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2010

## An Interview with Yorgo Kagafas

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee White

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Voices of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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This project was the brainchild of Deborah Boehm, Ph.D. and Patrick Jackson who taught at UNLV and resided in the John S. Park Neighborhood. As they walked their community, they realized it was a special place that intersected themes of gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gentrification. Patrick and Deborah learned that John S. Park had been listed on the National Registry of Historic Places and that original homeowners, local politicians, members of the gay community, Latino immigrants, artists and gallery owners and an enclave of UNLV staff all lived in the neighborhood. Therefore, they decided that the history of this special place had to be preserved, joined with the Oral History Research Center at UNLV Libraries and wrote a grant that was funded by the Centennial Committee.

The transcripts received minimal editing that included the elimination of fragments, false starts and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the narrative. These interviews have been catalogued and can be found as non-circulating documents in Special Collections at UNLV's Lied Library.

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# Interview with Yorgo Kagafas

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: lived on a farm in Guernsey County, OH; moved to Grandview Heights, OH as a teenager; attended The Ohio State University (B.A., Political Science); semester at University of Haifa (Israel); graduated 1988 and enlisted in U.S. Navy; served in First Gulf War in Bahrain, ended active service in Long Beach, CA.	1
Lived in historic Coronado Neighborhood, Phoenix, AZ and became active in neighborhood association. Attended The Arizona State University (M.A., Environmental Planning). Internship with City of Phoenix Neighborhood Services Department led to full-time position in Planning. Worked for City of Phoenix, then became neighborhood planner for Gilbert, AZ. Won Arizona State Planning Association Award.	2
Relocated to Las Vegas, NV (1999) to work as neighborhood planner for the City of Las Vegas. First job: assist in organizing the Ward 3 communities into neighborhood associations and identify community-based issues. Worked with Historic John S. Park Neighborhood and purchased a home there. What he liked about the neighborhood: centrally located, intact neighborhood; character of homes; size of lots; convenience to work; economical price. Description of house: Cape Cod style block home, built ca. 1943; three-bedroom, two-bath, detached block garage.	3
Work with neighborhood activist Bob Bellis and challenges to John S. Park Neighborhood: proposed Titanic Hotel and Casino (ca. 1998). Organizing the neighborhood on a more permanent basis; identifying and resolving varied issues confronting the community.	4
City of Las Vegas neighborhood planning process: proactive process for communities to express their desires re: proposed development. Participation of John S. Park Neighborhood in this process. Neighborhood planning process vs. prerogative of elected officials to make unilateral decisions for their communities.	5
Reasons for termination of the neighborhood planning process in City of Las Vegas: changes in planning profession—involvement of people in local government and empowering neighborhood associations. Different philosophies of City planners.	8
Formation of John S. Park neighborhood association and participation of residents in the association and the planning process. Identifying, planning, and resolving issues: redesign and rehabilitation of Mary Dutton Park; code enforcement; stopping commercial encroachment in the residential neighborhood; and historic designation.	9

Applying for and becoming listed on the National Register of Historic Places: the process and how it played out in the John S. Park Neighborhood: importance of the neighborhood planning process in this effort.	16
Beverly Green and Southridge neighborhoods: neighborhood plans and reasons for lack of historic designation process. Neighborhood associations still active but desire for historic preservation has not emerged.	19
Influence of historic designation on John S. Park Neighborhood: residents' stance to save their intact valuable residential community, prevent more commercial encroachment, stop the Stratosphere rollercoaster, inter-neighborhood activism to protect communities.	21
Conclusion: happy with the work he did in neighborhood planning for John S. Park Neighborhood and others. Disappointed that City has cancelled neighborhood planning process.	23

## Preface

John S. Park was first described in 1880 as "the finest residential neighborhood in the City of Las Vegas." In 1980, John S. Park was designated as a National Historic Landmark. The City of Las Vegas and the National Historic Landmark Program have worked together to preserve the historic character of the neighborhood and to provide a framework for future development.

The City of Las Vegas has a rich history and a diverse population. The John S. Park neighborhood is a historic residential neighborhood that has been an important part of the city's history. The City of Las Vegas has a long history of preserving historic neighborhoods and landmarks. The John S. Park neighborhood is a prime example of a historic residential neighborhood that has been preserved and restored.

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## Preface

Yorgo Kagafas is a self-described “urban guy.” He became an Urban Planner for the City of Las Vegas in 1999. A farm boy from Ohio, he was educated at The Ohio State University, served in the US Navy and earned a M.A. in Environmental Planning from Arizona State University.

He came to Las Vegas with a successful grassroots experience from living in a historic Phoenix neighborhood. His unique background complemented his new job which was to implement the Neighborhood Planning Process, a proactive system for Las Vegas communities to express their neighborhood desires prior to a developer coming in with their own agenda. In this interview he explains the criteria that must be met in this process.

By coincidence, Yorgo moved into the John S. Park Neighborhood. He was attracted to its central location, intact residential neighborhood, and homes with character at affordable prices. While walking his dog one day, he met neighborhood leader, Bob Bellis, and became aware of neighborhood activism that could use his expertise.

Yorgo points out that the good-old-boy mentality that still existed in Las Vegas was a potential obstacle. However he, Bob, and others were able to rally the homeowners and became a textbook example of how the Neighborhood Planning Process should work. He helped them identify their main issues: 1) Mary Dutton Park rehabilitation; 2) code enforcement of property maintenance; 3) attaining historic designation; 4) halting commercial encroachment. That was the first battle, according to Yorgo. With that done, they could next devise and implement a plan, which he describes. The process officially began March 14 2000. In June 2001, the Las Vegas City Council approved the final document.

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

Voices of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood



Use Agreement

Name of Narrator: YORGO KAGAFAS

Name of Interviewer: CLAYTEE D. WHITE

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Yorgo Kagafas 1/14/10  
Signature of Narrator Date

Claytee D. White  
Signature of Interviewer Date

## Interview with Yorgo Kagafas

January 14, 2010 in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by Claytee White

It is January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010. This is Claytee White, and I'm in the [Clark] County offices located at 731 Fourth Street in downtown Las Vegas, and I am with Yorgo Kagafas. Thank you so much.

We're just going to start by talking about your early life, where you went to college, those kinds of things, and eventually, if you did not grow up in Las Vegas, how you came to Las Vegas.

OK. I grew up in Ohio. [Laughing] I'm a true Buckeye. I spent my younger years in rural Ohio, in Guernsey County in east-central Ohio. I lived on a farm, and then I moved into the city in my teenage years, and I consider Grandview Heights, a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, to be my hometown. I attended [The] Ohio State University for undergraduate studies, where I studied pre-law and got a degree in political science with a specialty in Middle Eastern Studies. I spent a semester in Israel, going to school at the University of Haifa. And then when I graduated from college, it was during the recession [in 1988], and jobs were hard to come by, so instead of sitting around doing nothing, I chose to enlist in the [United States] Navy, and I served for eight years in the Navy—three years active duty, two active reserve duty, and then three years inactive duty. My active duty time coincided with the First Gulf War where I was stationed in Bahrain, and then I ended up my active duty service by decommissioning the battleship [USS] *Missouri* out of Long Beach, California.

When I left the service, I decided I would go to graduate school. I became very interested in planning, specifically historic preservation. The neighborhood I lived in in Phoenix [Arizona] was a historic neighborhood, the Coronado Neighborhood of Central Phoenix, and I became active in that neighborhood association, and then through my activities as a volunteer, I was interacting with the city, specifically the Neighborhood Services Department and the Planning Department; [I] was just fascinated by that, and decided that I could get a master's degree in planning. So I went to graduate school at The Arizona State University for a master's degree in environmental planning. My volunteer activities in the neighborhood led to an internship with the City of Phoenix Neighborhood Services Department, which in turn led to my first full-time position in the planning profession. So that's sort of how I got involved in it.

I worked for the City of Phoenix for about five years, and then I went to become the first neighborhood planner for a suburb—of Gilbert, Arizona, which is a suburb of Phoenix—and I worked there for almost a year, and during that time my project earned an Arizona State Planning Association Award for public involvement in the planning process.

I met the folks here at the City of Las Vegas at the 1999 national American Planning Association [APA] conference in Seattle [Washington], and they had heard about my work there. They had a position available as a neighborhood planner, and they suggested I apply for it because they would like me to continue that work here in the City of Las Vegas. So I did that and, lo and behold, I was hired.

**And were you excited about leaving Phoenix and coming to Las Vegas?**

I was. There was a lot of benefits to it. I miss Phoenix but I've been up here for over ten years now, so Las Vegas is my home.

One of my first jobs or assignments when I got hired by the City was to go into Ward 3, which was mayor *pro tem* Councilman [Gary] Reese's ward, and assist in organizing the communities into neighborhood associations, and identifying community based issues where the planning profession could help resolve those issues. So I did that, and one of my first neighborhoods to work with was the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood. I happened to buy a house in that neighborhood as well, so it was just a coincidence, because I had bought the house before I got the assignment.

**What did you like about the neighborhood?**

The location. I'm pretty much an urban guy. I liked the fact that the neighborhood was a centrally located, intact neighborhood, meaning that it was still primarily single-family residential homes. The homes had character. They weren't cookie-cutter homes. A lot of them had hardwood floors, coved ceilings, marble fireplaces, on nice-sized lots, considering the overall desert environment. Our lot was seven thousand square feet. And the fact that it was less than a five-minute drive to work. [Laughing] And quite frankly, the price, you know, it was economical. So that's what attracted me to the neighborhood.

And then by working in the neighborhood, it helped me in canvassing and identifying neighborhood leaders. It was easy for me because I could do it on the weekends when I'm walking my dogs. I'm a fairly friendly person to begin with, so it was easy to initially develop those relationships, and that's how I first met Bob Bellis. He owned a home like a block-and-a-half away from where I had bought.

**What was your address?**

1226 South Eighth Street. It was like the second house in off of Park Paseo.

**OK, so describe the house to me.**

It was a Cape Cod-style home, very simplistic when you look at it from the street. It had a very large picture window in the living room. It's a block home, which is very rare in the desert environment. That was an important thing because, you know, it's easier to insulate, it's a much sturdier home, lasting. It was built in 1943, I believe (don't hold me to that). It had hardwood floors and it was very charming: three-bedroom, two-bath. It had a detached car-and-a-half garage, also block, which is very rare in the neighborhood. So that's what attracted me to the home.

**That's great. Now you started to tell me that this is how you met Bob Bellis. So go ahead and tell me who Bob Bellis is.**

Bob Bellis lived a block-and-a-half away, and he had been active in the neighborhood before I moved to Las Vegas. About a year prior to my moving to Las Vegas in 1999, the neighborhood was challenged by a developer who wanted to build a very large casino in the theme of the Titanic. So there would basically be this replica of the Titanic ship in the desert, sitting right next to this neighborhood, and his proposal was to eliminate two blocks of single-family historic properties. And the neighborhood obviously was challenged and threatened by that, and rallied to defeat that project.

So there was some organization prior to my arriving, but they didn't hold regular meetings; they rallied around one issue. Even though other issues confronted the neighborhood, they focused on that one issue and when that issue was resolved to their satisfaction, meaning the project was defeated, people just sort of went about their business. So there was a skeleton framework to work with. I met Bob while I was

walking my dogs, and we just became friends. He was sort of the *de facto* leader of the neighborhood association, had contacts with City officials, and was very outgoing, and so it was pretty easy to develop that and nurture his skills as a community leader to facilitate my objectives, which was to organize the neighborhood on a more permanent basis, and to identify the issues that were confronting the neighborhood and then resolve those issues as best we could.

**But there was a planning process that most of us don't know about. We know that the neighborhood eventually became part of the historic registry [National Register of Historic Places], but prior to that, the City had a plan for that neighborhood.**

Well, they had a planning process, and again, one of the reasons why I was hired by the City was to implement this new process that the City had adopted. It was called the Neighborhood Planning Process. Basically what the [City] Council had decided when they created this was the Council wanted a mechanism for the community to express their desires prior to a developer coming and proposing something. It was a way for the community to be proactive as opposed to being reactive. I was hired to implement that process. That process was outlined in what a neighborhood had to do. If a community chose to do that, the end product was a document that the Council would adopt as an amendment to the general plan, which is basically a framework so everybody knows up front what the community wants for their neighborhood.

In the structure of the Neighborhood Planning Process, there were very basic requirements. One of the requirements was [that] it had to be grassroots-driven. So if the community didn't want to do this, the City wasn't going to impose it on them. So that was number one. Number two criteria was that the neighborhood had to have identified

boundaries, had to have a core planning team that geographically represented the entire neighborhood, and also had to be inclusive both in residential interest as well as business-owner interest in that neighborhood.

So those were the basic criteria, and the neighborhood chose to do that. It was really a textbook example of how a Neighborhood Planning Process should and could work. I'm just very proud of this community and this work because it was about an eighteen-month process. It officially began March 14<sup>th</sup> of 2000, and the Council approved the final document on June of 2001. So we're looking at a little over a year. And it was a very intense year. Another one of the criteria is once the neighborhood approached the City to utilize the Neighborhood Planning Process, there was basically a contract, if you will, with the City, stating that the neighborhood agreed to the terms of representation. They had to have a minimum of two community-wide meetings, they had to have the core team geographically represent the neighborhood, and they had to agree to complete the process within a specific time frame.

**Now was it just John S. Park or was it John S. Park and Huntridge and other little communities?**

There's only three neighborhoods that ever utilized the Neighborhood Planning Process. I was the neighborhood planner on all three of those neighborhoods. The very first one was the DCDC, Downtown Community Development Corporation, and they represented downtown Las Vegas. I worked with them to develop the first neighborhood plan that was adopted by the City. And then about halfway through that process, the John S. Park Neighborhood came along, and in my mind, the John S. Park was really the true first neighborhood to use it, because the downtown group was 95 percent commercial-based,

and there was very few elements in the downtown. So this was just the opposite. It was basically 90-95 percent residential, and 5-10 percent commercial, so it was more of a neighborhood that the Neighborhood planning process was set up to assist. And then the next neighborhood was the neighborhood just to the south of John S. Park because they saw the benefits of what John S. Park got out of the Neighborhood Planning Process, and then they utilized the process. Those were the three.

Now, what was interesting about this whole process—these three plans—was they succeeded in doing what the Council initially had wanted, [which] was to organize the community, to give voice to the community, and to be proactive. However (and this is my personal opinion on how this transpired), some of the Council members felt threatened by this process, because, you know, ten years ago Las Vegas still had the good-old-boy mentality where a developer comes in, meets the politician. This is what I'd like to do, the politician says; Oh, I don't see any problem with that, without consulting anybody. That was their prerogative. They were elected to represent their community. Well then when you add this Neighborhood Planning Process into the mix, and the community becomes empowered, then it makes it more difficult for that particular elected official to make decisions unilaterally without consulting the neighborhoods that had been organized; because you can't have it both ways. Once you organize the neighborhood and empower them, then you're obligated to listen to them, or at least consult with them, before you make a major decision, whether you want to or not.

And that's what happened. Some of the other Council members in the other wards were looking at what was happening in Ward 3, and basically thinking, you know, saying, This is not good for my career or the way I do business. I can't point to one

official saying to another official, We need to stop that process. There were four neighborhood planners that were hired to do this throughout the entire city. We were basically told not to do it anymore, and we were given other assignments, and [were told] not to initiate any more Neighborhood Planning Processes.

**Why hadn't the other planners gone as far as you had gone? You did three communities, three neighborhoods.**

Right. I think there was a combination of things. One is, I had lived it. You know, I was a product of a grassroots [project]. That's how I got into the profession. I started this in Phoenix, volunteering for a neighborhood association and doing the grassroots and going door-to-door and seeing how you could actually achieve results. I'm a goal-oriented person—that's just my mentality; that's my personality—and I like that, you know, I'm goal-driven and I see a problem, I'm like, OK, this is how you can solve it. So I had that personal experience, plus I had [a combination of] the educational experience and the professional experience. So I looked at it [as] that was an ideal fit for me.

The other three people that were hired came from totally different backgrounds. And, quite frankly, the planning profession was going through a major change during the Nineties, early 2000s, and that change was, for eighty years the planning profession was [that] planners know best, planners will tell the community what's best for them. That's the way the planning profession had always worked. Well, times have changed, and the communities and people were starting to become involved in their local government and their surrounding communities and wanted to have that voice. So the trend became empowering neighborhood associations, and working with neighborhood associations, and bringing them in the decision-making process, and that goes to consulting with the

community on how they want their general plan, where they want certain types of zoning, where they don't want certain types of zoning, what type of land uses do they want. The community became much more involved in that.

So you have this mix of things and it just so happened that I was a product of that, I believed in it, and I wanted to do it. The other three planners that were hired at the time along with me, good planners, but they just had a different philosophy and [they were different] personality-wise. You know, I have no issues going into a community that I would clearly not be involved in, you know, whether it be primarily Hispanic, primarily African-American, primarily senior, primarily gay. I have no problems going into any of those communities and working with those communities. Well, it takes a personality type to be able to do that, and do it comfortably, where you're not coming into a community saying, This is what you need to do. You got to come into the community and listen to what that community wants, and then take what the community wants and sort of balance it between what the government wants, and try to make that work so it's a win-win for everybody. It's a skill set, and obviously I have that skill set because I succeeded in doing it three times.

**What was the third community?**

The Beverly Green-Southridge neighborhood associations, which is immediately to the south of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood.

**So, once you were successful in the John S. Park Community and they had a neighborhood association, how often did they begin to meet?**

Well, during the Neighborhood Planning Process, they met often. I mean it was basically once a month at least, and that would be the core team. But you have to keep in mind, the

core team consisted of about twenty-five people, and there was only three hundred households in this community. That's a large percentage. And this is just the worker bees, if you will. When they had a neighborhood association meeting, they would have seventy-five to a hundred people attend, which is literally just unbelievable because, keep in mind, this was a neighborhood that didn't have an HOA [homeowners association], so the power that they were granted was power that they gave themselves. They didn't have the authority to enforce a lot of things. It was, do it by peer pressure.

But so many things happened, you know, changed during then. On my particular street, on Eighth Street, one block, when I first bought the house there, I just happened to count them [and] there was twelve homes that the roofs need replaced. I mean you looked and it was like missing shingles and stuff, and it was like, oh wow, it was a neighborhood that could've gone either way. And, you know, we fixed up our house, then the neighbor beside us fixed up their house, and then it was just, you know, when people realized that hey, people really care about this community and where they live, and they saw the positive changes that happened, within a year, every last one of those homes had been restored. And the government didn't come in and pay for it. This was just people saying, You know what? My neighbors are making an investment in this community. This community can be salvaged. Let's do our part. And that's what happened throughout the entire neighborhood.

And of course, you know, the community nudged their neighbors because the way the City has set up their code enforcement, everybody has to maintain their properties to a certain standard. That's City code. But the enforcement aspect of it is it's complaint-driven. So if nobody complains, then nothing is going to change, and that neighborhood

is just going to continue to decline. You know, I don't personally believe in that philosophy, but that's the philosophy that the Council has adopted. It works when the community realizes how to utilize that tool, because often somebody will sit back and they'll say, Why isn't the City doing something about this property? Well, you have to know the code. The code says that the City is not going to do anything until somebody complains about it. So if nobody complains about it, then that problem is never going to get addressed, and it's just going to expand, whereas, you [can] get a group of dedicated neighborhood leaders that say, I know the process; I know that this will get resolved if I call in and complain. And you can be anonymous, that's the thing. Somebody just has to initiate it.

And so that's what happened. They would go down street by street, list the major violations, and they would call into the City. The City would send the property owner a notice saying, You're in violation of this. You've got thirty days to correct it. There are programs to assist if you meet income guidelines, age guidelines, whatever. But the bottom line is, it has to be resolved. And that's how it happened.

**So even right now, if I live in a community that two or three houses need to be [repaired], I can just call in an anonymous complaint?**

Correct, to Code Enforcement, and a code enforcement officer will go out and look at that property and see, OK, this needs to be addressed, this needs to be addressed. And these are basic things, like for example, what you can see from the street is basically what you're looking at, so if you're looking at a roof, chipping and peeling paint, broken windows, the code says you can't have those. You have to fix them. You cannot park vehicles on the grass or in the yard; they have to be on a permanent surface. You can't

store things on your front porch or in your front yard or side yard; that's visible and it's not property screened. A lot of people say that's junk and debris but, you know, one person's junk is another person's treasure. You have to maintain landscaping, if you have it; you can't allow weeds or grass to be over eighteen inches high. You know, these are codes that are already on the books. They're only enforced if somebody complains about it. And it makes a big difference, you know, and it only takes one person. I mean literally one person can move into a neighborhood and make a difference. It's amazing.

**So now this neighborhood has been organized, now people are engaged in the process, and how is it proposed to them that they are able to become listed on the National Register [of Historic Places] or to apply for that? How did that happen?**

Well, it was a combination of things. The first thing you have to do is you have to get the buy-in of the community. Of course you have the buy-in of the key people, you know, the team leaders, but, in order to make anything happen, you've got to get the buy-in. This community, just like most communities, was jaded with government. They were like, We've heard this before. All talk, no action. All talk, no action. One of my first goals is that I had to overcome that obstacle, to explain to them, No, if you go through this Neighborhood Planning Process, what you're going to do, the community is going to identify the problems and the issues that they want corrected, and then we're going to come up with a game plan on how to address each one of those issues, and then we're going to implement those issues. So this is more than just talk; this is, we're going to identify, we're going to plan, we're going to resolve.

And I guess that's why I'm so happy and so proud of this planning process because, in this particular plan, every last one of the objectives that the community

identified were resolved. One of the issues they wanted resolved was they wanted the Mary Dutton Park redesigned and rehabbed so that it would be an asset to the community and not attract the homeless. So that was one issue they had. Another issue they had was code enforcement— people maintaining their properties. Another issue they had was they wanted the neighborhood to be designated as a historic neighborhood. And then the fourth issue that they had was they wanted to stop commercial encroachment into their residential neighborhood.

Those were the four main issues. I wanted it to be less than six issues because, you know, you have to start somewhere, and you want to do the things that's going to have the biggest impact, and show the community that you can make a difference.

Those were the four issues that the John S. Park Neighborhood identified, and once the issues were identified, that's like half the battle. Then we had to come up with a game plan on how to do it. And we brought in experts to do it. For the Mary Dutton Park, we contacted the University of Nevada, Reno [UNR] Cooperative Extension Agency and they had trained professional volunteers and they identified a master gardener who was willing to volunteer her time to come in, and she did. She came in, she met with the community and said, What do you want? And the community told her what they wanted, and she came up with three different schematics, plans for that particular park. And they voted on it. There was a lively discussion, because there was differing views in the community on what some wanted versus others, but they eventually voted on one concept. That plan, once it was voted on, became part of the document and went in there. Keep in mind, all of these happened at the same time. Once the document was approved by Council, then all the community had to do was go to the councilman and say, OK, we

need this implemented. And so, back then, the City was flush with cash because we were in the boom cycle, and the councilman identified funds to implement that plan to have that park redeveloped. And what you see out there today is exactly [what was planned]. I mean you can open up the neighborhood plan, open up the schematic that the community adopted, and go out there and look, bush per bush, tree per tree, everything, even the public art is identified in the plan and is now out there.

We did that on all four things. On the code enforcement, it was a matter of educating the community, saying, These codes have already been adopted. The enforcement aspect of it is already there. You just need to learn how to enforce it, and this is how you do it. It takes somebody to complain. So what they did is they basically took ownership of each of their own streets. So it wasn't one person just going through the neighborhood; it was somebody on each block, basically going and talking to their neighbors and saying, You know, the community really wants the neighborhood to improve. These are violations. You need to fix this. And so they talked to their neighbors, you know, and they did it. We helped them identify programs because there were some senior people on fixed incomes who owned their home, but didn't have the money to restore them. We helped them tap into those grant funds that were available. The community held two massive cleanups per year where they had volunteers come. If you were an elderly person or a disabled person and you had trash and debris in your yard, they moved it out for you, and cleaned up your house. I don't have the statistics with me, but it was amazing how much debris was taken out of that neighborhood. I mean we're talking semi-truckloads of debris, hundreds of tons of debris that was removed. There

was two a year for like two years, so basically four neighborhood cleanups. Just that made a huge difference. It was just amazing. So that was that aspect of it.

**And for that code enforcement part, you didn't have neighbors getting upset with neighbors because I've knocked on your door now to [talk to you]?**

Yes, of course, some neighbors did get upset, but the way we did that is we didn't have neighbor versus neighbor. It was like, This is the neighborhood association, and the neighborhood association is doing this. It's not me; it's the association, and it's doing it. Because we understand, you know, you want to keep that neighborhood a neighborhood.

Maybe I should backtrack a minute. When somebody took control of their street, their goal was to educate and say, Hey, the neighborhood association is going to do the code enforcement sweep. These are some of the violations that they're looking for.

**So they went to every house.**

Yes. This is coming, so we're going to have these cleanups so you can get rid of all this debris and stuff free of charge. These are your opportunities. It was the carrot-and-stick approach. It was like, hey, before they went even to Code Enforcement, they went to the neighborhood, the property owners, and said, This is coming. You're going to have to do this. We're going to provide an opportunity for you to correct it by arranging for free Dumpsters, bringing volunteers to come and help if you need help to clean up your property, but keep in mind, if you don't participate in this voluntarily, then your property will be cited by the City, and you'll have to do it on your own. So it was a comprehensive approach. It wasn't just a *we're-going-to-do-this* approach; it was, Let us help you help yourself. So then that dealt with that issue.

And then we came to the historic preservation. In the neighborhood plan, we wanted to set the groundwork for the historic preservation process to take place afterwards, because we needed to keep them separate. Because the plan is just that: *the plan*. The historic designation process is a different process, and is basically responding to the plan. So the objective of the plan, the historic designation issue, when it came to the planning process, was specifically to gauge the property owners' interest in pursuing historic designation. That was all that was in the neighborhood plan. There was a substantial amount of resident property owners that were interested in historic preservation, but we knew it took at least a supermajority. While the code says a simple majority, we wanted a supermajority because we wanted to be really community-driven. And we knew it wasn't going to be 100 percent because there are some people that just are opposed to it, but we felt that if we aimed to have a supermajority, 75 percent of the property owners that were interested or in favor of it, then it would make the process easier for the politicians when it came time for them to vote on it.

So that was the goal, and to achieve that goal, it was an educational undertaking, and this was door-to-door, in English and Spanish, and it was to the property owner. It wasn't that we dismissed renters, but the property owners are the ones that have the vested interest in their property, and when you go for historic designation, that is imposing land-use restrictions on a property, so you really have to deal with the owner of the property. At that time, a lot of the properties were rented, so it was a matter of identifying the owners of the properties and getting in contact with them. So again we went door-to-door, wrote down who they spoke with, whether they were the owner or the renter, verified that through property records, and then if they weren't the owner, then we

found the owner of record, based on whatever address we could find on public records, and we sent them a certified, registered mailing, saying, The community is interested in historic designation for this property. Please let us know your interest, either pro or con. And so it was educational. And at the time, through the Neighborhood planning process, we got a supermajority that was in favor of pursuing historic designation. Keep in mind, the Neighborhood planning process didn't go into specifics like design standards or anything like that. It was simply, Are you in favor of pursuing this and going down this road? And we got a supermajority to do that.

And that was the basis for the historic preservation, which came after the neighborhood plan was adopted, because the elected officials saw the involvement of the community at every aspect of this. We had the records, you know, we had the documentations, we took photographs at the meetings, we had sign-in sheets, we had the list of registered mail that we sent out, we had the flyers, we documented the entire process. So it was easy for the politicians when it came time to make their decision because, as you know, when you go to a public meeting and you get a heated issue, people will say anything, whether it's true or not, to justify their position. And that's exactly what happened in this process. When the neighborhood was going through the historic designation process, and having public meetings, people would stand up and they would say the most outlandish things, totally not true, but the beauty of it is, the community had physical, concrete evidence to say, Not only is that not true, here's the evidence to show that that's not true. And the classic example that I just love is two ladies had gone to the neighborhood planning process, had gone to the community meetings, and they just happened to be sitting in the front row of one of the meetings when I took

the photograph to show how many people showed up at this meeting. This was after the neighborhood planning process. These two ladies literally stood up in the historic designation process and said, This is the first I've ever heard of this. Nobody has ever contacted me. They're lying. And at that same meeting, I think it was Bob Bellis, the president of the association, opened up the document, the approved neighborhood plan, turned to the page for community involvement, where there was a photograph of it, and pointed and said, Excuse me, but you're sitting here in the front row of the community meeting where this was discussed, and here's the agenda for that meeting. And they were speechless, you know, because they knew that [he was telling the truth]. And that little episode showed the politicians that, You know what? The community really did their homework on it. And it made it easier for them to make the decision. And it was a unanimous decision by the Council to support the historic designation, even though it wasn't unanimous in the community. And that was the difference.

**For the historic designation process, were you still living in the community at that time?**

No. I had sold my property and had moved out.

**So why did you move out of John S. Park?**

Well, it was a separation, you know. It was a personal decision. And it had nothing to do with the neighborhood. My partner at the time, we had bought the house jointly and it was just a matter of economics.

**OK, I understand. So you had people going door-to-door, knocking on doors, to make sure that everybody was in tune. Were there any special fights that you remember during that period of historic designation?**

Well, I guess we want to make the record clear that I managed the neighborhood planning process. Once the neighborhood plan was adopted, my role was primarily complete, and then it was turned over to the Historic Preservation Officer which at the time was Frank Fiori, who is now the planning director for North Las Vegas [Nevada]. (You could interview him.) And then Courtney [Mooney] was involved in that as well. She came in after. I remember Frank because I had invited him to the neighborhood planning process when they were talking about the historic designation, and he came and he explained to them the process and stuff. So my official role was done. I had already done my work. I wasn't involved in the historic designation process, other than being a witness and watching it, being an observer of it, I guess.

**When Beverly Green did their Neighborhood Plan, was one of their four or five items historic designation as well?**

Officially, no, and that was my doing. My job is to facilitate the community, and direct them in a manner that they can achieve their goals, and that their goals are realistic. At the time that Beverly Green and Southridge neighborhoods went through their Neighborhood Planning Process, not one of the homes were over fifty years old. They were close. They were like in the neighborhood of forty-six, forty-seven years old. The way the neighborhood planning process was set up was, as I explained, the community goes through the process [and] once the plan is adopted, it was adopted for five years, and it's required that in order for the neighborhood plan to remain active, they had to review it and update it once every five years. So when the issue of historic preservation came up, my professional recommendation to them was, It's not appropriate to put it in your document now, because you don't even meet the minimum requirements. In five years,

when it comes time for your plan to be reviewed and updated, at that time, some of the homes will have met the minimum requirement of the age, and that would be an appropriate time to amend your plan and include it at that time. And the reason I advised them of that [was], you know, as a facilitator, it's your job to make sure to identify any flaws with the plan, or any obstacles, and I saw that as an obstacle; so if somebody wanted to sabotage the entire plan, they would focus on, This doesn't even apply to this neighborhood. Why is it in there? Therefore, this whole plan shouldn't be adopted. And that's part of my job, and I wanted to make sure that the plan that was adopted, that the Council was going to consider, was a solid, legitimate plan, and that there wasn't anything glaring, because of course there was going to be opposition, but you don't want to give the opposition any ammunition either, and that was one big bomb that, if we would've kept it in there, would've happened.

To follow up on that, the neighborhood associations are still active, not as active as John S. Park but they're still active to this day, but the desire for historic preservation hasn't emerged. There are some people, some residents that want it, but there's no evidence that the majority wants it. And keep in mind, the way the process is set up, a simple majority is required, but if you want to get the politicians really behind it, you want to aim for that supermajority, because if it comes down to a 48 percent--52 percent decision, you're putting your elected officials in a very difficult position that they don't want to be in. So you want to avoid that.

You want to do your background work first. That hasn't been done yet. They haven't gone door-to-door yet, to my knowledge. They haven't contacted all the property owners and gauged the feeling because, you know, it makes no sense for a neighborhood,

if you only have a half-a-dozen people that are really committed to historic preservation and getting their neighborhood designated. Well, they need, at the very minimum, 51 percent of those property owners in support of that position, or it's not going to pass. And we just recently had a neighborhood that didn't do their homework. They spent all this time, and instead of having a positive process, it was a very negative process because they hadn't done their homework. And again, they didn't do their homework because the neighborhood planning process has gone away.

**That's right. So they didn't have that foundation that John S. Park had.**

Right. Right. Just because the Neighborhood Planning Process officially went away doesn't mean a neighborhood can't utilize it, because it was successful. The big difference is, the City isn't providing the professional staff to facilitate the process. So you need somebody who is aware of the process to help them.

**Right. The last thing: do you ever drive through John S. Park now?**

Oh yes. I have many friends that still live in the neighborhood. I am in the neighborhood at least two to three times a week. [Laughing]

**Oh, good. So when you look around the neighborhood now, what do you see, the before-and-after of the historic preservation designation? Do you see it as a positive now, at this point?**

Absolutely as a positive, from a couple of different angles. One is, the community took a stance and said, This is an intact valuable residential community, and they drew a line in the sand, and they did what it took to preserve their neighborhood. They got the neighborhood plan adopted, which prevented commercial encroachment, and keep in mind, it didn't prevent it; it just simply stated, in writing, in a document, that the

community is opposed to any further commercial encroachment into the neighborhood. Now since the plan has been adopted, on at least three different occasions that I can rattle off off the top of my head, property owners attempted to convert residential property into commercial property, and all three times, the neighborhood president, whether it was Bob Bellis or Keny Stewart, went to the Council, held the plan up, and said, The community has spoken. The community says, We do not want any more commercial encroachment into our residential neighborhood. And it specifically said in the document that, We expect our elected officials to adhere to this plan, because that's your job. It's not our job to come to every single meeting and reiterate the same thing. That's why we went through this process, that's why it only took one or two people to stand up and say, Here. And it basically held the elected officials to the fire. Because some of the projects, I can tell you, the elected officials really wanted to approve it, but they just couldn't. I mean it was political suicide, if they had gone against the neighborhood, not just because it was an unpopular decision, but because they were basically saying, We don't care about your opinion. And that's what the neighborhood did, too.

It was part of the educational process of organizing a neighborhood association. Just like anything, there's power in numbers. For example, when the John S. Park-- Beverly Green neighborhood was faced with the rollercoaster issue with the Stratosphere [Hotel and Casino], and this was part of the educational process, I helped them do this. It was part of my job; even though it went against some government people, it was part of my job to do this. When I educated the neighborhood leaders, as I said, you know, Your council person, you've got them. He clearly understands what the neighborhood wants. That's one vote on Council. You have to learn how to count the four if you want your

position guaranteed. So what I did is I said, As a neighborhood leader, you need to be in contact with neighborhood leaders throughout the city, and explain to them that this issue is not just your issue, but it's their issue too, because whenever a project is proposed that's going to negatively affect your residential neighborhood, you're going to need help. So what they did is they contacted neighborhood association leaders in Ward 6 and Ward 5 and Ward 2 and said, We need your help. Can you contact your elected official and say, Hey, we want you to oppose that because, even though it's not in our neighborhood, a similar project could be proposed in our neighborhood, and we would want their support as well. And that's how that project was defeated. It was a textbook case. Because it was like, how do you convince the city council member in Ward 6 to vote against a development in Ward 3 when he has no vested interest? Well, you make it so he does have a vested interest, and that's how they do it.

**Yorgo, this is wonderful. I appreciate this so much.**

You're welcome. I'm very happy with the work that I was involved in during that time frame. I'm disappointed that the City didn't follow through with it to this day because, quite frankly, a lot of the issues that have come up, the negative issues that have been very controversial, could have been avoided, had they continued the Neighborhood Planning Process. That's just the way it is. [Laughing]

## INDEX

## A

APA, 2  
 Architecture  
   Cape Cod, 4

## B

Bahrain, 1

## C

Columbus, OH, 1

## F

First Gulf War, 1

## G

Gilbert, AZ, 2  
 Grandview Heights, OH, 1  
 Guernsey County, OH, 1

## H

Hotels/Casinos  
   Stratosphere, 22  
   Titanic (proposed), 4

## L

Las Vegas, City of  
   City Council, 5, 6, 7, 11, 14, 18, 20, 22  
   Historic Preservation Office, 19  
   Ward 3, 3, 7  
 Long Beach, CA, 1

## N

National Register of Historic Places, 5, 12

## Neighborhoods

Beverly Green, 9, 19–21, 22  
 DCDC, 6  
 Huntridge, 6  
 Southridge, 9, 19–21  
 North Las Vegas, NV, 19

## P

## Parks

Mary Dutton Park, 13

## Personalities

Bellis, Bob, 3, 4–5, 18, 22  
 Fiori, Frank, 19  
 Mooney, Courtney, 19  
 Reese, Gary, 3  
 Stewart, Keny, 22  
 Phoenix, AZ, 2, 8  
 Coronado Neighborhood, 2  
 Phoenix, City of  
   Neighborhood Services Department, 2  
   Planning Department, 2

## S

## Schools

Arizona State University, The, 2  
 Haifa, University of, 1  
 Ohio State University, The, 1  
 UNR  
   Cooperative Extension Agency, 13

## Streets

Eighth Street, 4, 10  
 Park Pasco, 4

## U

USS *Missouri*, 1