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JARED LAZARUS/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

## HOLLYWOOD: LAW FIRM IS KING AT CITY HALL

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The won-lost record of the law firm of Becker & Poliakoff reads like a boxing champ's: 36-0, with a string of knockouts, stirring comebacks and contested TKOs.

In Hollywood City Hall, this undefeated, undisputed king of contracts, fundraising and influence is a lone lobbying outfit that bills itself as the "hometown" law firm in Broward County's third-most populous city.

Combining big-money political contributions, deep roots in Hollywood and a highly personal touch with city commissioners, the firm has cultivated an unshakable voting bloc that nearly always includes Mayor Mara Giulianti.

Meanwhile, its client list has skyrocketed — from 12 in 1999 to 52 in 2005. The next busiest lobbyist in Hollywood listed nine clients last year.

As Hollywood aims to transform itself from sleepy town to destination city, with new high-rises on the beach and condos breaking ground downtown, some insiders say Becker & Poliakoff's lobbyists have garnered so much influence they're now the gatekeepers of the city's growth.

"Every major decision in the city of Hollywood went through them," said Sam Finz, the city manager from 1992 through 2002, who said he quit largely because of the firm's influence. "I felt it was bad government and the taxpayers suffered sometimes."

Bernie Friedman and partner Alan Koslow, the law firm's two most public faces

at City Hall, are longtime Hollywood home-steaders who say they only push projects that will enhance the city.

Koslow, a former Hollywood city attorney who served with four of the current seven members, still addresses them as a confidant.

"I don't think we take undue advantage at all," he said in an interview. "We know how far to go without taking advantage."

Friedman, a resident since 1960, is a longtime fixture in Hollywood political circles.

"The reason why we have an insider's view is because we roll up our sleeves every single day," he said.

### 'WE ARE SO VISIBLE'

The firm's lawyers are regulars on community boards and at black-tie galas for charities ranging from the Boys and Girls Club to



JOE RIMKUS JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

## STAFF CONDOS: Developers of Radius Phase I, a high-rise at Hollywood Circle, are clients of Becker & Poliakoff.

the Hollywood Art and Culture Center. They raise funds for the city's Artspark and the American Jewish Congress.

"Part of the reason people come to us first is because we are so visible in Hollywood," Friedman said.

Consider just how visible:

- The firm and its clients bankrolled, conservatively, more than \$1 of every \$6 to commissioners' campaigns, or \$130,000 of the \$770,000 to come in since the 2004 elections through 2006.

The firm affixes postage to many commissioners' campaign mailings and helps some new politicians decide whether to run, mapping strategy at an office conference room or over lunch at the nearby Deli Den.

"I have never had to raise money without their help," said one beneficiary, Commissioner Fran Russo, who is paid \$28,000 a year as a city commissioner. "I am the poor commissioner. I needed the money."

- From 2004 to 2006 Becker & Poliakoff's lawyers appeared before commissioners 36 times requesting yes votes for a range of development deals, zoning changes, grants and contracts.

They won every time — 36 wins in 36 months.

"I have joked more than once referring to us as the economic development agency for the city of Hollywood," said founding shareholder Alan Becker, a Florida legislator from 1972 to '78. "We bring good projects, and we should win."

- Downtown, its clients have been green-lighted to build \$370 million in projects, more than all other developers combined.

Those clients have won approval for \$37 million in property tax incentives. The share of new tax revenues their clients will pocket is more than twice that of other developers.

- While representing clients seeking

business with the city, Becker & Poliakoff maintains a \$50,000-a-year contract as Hollywood's lobbyist in Tallahassee. Hired in 1992, it has kept the job in a series of 15 no-bid extensions.

"The conflict slaps you right in the face," said City Manager Cameron Benson.

Mayor Giuliani, longtime friends with Friedman and Koslow and a beneficiary of major campaign support, declined to discuss her relationship with the firm.

### CONSTANT PRESENCE

Becker & Poliakoff is headquartered just outside city limits on Stirling Road, but its satellite office could well be City Hall. Finz, the former city manager, recalled how Koslow and Friedman would often be walking out of a commissioner's office as he entered to brief his bosses.

At the negotiating table, Finz said, "They were quick to tell you what the outcome is going to be. They would blow me off because they knew damn well the vote would go their way."

Friedman said he was surprised by Finz's comments.

"I always thought we had a great relationship, and I don't ever remember disagreeing with him," he said.

The commission, led by Russo and Giuliani, ousted Finz in 2002, two months before his planned retirement. Friedman said the manager's departure had "absolutely nothing to do with me or Alan Koslow."

At City Commission meetings, where votes are cast on everything from small grants to million-dollar developments, the firm is a frequent presence. Friedman once dialed some commissioners on the dais as they prepared to vote on a major beach development deal, drawing the ire of City Manager Benson.

"I offer my sincere apology if, in any way, I have made a 'mockery' of a Hollywood City Commission meeting," Friedman wrote in 2005 after helping his No. 2-ranked client win the contract. He promised to stay seated, not use his cellphone or "make any hand or face gestures."

The firm's ties to the commission date three decades, when veteran Commissioner Cathy Anderson met Friedman's father at the bank where she worked, not long before she took office. Dr. Charles Friedman held an account and would often have young Bernie make deposits.

A dozen years ago, Friedman hosted a

birthday party for Anderson at the Becker & Poliakoff office, and the lobbyist's daughter dressed up in costume to celebrate. "I have always felt that Bernie is an honorable, ethical person. I view him as a loyal friend," Anderson said.

She added, "They're the only people that raise any money in Hollywood."

### DELI POLITICS

Before Russo decided in 1999 to run for office, she sat with Friedman at the Deli Den, a favorite haunt near the firm's office. In a lunch meeting Russo said she felt more like a job interview, he asked about her vision for Hollywood.

"He basically said they would support me and drum up money for me," Russo said. "But that doesn't mean I was going to vote for them."

Yet she has, records show.

The firm made good on its promise to Russo again in 2006, when Commissioner Peter Bober suggested barring developers and corporations from contributing to city campaigns and limiting private donations to no more than \$200. Russo wanted to pocket as much as she could before any change took place.

"I told my campaign people to call Bernie," Russo said. "They were ready to go."

The firm quickly secured multiple \$500 donations totaling more than \$14,000 from its clients, companies that often appear before commissioners.

### RESTRICTION FAILS

Ultimately, Bober's reform failed 4-3. Russo, Anderson, Giuliani and then-Commissioner Keith Wasserstrom beat it back.

The four, the biggest recipients of campaign support from the firm and its clients, have been consistent yes votes for Becker & Poliakoff issues.

"What's the big deal?" Friedman asked, noting that some clients are represented by other politically active firms who also fundraise. "To make a generalization that raising money has something to do with votes is insulting."

Not everyone agrees.

'It's like, 'If you do for me, then I'll do for you,' " said Commissioner Sal Oliveri, who is occasionally among the minority voting no. "In my opinion, they for the most part

have a pretty strong voting bloc on the commission."

To Becker & Poliakoff and many Hollywood officials, the firm's role as the city's Tallahassee lobbyist has been a clear success. To others, it's a clear conflict.

Friedman, the city's advocate in the capital, recently alerted city leaders that most of their priorities received funding this year, from \$200,000 for Rotary Park to \$1.4 million for beach renourishment.

In last year's legislative session, Becker & Poliakoff represented gambling establishments — while working for Hollywood, which opposed increased gaming.

"That to me was an eye-opening experience that I felt very uncomfortable with," said City Manager Benson.

Said Friedman: "We represent Pompano Race Track. Pompano has zero to do with the city of Hollywood."

Broward County bars its capital lobbyists from lobbying county commissioners during the legislative session. Hollywood doesn't.

Oliveri once tried to force his colleagues' hands: Have the firm be a lobbyist before Hollywood or for it. His motion never gained support. "Some of my colleagues might be afraid to challenge Bernie because he is a big mover and shaker in all the campaigns," he said.

### HIGH-RISE SYMBOLS

Along the beach stand striking symbols of the firm's imprint: The 39-story, \$800 million Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa that towers over the city's south beach, the even taller Trump Hollywood luxury condos rising nearby, and a planned 17-story \$110 million hotel-garage to anchor Johnson Street.

"One of the reasons for our success is we were in the right place at the right time," said Koslow, noting how the Westin Diplomat triggered a development domino effect.

Said Anderson: "We had no development for decades here until developers discovered us, and they had a lot to do with that."

### MILLIONS APPROVED

Its downtown clients have been approved to build five projects with budgets totaling \$370 million — though Friedman noted that only one crane is at work and other developments are years away.

Hollywood's Community Redevelopment Agency, which has control of the millions in new property tax dollars anticipated

from developments in the downtown and beach districts, has been unusually generous to clients of Becker & Poliakoff.

With city commission approval, the downtown CRA has agreed to return to the firm's clients 42 percent of new property tax money to be generated in the projects, or \$37 million of \$89 million. Each client has its own negotiated settlement; they range from 21 to 81 percent over many years, records show.

Developers the firm doesn't represent have been approved for \$308 million of downtown projects — and just 18 percent of new tax money.

Koslow said incentives are a must for complex redevelopments in the city's aged business core. "That's a project that isn't getting built otherwise," he said.

When Koslow rises to address commissioners, he speaks with a familiarity opponents lack. Koslow often sits in the seats generally reserved for city staff, while other lobbyists and vendors find spots across the aisle.

"If you want to kill all the deals that are proposed, if you want to kill them, just put it in there," Koslow said last June, as commissioners debated public disclosure requirements that could affect his beach condo-hotel clients.

Taken aback, Commissioner Bober suggested that Koslow had "made a threat," before taking the words back.

"It was not a threat," Koslow replied. "I have never made any threat up here. I just make a persuasive point."

Later, Anderson suggested limiting the numbers of units that condo hotels could have — a move that with other zoning strictures would all but stop new beach condo-hotels.

After three hours of debate, the restrictions looked destined to pass. Abruptly, Mayor Giuliani called a recess.

"I'm taking a break. I think that you need to explain or somebody needs to explain to people," the mayor said.

### ANOTHER KO

The mayor did not make clear to whom she was speaking. But during the 18-minute recess, Koslow sidled up to Anderson. When the meeting reconvened, Anderson's potential reform had died, another KO for Hollywood's hometown firm.

"I would hire them, too," Commissioner Russo said. "They get the job done."

# LOBBYIST TRUMP CITY STAFF

On big things and small, Becker & Poliakoff lawyers have persuaded Hollywood commissioners to override staff recommendations.

BY RONNIE GREENE AND TODD WRIGHT  
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A golf course in the rough. A Thai restaurant in a pinch. A hotel plan in a hole.

The three Hollywood businesses, unrelated to one another, each wanted something from the city — a contract extension, a financial grant, and a lucrative development deal.

In each case, Hollywood staff said no.

Enter Becker & Poliakoff.

Problem solved.

The three cases — ranging from an \$80,000 grant to Try My Thai to the \$110 million Johnson Street hotel development — reveal how Becker & Poliakoff wins even when city staffers say no.

Politicians overrule them.

“There is a perception that if you want to get something done, you get them — and that’s a problem,” said Commissioner Peter Bober, the only one to vote no each time.

## WEEDS ON THE LINKS

At Hollywood’s Orangebrook Golf and Country Club, the greens were brown. Weeds overran the course.

City staff called the conditions inferior to any other course in town, a direct shot at Hollywood Golf!, the course’s maintenance team.

“The only option I want to present is we simply deny the renewal and get another management company,” said David Flaherty, then the city’s parks director.

Days before the 2004 vote, Becker & Poliakoff attorney Alan Koslow met individually with commissioners, then pressed them in a meeting.

Hollywood Golf! kept its contract in a 4-3 vote, with Commissioners Bober, Sal Oliveri and Mayor Mara Giulianti against it.

It did so even though Vice President David Lottes admitted in the meeting: “Have we delivered at Orangebrook? I have to agree with Mr. Flaherty. No, we haven’t.”

“That was strictly a decision based on the fact that Koslow had a lot of friends on the commission,” Oliveri said.

Koslow said his client did a good job on a difficult course. “It wasn’t Augusta at the Masters, but for Orangebrook it was pretty

damn good.” Eighteen months later, the contract ended. By then, the city had sunk \$1.1 million into the course and paid Hollywood Golf! an additional \$135,000.

Phonethip Vaz, proprietor of downtown’s Try My Thai restaurant, was struggling for cash and seeking an \$80,000 grant from the Community Redevelopment Agency.

CRA Director Neil Fritz opposed giving the money to finance new kitchen equipment, imported furniture and Thai decorations because he wanted to push retail and office development.

Vaz hired Koslow, who said he worked pro bono.

“We have to help out the little people also,” Koslow said in February 2006,

reminding commissioners that Vaz catered campaign functions at no cost. Fran Russo, for one, received \$500 in food in-kind in 2006.

Try My Thai had support from neighboring businesses, and Koslow suggested disregarding Fritz’s recommendation. Commissioners did, with only Bober objecting.

On the beach, Becker & Poliakoff represented the Marriott Ocean Village, one of three developers vying in 2005 to build a hotel on city-owned land at Johnson Street.

City Manager Cameron Benson concluded the firm’s plan would result in “a negative impact to the Beach CRA in financial terms, especially during the first two decades and continuing to the third.”

Benson said, “They submitted what I thought was a subpar project.”

Baltimore’s Cordish Co. had built the city’s most bustling hot spot, the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, and proposed a destination development on the beach.

Benson said it had “the greatest potential” for tourists and residents, offering double the retail and parking.

## ‘DON’T BE NAIVE’

“Don’t be naive,” Koslow said during the



CANDACE BARBOT/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**APPETIZING:** Try My Thai owners Andrew and Phonethip ‘Tai’ Vaz got an \$80,000 grant from Hollywood, with help from Becker & Poliakoff lawyers.

nine-hour debate, arguing that Marriott’s track record — it already had a hotel on the beach — showed it was the best.

Oliveri moved to vote Marriott the top-ranked firm. The reason? Echoing citizens who appeared before commissioners, he thought Cordish’s proposal was too big. Becker & Poliakoff’s Bernie Friedman dialed some commissioners on their cellphones on the dais.

Yet as he urged his colleagues to pick No. 2-ranked Marriott, Oliveri instructed staff to *enlarge* the project so it would not drain city dollars.

“I’m confused, and I don’t understand,” Benson replied.

By a 4-2 vote, commissioners overrode him, with Bober and Beam Furr against and Giulianti away from the dais.

Commissioners decided to rank a No. 2 firm, in case Marriott’s deal collapsed. Amid confusion over another vote, Friedman yelled out, “Cathy, vote yes!” to Commissioner Cathy Anderson.

“We had a world-class collection of tenants ready for this project,” said Cordish executive Scott H. Marder.

Cordish did not have a lobbyist.