

Pembroke Pines

The City That Almost Wasn't

By Joe Knetsch



Dr. Joe Knetsch, 1994
*(photo by the Broward County
Historical Commission)*

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On May 11, 1957, voters in West Hollywood and what is now Pembroke Pines went to the polls to try to create a new, viable city that would block attempts by the City of Hollywood to annex the area. Among those standing for office in the “Hollywood Heights” election were J.J. Shear, John (Jack) Dockery and Walter S. Kipnis. They never got the chance to serve. The election, featuring a “don’t go to the polls” campaign by those opposed to a new municipality, failed to give birth to a city.

In southwest Broward County, the late 1950s were a time of rapid growth, festering dislike of county government and taxes, and a desire to avoid being swallowed up by a neighboring city. The citizens of the then tiny development of Pembroke Pines felt that they had four choices as to how to face the future. First, they could join neighboring Miramar, a choice favored

by some Miramar officials. Another choice, championed by J.J. Shear, but not many others, was to be annexed into the City of Hollywood. A third option was to incorporate all of West Hollywood, but Dr. Kipnis, David Hlay and other leaders feared the Pines would become just a small fish in a big pond, “paying most of the taxes and having the least to say about things....”

That left only self-incorporation. Kipnis, Dockery and others were familiar with this from the 1957 “Hollywood Heights” election, but State Law 165 allowed a community to incorporate only if two-thirds of the eligible registered voters approved. With this requirement in mind, the attempt to incorporate the Village of Pembroke Pines began.

The task of incorporation was not to be easy, although the arguments for the move were fairly clear. According to a flyer handed out by the Committee for Incorporation of Pembroke Pines, the reasons were: 1) “the desire to protect property values through retaining the present zoning...and insure a continued high future zoning” 2) our “problems and interests are not identical with those of West Hollywood...” 3) “we would be a very small frog in a very big puddle through joining West Hollywood...” and 4) “we can be annexed to West Hollywood without any choice if we don’t form our own government.”

To reinforce their stand favoring incorporation, the committee, headed by Kipnis, Hlay, James Bardsley, Ted Thompson and Anthony DiPietro, with help from the Pembroke Pines Civic Association, held a “straw ballot” which favored incorporation by a vote of 103 to three. Still, this was only one faction.

The opposition was larger than the three dissenters noted above. In a May 4, 1958, editorial, the *Hollywood Sun-Tattler* came out against incorporation. The paper feared “that a number of small municipalities may continue to grow in the sprawling west Hollywood area until Broward County is saddled with the same confusion that runs rife among the nearly

30 Dade County municipalities.” The editor favored one city for all of south Broward. Additionally, an opposition group sprang up, headed by Robert Fegers, president of the West Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, and Charles Ziemba, a building contractor and leading proponent of a single West Hollywood city. They, too, voiced strong arguments against incorporation.

Fegers felt that “the area is too small. There is no money to provide public services...They have suggested using a fire truck from North Perry Airport. That truck throws foam and cannot be used for homes.” Even Shear, who would work eventually for incorporation, initially sounded a shrill note of caution when he asked Pines residents to “weigh the costs of incorporation...Pembroke Pines has no business.” The lines for battle were thus clearly drawn.

The incorporation campaign was marked by a high degree of personal invective and mudslinging, as might be expected in “small-town politics.” More critically, neither faction was able to ascertain the exact number of freeholders. The newspapers of the day offered no reliable numbers, and although the court would ultimately rule on this matter, the issue was never completely resolved.

The election itself, requiring two-thirds of the registered freeholders to approve incorporation, was close and hotly disputed. Although incorporation won out, and the Village of Pembroke Pines was created, there were charges that it was not approved according to statute law. The result was a three-part suit filed by Ziemba, Alex Millstone and Ralph Bibbo. The suit charged that: “1) The incorporation did not receive the necessary 2/3 majority vote of the freeholders, 2) The legal description of the town boundary as it appeared on the ballot sheets was incorrect, 3) Dr. Kipnis was the self-appointed chairman of the committee to open and close balloting, and clerks named to tabulate results were not appointed by the persons assembled, both violations of Florida statutes.”

After ten months of village government, lawsuits and a treasury with less than \$100 in it, Judge Richard Sauls de-incorporated the village on December 14, 1959. Judge Sauls’ decision was based on the issue of advertised boundaries only.

This set-back did not keep the redoubtable mayor – Dr. Kipnis – down. He, along with many others, spearheaded a drive to re-incorporate. Bob Miller best summed up the spirit in a *Fort Lauderdale News* interview on October 29, 1959: “We have a little village. Let’s tear it down and build a bigger and better one!”

Having learned by their mistakes, the re-incorporators made sure their new advertisements were as correct as could be. From the very start of the second incorporation campaign, the issue was not in doubt. When the votes were counted on January 16, 1960, Pembroke Pines was the winner. Dr. Kipnis was elected as the first mayor, and the council consisted of Frank Quinn, Robert Miller, Ruth Pearce, Anthony DiPietro, James Kier, Eugene Moran and John O’Brien. Oliver Shaw was elected as marshal, and Bill Murphy was elected city clerk.

Born out of a fear of lost value, unfriendly surrounding governments and a sense of communal uniqueness, Pembroke Pines has grown from a little over 200 freeholders to a city of more than 150,000 residents. This growth has taken place in less than 25 years. The city still faces an uncertain future, but it can forge its own path now, something that could not be said with certainty prior to 1960. Given its hesitant beginning, Pembroke Pines could well be called “the city that almost wasn’t.”