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## New Medley town attorney settling in to his new post

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Gazette Photo/BILL DALEY

**NEW COUNSEL:** Stephen Helfman approached the podium at Medley Town Hall last month to pitch his case for being the town's new attorney and eventually the council agreed.

The dust has finally settled from what was an extremely tumultuous and frantic month of August for the Town of Medley.

What started early in the month with the stunning arrest of Medley Town Attorney Michael Pizzi on alleged bribery charges led to a major upheaval when it came to how the town council and mayor Roberto Martell would handle the situation.

Before things got ugly and the town might've been forced to terminate Pizzi, Pizzi, who also served as the mayor of Miami Lakes and was forced out of that post, stepped down and resigned his position with Medley, per a monetary settlement with the town among other things since his contract did not expire until next year.

But a big hole needed to be filled and that was the process of hiring, at the very least, an interim town attorney. Someone, or more than one person that could come in and very quickly adapt and familiarize themselves with Medley's issues.

That answer came late last month when, following an Aug. 21 special meeting in which 11 different law firms "pitched their case" for the job, Stephen Helfman from the law firm of Weiss, Serota, Helfman, Pastoriza, Cole & Boniske got the nod. And even though he didn't work for the firm at the time, former Miami Springs councilman Dan Espino is back in the picture as well.

Espino recently signed on to the Weiss, Serota firm and Helfman immediately brought him in to serve as Medley's Assistant Town Attorney.

"It's a privilege to serve a neighboring River Cities community like Medley with so many positive things going on," said Espino who served on the Miami Springs council from 2009 to 2012 before vacating his post early in order to run for a school board seat last year. "I feel my familiarity with the River Cities area.

The big difference compared to Pizzi is that Helfman, Espino and their firm will not serve in a

full-time capacity. Medley will be charged \$200 an hour for their services and Helfman was adamant that that would not include phone time or time spent at the town's meetings. The move was not permanent either. Helfman and Espino will have until the end of the calendar year to show the council that they "can do the job" at which time a decision will be made whether to retain their services or put the job out for bid again.

Helfman was present at his first meeting, the town's monthly meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 3 and, in his own words, "hit the ground running."

"Busy, very busy to say the least," said Helfman when asked about his first few days dealing with the town's issues. "We're used to coming into these kinds of situations. There's a couple things that are important. Number one, understanding what each of the council people expect from us and what their expectations are along with making sure they're comfortable with me and the way I work. Secondly, sort of understanding what the scope of the work is and in particular in this circumstance what the scope of the work that hasn't been done."

And it was there that Helfman, while not exactly throwing Pizzi in front of the bus or even mentioning him by name, didn't exactly push him out of the way either as he was somewhat critical of how the town had been operating.

"There are a lot of matters that haven't been addressed, that have been lingering," said Helfman. "The first week we were just sort of assessing the things that had been left undone which were many. There are many items the town staff has been waiting for...a lawyer to help them. Unfortunately it appears that a lot of legal work was left undone."

"There are a number of projects that need and have needed legal attention. Agreements that haven't been completed, even day to day things that were stacked up and needed legal attention that were stacked up and waiting for the town staff."

Asked what things specifically, Helfman cited Capital projects, roadway projects and annexation issues to start with. "It runs from just day to day things to the biggest projects," he said.

Helfman was then asked about another big challenge in front of both him and Espino and that's developing a repore and comfortable relationship with the Medley councilmembers.

"That's going very well," Helfman said. "The council is very appreciative of our help and getting along with them is the easy part. One of the more difficult things has been the procedures. There is a lack of process and we're trying to help them with everything from the variances that we we've gone through and how do you legally go through that process."

"How do you handle variances? Do you do them by resolution? The code lacks an entire process for variances. If you look at the town code, it has a section called variances and then there's nothing there. What they've done in the past is improvise and just made it up. Well, that's not our style, we don't make things up. So we're going to have to help them adopt codes and rules that they follow. This town needs rules and that's what we're going to help them put in place."

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