


Quality Dental Care
Affordable Prices
239 774-3017
OFFER EXPIRES DECEMBER 1, 2016. Offer code NDN

NEW PATIENT SPECIAL (\$30 Exam & X-Rays with cleaning)
\$90 CLEANING (D1110, D0150, D0277)
CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFORMATION

LOCAL NEWS

Councilman Bill Barnett frequently hired law firm that also represented developers to the council



Bill Barnett cracks a smile as he chats with people during an event where he announced he will run for Mayor of Naples again on Tuesday, September 15, 2015 at Cambier Park in Naples, Fla. (Logan Newell/Special to the Daily News)



By *Joseph Cranney and Maria Perez* of the *Naples Daily News*

Posted: *March 04, 2016*

1    

The question for City Councilman Bill Barnett came near the end of the final Naples mayoral debate, hosted by the Old Naples Association earlier this week.

"Do you have or have you had any significant or reportable



Lisa Barnett Van Dien.
(Submitted photo)

conflicts of interest as a council member or mayor? And if yes, how did you manage them?" the moderator asked Barnett, who is running for mayor.

"No I have not," he said. "And so, that's an easy answer."

The question was a nod to the frequent digs Barnett has taken during the campaign against Mayor John Sorey, who also serves as the executive director of the Sugden Theatre and has faced criticism over his two jobs. Barnett has faced criticism during the campaign for a pro-development voting record.



John Passidomo (Lane Wilkinson/Special to the Daily News)

What's not widely known is Barnett's personal ties to a Naples law firm that frequently represents developers or property owners appearing before the council. The firm, Cheffy Passidomo, includes John Passidomo, who claims more than 100 appearances before the council since the early 1990s.



Bill Barnett

Barnett, his relatives or his businesses have used Passidomo or lawyers in his firm for private legal matters at least 17 times during the past two decades, court records show. Many of the cases coincide with Barnett's time as a City Councilman or mayor. Barnett served on the council from 1984 to 1992. He was elected mayor three times, from 1996 to 2000, and again from 2004 to 2012. Barnett started another term on the council in 2012.

The law firm, or an attorney in the firm, worked on at least two private lawsuits Barnett was involved in during his term as mayor from 2004-12, court records show. The firm's lawyers also handled other personal matters for Barnett, including real estate and private business transactions, records show.

Barnett's daughter, Lisa Barnett Van Dien, also worked for the firm from 1999 to 2014, including work on some issues in the Naples Square development just before she left, according to correspondence obtained by the Naples Daily News. Barnett and a majority of other council members approved the development.

Related Coverage

[Editorial Board interviews with candidates in Naples and Bonita Springs](#)

Van Dien said she handled private matters, and did not participate in issues presented to the council. She worked on a cost-sharing and easement agreement, and a declaration of condominium for one part of the project.

Barnett said he hired the lawyers for their expertise and paid them for all of their work. The Daily News requested payment receipts and invoices for the work provided in five of the legal matters handled by the firm while he was in public office. The receipts and invoices were not provided, but lawyers who handled some of the cases and a paralegal said their review of four of the matters showed Barnett paid standard fees for the work.

The fifth matter, a real estate transaction, was handled by Barnett's daughter. She said, "I am sure I charged him something" for the 2014 work. Barnett said he didn't know.

"I would hope she didn't charge me as I wouldn't have charged my parents if the situation was reversed," Barnett said.

Passidomo said the firm allows lawyers not to charge relatives for work that doesn't take much time, like routine real estate transactions.

Barnett said his relationship with the firm had no impact on his votes.

"I vote in favor if I've done my homework and looked at the project, and that's the only way I've ever made my decision," he said. "It has nothing to do with the attorney. It has to do with the project."

A Daily News review of council agendas since August 2012 on the city's website found the council considered at least 69 items for clients represented by Passidomo. Barnett voted in favor of 57 and didn't vote against any. In some cases, Barnett was absent, or voted in favor of continuing items.

Barnett said he never brought up his relationship with Passidomo's firm at a council meeting or abstained from a vote "because there was never anything to abstain from."

Passidomo, who was also a vice-mayor and council member from 1990-92, said, "One thing I can tell you is that in the 24 years since I chose not to run for re-election to City Council, my track record as an attorney representing clients before City Council is no better when Mr. Barnett has been a member of City Council than when he has not been a member of City Council."

Passidomo said he didn't recall his firm doing work for any other City Council members, except handling a minor matter for former City Councilman Fred Coyle.

"We were reluctant to take on that kind of work," Passidomo said. "We had a pretty strict rule against that kind of work."

But they did help Barnett, Passidomo said, because of his daughter.

"They came through Lisa in each instance," Passidomo said.

However, Passidomo and his firm's lawyers have helped Barnett with legal issues before and after Barnett's daughter worked there, court records show.

Passidomo prepared some documents, such as property deeds or mortgages, for Barnett or businesses he owned, beginning in the early 1990s. In 1998, with Barnett serving as mayor and Passidomo a member of Cheffy Passidomo Wilson & Johnson law firm, Passidomo prepared a partial release of judgment for Barnett and a business he owned with his wife, a continuation of lien for that business, and a mortgage modification for the business.

Barnett's daughter left Passidomo's firm in May 2014. In January 2015, another lawyer in Passidomo's firm worked on a real estate transaction for Barnett.

As for his daughter working at Passidomo's firm, Barnett said she never talked to him about her clients or worked on anything that would be discussed or voted on by the council.

Barnett said he didn't know his daughter worked with clients involved

with Naples Square.

"She might have, but I wouldn't have any idea," Barnett said.

Passidomo said the documents Van Dien prepared for Naples Square clients are private agreements that have nothing to do with the council, he said.

"The city doesn't have any interest in those," Passidomo said. "They don't approve them, they don't do anything to consider them."

Van Dien said she never worked on matters that would go to the city council.

"I was just a transactional attorney," Van Dien said. "I didn't represent clients."

Passidomo said the firm hired Van Dien because she finished at the top of her law class. She graduated magna cum laude from the University of Richmond School of Law. The fact that she is Barnett's daughter made the decision to hire her more difficult, Passidomo said.

To prevent any potential conflict, Passidomo said Van Dien was told she could not work on matters going before the city council or talk to city employees or elected official in any way that could be viewed as trying to influence them.

Bob Pritt, the city's lawyer, said he remembers a conversation with Passidomo about Van Dien's hiring, and said the conversation probably happened sometime after Barnett became mayor in 2004.

"My dim memory is that I had a discussion with John Passidomo and they wanted to make sure there was no conflict of interest regarding Mr. Barnett's vote," Pritt said.

Pritt said he could not comment on Van Dien's legal work because he didn't know the details.

Passidomo said the firm talked with Pritt about the possibility of making Van Dien a partner in the firm. She was entitled to be an equity partner,

Passidomo said, but they didn't want her father to vote on any matter that would affect her compensation. As a partner, she would share the firm's profits. They decided against it, Passidomo said.



About Joseph Cranney

Joseph Cranney covers life and politics in the City of Naples for the Naples Daily News. He writes about City Council, housing, labor and minority affairs. His occasional series "Around Town" features interesting people living and working in the city.

[@joey_cranney](#) joseph.cranney@naplesnew... [239-213-6035](tel:239-213-6035)



About Maria Perez

Maria Perez reports on Southwest Florida multi-ethnic communities for the Naples Daily News. She covers issues that affect these communities such as immigration policy, affordable housing and labor conditions. She joined the Daily News in 2014.

[@mariajpsl](#) maria.perez@naplesnews.co... [239-213-5326](tel:239-213-5326)

SECTIONS

Search...



Naples Daily News
naplesnews.com

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



SUBSCRIPTION

Why Engaged Employees are Successful Employees

Paychex

Extremely Brilliant Way to Pay Off Your Mortgage...

AmeriValue Rate Quotes

Don't do it! The game that will have you hooked

Stormfall: Free Online Game

Debut Breakthrough Product Developed By Cambridge Anti-Aging Scientist Redefines Longterm Health

Boston Globe | Elysium Health

1 Reason To Do This Every Time You Use Your Computer

SmarterWebLife by SaferWeb

Why Men Love This New Bed Sheets Company

Parachute

Sheets That Always Feel Like The Cool Side Of The Pillow

Business Insider | Brooklinen