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UNION-TRIBUNE

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Maybe it's because Mayor Jerry Sanders was a police officer for so long before he entered politics, but sometimes when he speaks, I hear the voice of his Inner Cop.

It happened Sunday as I read reporter David Hasemyer's engrossing narrative of how the Sunroad Centrum building eluded proper oversight by city planners, resulting in a structure so tall it's a menace to aviation.

One part of the story noted that Sunroad President Aaron Feldman and other company executives contributed \$3,600 to Sanders' 2005 mayoral campaign as the building was being reviewed by the city.

Sanders contends he wasn't aware that Feldman had given him any money – and that's when I heard the voice.

It was the firm, flat voice a cop uses to disperse a crowd after an accident or a crime.

“There's nothing to see here, folks,” it said. “Move along. There's nothing to see.”

A day later, that voice was still in my head – and, try as I might, I couldn't move along. It didn't add up. How could Sanders have completely forgotten dealing with Aaron Feldman, much less the \$3,600?

Developers who make campaign contributions want, more than anything, to be remembered. “I'm here for you now, when you need me,” the contribution says; “don't forget me when I need you.”

Yet Sanders apparently couldn't pick the guy out of a lineup. How could Feldman have messed up so badly?

With a little research, I discovered that Feldman had done his best to make a good impression on Sanders. He didn't just contribute money, he held a campaign fundraising lunch for him. His friends and associates filled the panoramic banquet room at the Island Prime restaurant, which sits on property Sunroad leases on Harbor Island.

In front of a gorgeous view of San Diego Bay, Feldman introduced Sanders to the check-writing crowd that Feldman himself had assembled. He did everything right.

Sanders' fundraiser, Jean Freelove, told me it was entirely possible for Sanders to have forgotten all about it.

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"It was very pleasant," she said of the event. "About 30 people were there. It was a nice lunch, a nice introduction, the mayor went around and shook everyone's hand and said he was glad they were supporting him. I hate to say there was nothing distinctive about it, but there wasn't. You have to remember, he went to 110 events and had 5,500 donors."

I'm not one to point fingers on the subject of memory. I'm constantly forgetting my keys, or my cell phone, or my hat. Sometimes I walk from my garage to my house three times before leaving for work. I have a black bag I've left in a hundred places, most recently on the counter at a salad bar.

So I decided to leave the finger-pointing to others. I called two of Sanders' election rivals, businessman Steve Francis and Councilwoman Donna Frye, who also attended numerous fundraisers that summer.

They said it would be highly unlikely that someone could forget such an event.

"Of course you're going to remember that," Francis said.

"My memory is still fairly functional," Frye assured me.

Frye suggested a theory: Maybe the mayor couldn't remember Feldman because so many developers gave him money that they began to look and sound alike.

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"So you're rising to his defense," I said.

"We-e-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l," Frye answered. "No.

"I'm not rising to anything. I'm just saying I can understand when someone has so many developers giving you fundraisers and introducing you, they may all blur together into one big developer blob."

That Donna. Here I am addressing a serious issue like the mayor's memory loss, and she's trying to score political points.

Yesterday, the phone rang and the mayor was on the line. I asked how his memory was holding up.

"It's going more every day," he said.

Sanders said he called to clear up any confusion he may have created. He said he did remember the fundraiser Feldman held – "There were probably 40 people, it was a big event" – and said he met with Feldman on several occasions afterward, though none since Sunroad and the city became legal adversaries.

"You don't forget Aaron Feldman," the mayor told me. "He's an interesting guy."

I asked Sanders if he ever wondered about the motivations of people who hold his fundraisers.

"I certainly do now," he said. "When you go through a campaign, you're convinced everyone wants to see you be mayor because you're the best person. . . . I still like to think that's the reason he supported me."

As for Hasemyer's article Sunday, the mayor was apologetic. He couldn't account for his contention that he had no memory of Feldman's money.

“I don't even remember telling Dave I didn't remember,” he said.

So, at least according to the mayor, there's nothing to see here, folks. We can all just move along now.

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