

Planning Commissioner a Boon to Homeowners, a Bane to Developers

By RICHARD SIMON, Times Staff Writer

"Developers probably say rotten things about me," said Suzy Neiman.

Indeed. They call her arbitrary, stubborn and determined to oppose their best efforts to build homes, condominiums and office buildings.

Neiman is the best friend most homeowner groups in Los Angeles have on the city Planning Commission because of her dogged, sometimes lonely, battle to protect neighborhoods from what she sees as overdevelopment.

An Encino homemaker, Neiman is the only Valley resident—and only woman—on the five-member commission, which helps make multimillion-dollar land-use decisions affecting the quality of life throughout the city's 465 square miles.

She has served longer than any of the other commissioners—11 years—and was one of the few survivors of Mayor Tom Bradley's recent shake-up of the city's 32 boards and commissions, whose members serve at the pleasure of the mayor.

The 61-year-old, silver-haired grandmother is a brassy, outspoken former homeowner association leader whose homespun, often jovial, demeanor masks her political acumen.

As a planning commissioner, she plays a key role in determining how private property is developed. The

commission recommends to the City Council what kind of development should be permitted and what type of restrictions should be imposed on projects. Few commissions draw as much public turnout for their meetings—500 for discussion of major controversies like oil drilling in Pacific Palisades.

Although most commission actions must be approved by the council, opposing sides in building disputes wage fierce battles for commission support because it takes 10 of the 15 council votes—instead of the usual eight—to override commission decisions.

Neiman is the commission's severest critic of developers. "I hate what some of them do to property," she said in a recent interview.

Answered one developer, who, like most who might take projects before the commission, would speak only on the condition that he not be named: "I'd prefer to see a fair, open-minded commission that weighs everything on its merits. The merits don't mean a damn to Suzy. She has a predisposition to try to limit development."

For most of its members, serving on the Planning Commission means reading a dozen or so staff reports a week and attending meetings every Thursday.

For Neiman, it is virtually a full-time job.

She said she devotes about 30 hours a week to commission business, poring through stacks of files—thousands of which she has stored in her house, and, she acknowledges with some embarrassment, under her bed.

She is the only commissioner who personally drives throughout the city to inspect every parcel under consideration. The other commissioners, all of whom hold full-time private jobs—two are businessmen, one a lawyer, one a labor official—instead rely on staff reports.

She also knocks on doors, asking residents how they feel about proposed projects.

For this, she gets \$50 a week from the city.

Demands Concessions

When City Council members receive a commission recommendation that has been reached on a 4-1 roll call, they usually know that the lone vote was cast by Neiman. More often than any other commissioner, she demands—and sometimes wins—concessions from developers to minimize the impact of projects on neighborhoods, such as building fewer units.

"She thinks as a homeowner," said Carole Stevens, president of the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Residents.

"She's just one vote, but what makes her valuable is she often can deliver votes we need on the commission," said Dan Shapiro, president of the Studio City Residents Assn., explaining that Neiman tries to persuade her colleagues to support her point of view.

Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn., said, "I'll get calls from her late at night about a proposed development coming up at the commission meeting. . . . She's out there making sure the community knows what's going on."

Steve Harrington, a representative of building trade unions and a former planning commissioner who often voted the opposite of Neiman, said of his former colleague: "She loves to fight developers. . . . If the zoning allowed 158 apartments, and the city planning staff was recommending 140, she'd try to get it down to 120."

(A developer does not need commission approval if his project conforms to zoning. However, commission approval is required if developers want to do something not normally permitted, such as building homes closer than the required 10 feet side-yard separation.)

"I don't like to fight anyone," Neiman retorted. But she said many developers do not care about the effect of a project on the community because "they're not going to be living or working there."

A popular story told about Neiman deals with an incident several years ago. Furious with the city's failure to do anything about a dangerous intersection in front of her home, she went out at night and painted STOP in the street. The city shortly thereafter put in a stop sign.

"That represents the essence of Suzy Neiman," said West Valley Councilwoman Joy Picus, a close friend.

Lobbied With Council

Neiman's determination recently came into view when the commissioner broke with tradition by going directly to City Council members, lobbying for her position on a proposed development.

Usually, commissioners send their recommendation, as a body, to the council, but take no action individually.

It also was a case that, ironically, found Neiman, champion of homeowners, siding with a developer.

Neiman wrote a letter to council members supporting Warner Center developer Robert Voit's effort to stop another developer from building a high-rise in the Woodland Hills complex. Neiman's letter was hand carried to council members by a representative of Voit.

Council's Unwritten Rule

Neiman's opposition to the project was not enough to kill it, as the council followed an unwritten rule of deferring to the community's councilwoman, Picus, who supported the development.

Picus said recently that she was upset that her friend "allowed herself to be used" by Voit for lobbying the council, but said she holds no hard feelings.

PLANNING: Commissioner

Neiman was studying to be a nurse when her first husband, a Navy pilot, was killed in action during World War II, and her friends suggested she go to California for a vacation.

She got a job as a secretary at Paramount Studios, where she met her current husband, Bob, a highly decorated Marine Corps colonel who would make a fortune as co-owner of Neiman-Reed's Lumber City.

Her interest in city government began in 1959, when she and a few neighbors went to a hearing to protest a proposed apartment house in their single-family residential neighborhood but found the commissioners paid little attention.

"I was outraged at the way we were treated," she said.

She was told that the project she opposed conformed to the community's "master plan," which she had never heard of. She decided to find out what the master plan was all about.

She learned that the plan called for intense development along Ventura Boulevard, a concept that so disturbed her and a few of her neighbors that they organized the Encino Property Owners Assn.

"At the time, the Valley was experiencing great growth, and some of the builders and planners said I was opposed to progress. Progress, my foot. What they meant was progress in their own bank accounts."

Her first major battle, in 1961, was to protest the proposed destruction of a giant oak at Louise Avenue and Ventura Boulevard.

'A Bunch of Women'

When Neiman appeared before the council with a few neighbors, Councilman Gilbert Lindsay commented, "It's nothing but a bunch of women." But, by the time the battle was won, several thousand residents had joined her cause.

"I'm sure some of the councilmen would have liked to see me hang from that tree," she said. Neiman said one of the commission votes she is most proud of was one in 1979 for an oak tree protection law requiring developers to preserve, relocate or replace oaks before receiving building approval.

It was Neiman's incessant, plucky rattling of the council chambers that made her known to the new mayor when Tom Bradley began appointing his commissioners in 1973.

"I think Tom Bradley probably made a secret campaign pledge (to the council) saying, 'If I'm elected mayor, I will get that broad out of your hair,'" she joked.

In turn, Neiman, a Republican, has been a loyal supporter of the mayor, a Democrat. She walked precincts for Bradley's unsuccessful 1982 gubernatorial campaign, while her husband contributed \$1,400.



JOEL P. LUGAVERE / Los Angeles Times

Suzy Neiman, an Encino homemaker, puts in about 30 hours a week as a planning commissioner.