

Lighthouse Project - History: Stadium Naples was biggest public corruption scandal in local history



Rendering of what Stadium Naples would have looked like.

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ESPN founder Bill Rasmussen unveiled plans for a first-of-its-kind golf stadium in 1996, an ambitious, \$100 million project to be located northeast of the city of Naples. The facility, to include luxury skyboxes and 12,000 seats surrounding the course's 18th hole, would be called Stadium Naples. But the stadium was never built. Plans fell apart under controversy and public outrage when a Naples Daily News investigation revealed in 1997 that an elected official, then Collier County Commissioner John Norris, had negotiated for a stake in Stadium Naples estimated at \$7.5 million before casting votes to benefit his developer partners and the stadium.

The controversy would only grow from there. Following the urging of residents and the local Republican Party, then Gov. Jeb Bush ordered a detailed investigation into the matter, as well as the assignment of a special prosecutor.

What resulted was the largest corruption case in Collier's history, netting charges against 10 people: four public officials, five business leaders and an attorney. For more than six years, investigations into the project, which was attempted a second time with now defunct Naples-based brokerage company A.S. Goldmen & Co., continued.

The case was sprawling and complicated. Eventually, the public would learn that A.S. Goldmen & Co. had manipulated a number of small company stocks, including Stadium Naples partner Millennium Sports Management, in what state and federal securities regulators dubbed one of the nation's most notorious boiler rooms. It would learn that David

Mobley, the financier whose Maricopa Investments backed Stadium Naples and The Strand, was cheating investors of millions, pumping their money into his posh lifestyle and failed businesses and charities.

'People were closing their eyes; the whole society was rupturing with corruption,' Mike Carr, a Collier County judge who was then a Republican state committeeman and leading voice in calls for an outside investigation, said of the time.

'Roads weren't being built. Developments that shouldn't have been built were being built. Zoning decisions were not based on merit but who was being paid off; taxes weren't being collected on fancy golf clubs. The saying around here was, 'To get along, you go along.' It was a cesspool.'

'We've been amazed at the institutionalized corruption we've been seeing,' special prosecutor Michael Von Zamft said in October 2001, when prosecutors unveiled sweeping new corruption charges and the last five arrests.

Prosecutors charged the 10 Stadium Naples co-defendants with conspiring to deprive the citizens of Collier County of the honest services of public officials by swapping financial incentives for votes and influence favorable to their projects.

Although initially only Norris was in the spotlight for wrongful dealings with developers, it was later revealed that other county officials had also accepted gifts and favors from them.

'Crooks are like cockroaches and the sunlight makes them run,' Carr said. Once the first hints of corruption began coming out, he said, the rest followed.

Then Commissioner Tim Constantine, the public learned in 2000, received a discount on his wedding reception at a country club and a \$100,000 business loan from the Stadium Naples developer. The loan wasn't repaid.

It learned Neil Dorrill handed out pay raises to key county employees days before leaving his job as county manager in 1997 to become president of the first Stadium Naples development partnership.

Tim Hancock, another county commissioner at the time, admitted to taking more than 40 free golf games from lobbyists while in office.

Several years would pass before the case ended in January 2004 with the last remaining defendant, Norris, striking a deal with prosecutors.

The defendants were dealt varying sentences, ranging from community service to house arrest and thousands of dollars in fines.

The case led to changes at the state and local level. Ethics ordinances were passed by both city and county government. And the Florida Legislature amended state law, stiffening penalties for public corruption.

Commissioner Fred Coyle, who was a city council member when the city's ordinance was adopted, said the new rules help sensitize elected officials to how the public perceives their interaction with developers. The ordinances closed the loopholes and prohibit officials from engaging in activities that could even be viewed as unethical.

'We probably overreact in some cases,' Coyle said. 'We are probably overly cautious and that's not bad.'

Carr said although 'there's more money here (and) you're going to get more crooks gravitating toward money,' he believes the area's elected officials to be honest and he is proud of that. The county, Carr said, has to continue to maintain integrity and take the stance that corruption is unacceptable.

'If we keep in mind what's happened before, we can make new mistakes,' he said. 'We don't have to make the old ones.'

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