

2 local developers may be ambassadors

[CITY Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: JOHN HARWOOD

Date: Feb 8, 1989

Start Page: 1.A

Section: NATIONAL

Text Word Count: 618

Document Text

WASHINGTON - For Mel Sembler and Joseph Zappala, all of the phone calls, friendly persuasion and deep pockets appear to have paid off.

In the time-honored tradition of rewarding prodigious political fund-raisers, President Bush reportedly has asked the two St. Petersburg developers to be ambassadors - Sembler to Australia, Zappala to Spain.

The White House has not yet announced the appointments, but two prominent Republicans in Washington confirmed Tuesday they would be forthcoming.

"It is going to happen," said Jeanie Austin, co-chairman of the Republican National Committee and former chairman of the Florida GOP. "I'm tickled to death - two ambassadors in one day for Florida."

"If anybody deserves it, they do," added Rep. C. W. Bill Young of Seminole, who said he heard the news from another official at the Republican National Committee. "These are two fine men who certainly could represent us well in those countries."

Neither Sembler nor Zappala could be reached for comment.

Sembler, a 58-year-old shopping center developer, is chairman of The Sembler Co. The company's projects have included Walsingham Commons near Largo and Clearwater Collection at U.S. 19 and Drew Street. Zappala, 55, is a developer whose investments have included the Dolphin Village shopping center on St. Petersburg Beach and a dog track in Tucson, Ariz.

Simultaneous elevation to the diplomatic corps would be just one more of their common experiences. Sembler and Zappala maintain business offices a few blocks apart on Central Avenue and have been partners in commercial development projects.

They both have been active in the Straight Inc. drug treatment program, which Sembler helped found. And they have joined forces to become a formidable fund-raising team for both George Bush and the Republican Party.

Among other duties, Sembler and Zappala served as co-chairmen of the committee that raised more than \$20-million to finance the new president's inauguration last month. In addition, they were members of the Republican Party's so-called "Team 100," a group consisting of donors of at least \$100,000 during the 1988 campaign.

The appointment of big contributors and other political allies as ambassadors is a touchy subject at the State Department. The percentage of ambassadors who are career diplomats fell from slightly less than 75 percent to slightly more than 60 percent during Ronald Reagan's presidency, leading some Foreign Service officers to complain that the quality of the diplomatic corps had diminished.

But Young expressed confidence that his constituents Sembler and Zappala would be able to handle their new responsibilities in Canberra and Madrid.

"Australia is so much like the United States, and Mel Sembler certainly knows his way around the United States," Young said. "He is certainly able to communicate, which is one of the essential requirements of diplomacy."

Sembler also traveled extensively around the world in 1986-87 as president of the International Council of Shopping Centers.

Spain is considered a sensitive posting because of controversy over its participation in NATO. But Young noted that Zappala - one of several prominent Bush allies who reportedly had wanted to be appointed ambassador to Italy - "has handled a lot of touchy situations . . . in his business life."

Young, a longtime Bush supporter himself, also observed that the appointment of two new ambassadors from St. Petersburg would bring "a certain amount of prestige" to the city, indicating that "we were players" in the national Republican campaign.

"We obviously have probably as good communication and access to the president of the United States that you could have," Young said.

A White House spokesman said announcement of ambassadorial appointments is sometimes delayed while the countries involved are notified. Ambassadors are also subject to confirmation by the Senate.

[Illustration]

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, (2); Caption: Mel Sembler; Joseph Zappala

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

WASHINGTON - For Mel Sembler and Joseph Zappala, all of the phone calls, friendly persuasion and deep pockets appear to have paid off.

In the time-honored tradition of rewarding prodigious political fund-raisers, President [George] Bush reportedly has asked the two St. Petersburg developers to be ambassadors - Sembler to Australia, Zappala to Spain.

Sembler, a 58-year-old shopping center developer, is chairman of The Sembler Co. The company's projects have included Walsingham Commons near Largo and Clearwater Collection at U.S. 19 and Drew Street. Zappala, 55, is a developer whose investments have included the Dolphin Village shopping center on St. Petersburg Beach and a dog track in Tucson, Ariz.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.