

Trump and private property: What's yours is really his?

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The Trump for Running Horse saga was dead from the get-go.

We just didn't know it for months.

My guess: So, too, is the Trump for president saga.

This, too, will take time to sink in.

Any Fresnan who wonders how Donald Trump, running hard for the Republican presidential nomination, has come to dominate the news media these days need only look in the mirror for the answer.

Human beings simply are suckers for a charismatic showman. Fresno nearly a decade ago rediscovered this truth.

It was Friday, May 25, 2007. I was sitting at my desk in the sports department when sports editor Robert Zizzo dropped by.

"We just got a phone tip," Zizzo said. "Donald Trump has flown into town. Check it out."

Pretty soon I was standing outside the double-wide trailer that served as headquarters for the Running Horse residential/golf course project in west Fresno.

It's sufficient here to note that Running Horse in mid-2007 had already confirmed itself as a disaster of uncommon dimensions. The dream of a Carmel-based developer to build a world-class golf course lined with half-million-dollar homes was in complete disarray.

We would make it much more glamorous.

Donald Trump in 2007 on his vision for the failed Running Horse project

In fact, the original developer had already given way to another owner. City Hall didn't have any money in the mess. But it did have a political disaster on its hands.

After all, Running Horse had been pitched originally as the key to revitalizing long-struggling west Fresno. When Trump arrived on the scene, Running Horse was little more than a mile-and-a-half-long ditch that in places reached a depth of 25 feet or so.

A lot of local reporters were standing outside the Running Horse trailer with me on that spring 2007 afternoon. Trump (whose name on first reference in subsequent Bee stories would always be preceded by "billionaire developer") and then-Mayor Alan Autry emerged from the trailer.

"We're looking to try and save a very troubled situation," Trump said. "We're looking at whether or not we want to do it in the first place. It's a very, very difficult thing."

The original developer several years earlier had lined up a PGA Tour event for Running Horse, slated to tee off for the first time that fall. The tournament was doomed for 2007, but everyone hoped a miracle would save the Fresno-PGA marriage for 2008.

"We have a great relationship with the PGA Tour," Trump said. If he fixed Running Horse, Trump said, "they will come."

I really believe, at the end of the day, we can pull this off.

Trump lawyer Michael Cohen in July 2007 between meetings in Fresno

Autry, the former NFL quarterback and one-time Hollywood actor, wasn't used to playing second fiddle in his own town. But Autry on this day knew who had the true star power.

"Donald Trump knows there's a bigger picture at work here," Autry said. "He doesn't mind going into distressed areas and making a mark and bringing hope and opportunity."

Of course, the Trump-for-Running Horse dream came to nothing. It finally fizzled out in late 2007. There were hard feelings over price, financing and land acquisition – the usual stuff of failed land deals.

Exhaustion had also set in. This was obvious to any reporter hanging around City Hall. Nor was there much enthusiasm in the public statements dribbling out of the Trump organization in New York City. High-octane fantasies have a short shelf life.

The 400-plus acres that once were Running Horse now are covered in young almond trees, thanks to the renewal powers of bankruptcy and the never-ending ambitions of the Assemi family.

The place is called Mission Ranch. The Donald isn't the only guy who understands the art of the deal.

The Trump-Running Horse glory days, when a deal truly seemed possible, lasted a mere two months. The big questions: What would the new Running Horse owner charge Trump? What would Trump pay? What kind of help would City Hall provide?

Trump never personally returned to Fresno. Speaking through his lawyer, Michael Cohen, he was soon offering \$30 million cash. Trump in late July sent his daughter Ivanka Trump and Cohen to Fresno to fish or cut bait.

"I'm here to say we will continue to pursue this project," Ivanka Trump said at a news conference on July 27. She spoke as she rushed out of town, taking the Trump money with her.

A lot of Fresnans believed Trump was the answer to the Running Horse problem. They saw him as a savior come to do something special for the city. Trump by his mere presence amid the dust at Running Horse encouraged such a mass sentiment. After all, he could have simply picked up his New York City office phone and called Autry if all he cared about were numbers.

Trump in 2007 knew the value of display. He knows the value in 2015.

I recently made Public Records Act requests to City Hall and the city's old Redevelopment Agency (now called the Successor Agency). My goal: review documents and emails tied to the Trump-Running Horse story.

I didn't get much – about a dozen documents total. Many were dated from the days immediately after Trump left Fresno.

Nor was there anything of heft that hadn't in some form been in The Bee when the paper's business reporters were hot on the story.

Still, there was one document that I hadn't seen before and made interesting reading eight years later.

Cohen on the morning of May 29, 2007, sent an email to Autry.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with Mr. Trump to discuss the Fresno Running Horse project," Cohen wrote. "As discussed, I am attaching a preliminary 'wish list' needed to make this venture a successful one."

Cohen closed by saying he would contact Georgeanne White (chief of staff for Autry at the time and currently Mayor Ashley Swearingin's chief of staff) that afternoon.

There were 13 "wishes." For example, Trump wanted all crossroads removed from Running Horse. He wanted several holdout homeowners in the Running Horse footprint bought out at fair market value. He wanted secure water rights.

One of the wishes stated: "Buy out and re-zone entire area around course."

Another stated: "Establish a one (1) mile perimeter around the property to be classified as a redevelopment zone."

The Fresno Successor Agency has a map of west Fresno that shows the amount of land Trump was talking about. Running Horse with a one-mile perimeter would be bordered by Belmont Avenue on the north, Brawley Avenue on the west, Jensen Avenue on the south and Fruit Avenue on the east.

Trumpville would have been huge – about nine square miles.

And keep in mind that Trump arrived at Running Horse in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's controversial *Kelo v. City of New London* decision (2005) that gave the green light to transferring, by eminent domain, property from one private owner to another private owner in the interests of overall economic development. Trump at Running Horse wanted more than 5,000 acres of historic west Fresno made subject to what is called in some circles as the "grasping hand" of an insatiable government.

I spoke to Donald Trump. I'm pleased to tell the people of Fresno that he is still 100 percent committed to this project.

Mayor Alan Autry in July 2007 after the Trump team tore out of town

No need here to go into the nuances of redevelopment law. Some of the land in question already was in a redevelopment zone. Much of the land was rural or in the county. Bottom line: It would have taken an act of the California Legislature to meet Trump's demand for a redevelopment zone of that size in that part of metropolitan Fresno.

White replied to Cohen in the late afternoon of May 29 after she and city staff had discussed the wish list. White cut to the chase on the pivotal wish. When it came to buying all the land within one mile of Running Horse, White wrote, "I'm assuming you mean the Trump Organization would be the buyer. ..."

The documents don't say whether White's assumption was correct or whether the RDA was expected to buy everything and sell it to Trump. And as far as Running Horse is concerned, it no longer matters.

But Donald Trump wants to be president of the United States. He's generating among millions of Americans the kind of passion that he generated instantaneously among hundreds (if not thousands) of Fresnans in 2007.

What does presidential candidate Trump think about private property and eminent domain? Near as I can tell, Trump has yet to answer such a question.

I spoke on Wednesday morning with Hope Hicks, Trump's press secretary. I said I want to pose this question to Trump in a phone interview. No word yet on that request.

One thing is certain. There was no reason for Trump in 2007 to want so much of west Fresno put into a redevelopment zone if his plan was to use his own money to buy all the privately owned properties at prices the owners set themselves.

But if Trump wanted to latch onto the power of government to force private-property owners to sell to him at prices deemed by a third party to be "fair market value," then by all means "The Donald" would want to get cozy with City Hall and the Redevelopment Agency it ran.

The documents I got suggest Trump in 2007 was very fond of eminent domain.

I'm assuming Trump as president would run America exactly like he ran his Running Horse show.

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