comfortable in the courtroom, Gionfriddo has drafted several significant policies for the town.

FOUR OR FIVE YEARS AGO he wrote a blighted property statute that gave the town the ability to clean up abandoned and run-down properties. Many thought real estate lobbyists would oppose such a statute, because it would give local government too much power. But the statute was even-handed enough that it passed through the Virginia General Assembly. It was also picked up by several other municipalities.

"Everyone jumped on it," Briglia said. "I think Fairfax used it even before we did." Council member Albert Boudreau mentioned an ordinance, developed by Gionfriddo, that defines the responsibilities of a massage therapist. Massage parlors are notorious as screens for prostitution. "Massage therapy is a legitimate business," Boudreau said. "We had to get a code to distinguish it as a distinct business. That code was adopted by other communities, and was also adopted by the state."

Other municipalities have adopted several of Gionfriddo's policies. He helped set up an architectural review board, which has been in place for over 20 years. The board enforces guidelines over lighting, billboards and other public structures.

"Vienna used to be a hodge-podge of signs," Briglia said. "Looking back, most businesses would probably say [the architectural review board] helped us all."

But Gionfriddo does not take full responsibility for such accomplishments.

"Vienna has been very active," Gionfriddo said. "We have led the way for a lot of other jurisdictions. Mayor [Charles] Robinson was very active. He was the moving force."

ROBINSON, THE LONG-TIME Mayor of Vienna, first convinced Gionfriddo to become town attorney in 1966. At that time Robinson was a board member and Gionfriddo was chairman of the Board of Zoning Appeals. Gionfriddo said the town had to "scrap and fight" when it was first coming into its own.

"We had to fight to preserve what Vienna people wanted," Gionfriddo said. "We had to control development, to get the kind of growth we wanted."

Council member Robert McCormick said new council members may be at a disadvantage without Gionfriddo's guidance and experience.

"He takes off the rough edges," McCormick said. "He's not someone who's going to intrude on your life. But he will make himself available."

In the five years he has been on the board, McCormick said Gionfriddo has been "invaluable." McCormick has often approached the attorney for advice.

"I've become somewhat of a friend with John," McCormick said. "When all of us on the town council go out, I usually sit and talk with John. He's given me a lot of advice, and not only professional advice, but personal advice as well. Just how to approach people, that kind of thing."

Briglia said Gionfriddo has been valuable so much as he has been able to keep the town out of court. Because Virginia is a Dillon Rule state, all the decisions made by a town must first gain state approval. Briglia said there have been several instances when Gionfriddo has pulled the council back.

"It's very easy to overstep your bounds," Briglia said. "You think you're protecting the interests of the public, and it makes sense at the time, but then you realize the general assembly hasn't said you can do that. It can

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be very hazy sometimes."



THE TOWN COUNCIL VOTED to appoint Briglia to the town attorney position last week, but not all council members were in favor of the decision. McCormick argued against the rest of the council, and asked that they conduct open interviews for the position.

"I'm not in favor of Steve Briglia becoming the attorney," said McCormick, who will leave the town council after the elections on May 7. "We shouldn't be taking someone from our group [of council members]. They're all too close."

But Boudreau said Briglia's experience on the town council should be considered an advantage.

"[Briglia] grew up in town, he's on the council, he's aware of things that go on in town and in the government," Boudreau said. "That should be considered an asset, not a liability."

McCormick said he was not questioning Briglia's competency, but his experience. Briglia is a partner at a Fairfax law firm, but he has never worked as a municipal lawyer. Although they have not done so yet, Gionfriddo said he plans to sit down with Briglia sometime this month, to prepare him for the job. He said that if he had to give Briglia one piece of advice, it would be, "Do what's right."

"I was always very proud of being a lawyer," Gionfriddo said. "It's an honored profession. I helped people. I loved the law."

After he leaves as town attorney, Gionfriddo plans on spending time at his house in the Allegheny Mountains, hunting and fishing. He will also spend more time with his grandchildren. And, if he gets antsy, he might do some legal consulting.

"With my years of trial and municipal practice, I ought to have something to offer someone," he said.

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