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By Gregory Meyer



Streeterville's Development Watchdog

With shrillness the usual hallmark of neighborhood development disputes, why is debate in Streeterville – one of the hottest areas for builders – so well-behaved?

At least some of the answer may hinge on Gail Spreen, who for the last three years has served as chair of the Neighbors Action Task Force, the development review committee of the Streeterville Organization of Active Residents, or SOAR. A Streeterville resident, she's also spent years on the developers' side.

On Thursday, Ms. Spreen and her comrades will be watch dogging the neighborhood's most audacious project to date as the proposed Fordham Spire goes before the Chicago Plan Commission at 1 p.m. Developer Christopher Carley's high-rise would be the North America's tallest building. SOAR endorsed the twisting spire, calling it "a positive addition."

That's not always the case.

A TV broadcast tower next to the Fordham? "Totally inappropriate for the area," says Ms. Spreen, 46. Parking barges at Navy Pier? A traffic nightmare. Above-ground garages? "One of my pet peeves." An apartment tower proposed next to Fourth Presbyterian Church? She still carries a protest button with a red slash across the tower in her purse.

Still, she and the group she speaks for haven't alienated the developers who see gold in the streets of Streeterville.

"I like Gail, and I don't mind SOAR," says Lee Golub, executive vice-president of Golub & Co., which is marketing a 49-story apartment building at 345 E. Ohio St. and recently bought the WBBM-Channel 2 studios in Streeterville.

"Even if she's not supporting a project we're promoting, she does that with civility and professionalism," says Tom Weeks, president of LR Development Co. in Chicago.

If they're simpatico, it can be partly attributed to Ms. Spreen's career: from 1997 to 2001, she worked for developer Daniel McLean's MCL Cos. as a project coordinator on the CityView condo conversion and RiverView and River East developments in Streeterville. She lives in a CityView building on North McClurg Court.

Does that make her too chummy with developers? She says no. "We're not there to be enemies with the developers. I still have the philosophy that the more we can get along, the better off we are to be able to facilitate changes," she says.

Meanwhile, 31-year-old SOAR has matured into an established organization with a small budget (it recorded \$63,348 in expenses in the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, 2004), a paid executive director and glossy publications including a 20-page "neighborhood plan." More than a week ago, Mr. Carley himself presented the Fordham Spire plans to SOAR.

Ms. Spreen received an MBA from Kellogg School of Management last year but started out as a band director, not a businesswoman. The former marimba player took her bachelor's degree in music education from the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. She taught school bands for three years, skied in Aspen a few winters and moved to Chicago in 1989.

She entered real estate by running a Hyde Park condo conversion for Draper and Kramer. Her day job is now as head of a five-person real estate brokerage and appraisal firm specializing in Streeterville. It's one block from her home.

Her other volunteer activity is curling – she's played since high school in Wisconsin, and is secretary and past president of the Illinois Curling Assn.