

# Southeast Valley zoning attorney has seen controversy, success

Maria Polletta, The Republic | azcentral.com 7:20 a.m. MST April 12, 2014

After 35 years as a zoning attorney, 60-year-old Ralph Pew has represented some of the most contentious cases in Mesa, Gilbert and Chandler.



(Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

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Gardening is Ralph Pew's therapy.

"The plants and the soil can't talk back," he said. "They can't argue with me. They can't yell and scream at me."

After 35 years as a zoning attorney — during which the 60-year-old Pew has represented some of the most contentious cases in Mesa, Gilbert and Chandler — the value of a bit of peace and quiet can't be overstated.

Pew's life wasn't always peppered with controversies.

The fourth-generation Mesan, the middle son of a Salt River Project meter-reader and a first-grade teacher, said he was "raised in a very wonderful family and had a great growing-up."

Active in sports and student government, he served as student-body president at Westwood High, an alma mater he shares with outgoing Mesa Mayor Scott Smith.

His interest in law blossomed a few years before graduation, following a pattern younger and older siblings will recognize: His big brother wanted to be a lawyer, so Pew did, too.

Pew was the one who ultimately pursued the law career, though he took the scenic route to his first job.

"I went to Eastern Arizona College for a semester thinking I could make the basketball team," he said. "I did not make the team. So then, I had nothing to do but study and study hard."

He transferred to Mesa Community College to finish his associate degree, then headed to Peru to serve a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Two years later, with his Spanish skills significantly bolstered, Pew returned to the Valley to pursue a bachelor's degree in business management at Arizona State University. The last step was law school, at Brigham Young University.

His legal career began in 1979 at the firm of Killian, Legg, Nicholas & Fischer. The plan: "to be a tax attorney, and to work in the corporate world of transactions and that type of thing," Pew said.

That plan changed within weeks.

"Max (Killian), who was what I would call the godfather of land use and real estate in the East Valley, took me under his wing and we started right away doing zoning cases," Pew said. "That turned out to be more like day-to-day walking the streets, meeting people, versus sitting in an office.

"It was a complete culture change from what I thought I would be doing," he said. "And I've never looked back."

In 1997, Pew left the firm to start his own practice. The years since have been marked by a constant quest for balance, which sometimes seems impossible to obtain and almost always proves a hard sell to at least one group.

"The practice of law is stressful no matter how you look at it, but it is complicated in zoning cases when you have different constituency groups — (municipal) staff, neighbors, policy makers, board members, council members — and decisions get ground up in this process," Pew said. "It's a little unpredictable."

Neighbors are Pew's most common detractors, and he said he learned early on "that to be effective in this business, you have to meet the people ... in the vicinity where these changes are occurring, and get to understand them and what their thoughts are."

In some cases, that strategy has served Pew well. In others, community meetings and one-on-one conversations have done little to quash neighbors' perception of him as a greedy big bad wolf.

A recent Mesa case involving a 230-lot residential development proposed near Dreamland Villa Golf Course, for instance, spurred tears, expletives and the premature departure of some spitting-mad county-island residents at a February Planning and Zoning Board meeting. And in Chandler, people are still ticked off about an attempt to turn the Chateau de Vie mansion into a wedding center.

Pew said he won't accept a case he believes is significantly detrimental to surrounding neighborhoods, despite the accusations to the contrary. Before he agrees to defend a project, he has to believe the proposed use "is a reasonable use and that the property owner should have the right to do it."

A case with opposition can take twice as long to move through a city's approval process, so once he says yes, he's in it for the long haul.

"I stay in this business because I think people have the right to propose development changes on their property that are not harmful ... in a material way," he said. "Part of what I try to do is try to help council, planning and zoning, neighbors, even ourselves separate perception from reality as to what (a case) really means. Most people tend to conjure up in their minds this parade of horrors, and while some of it may be true, not all of it is."

Neighbors vehemently opposed Gilbert's Seville and Morrison Ranch master-planned communities, for example, as well as northeast Mesa's Las Sendas. All three enjoy widespread popularity now.

Pew is "sincere about understanding the community's needs, but yet, he also has a good vision of what the community *might* need," said Gilbert Planning Manager Linda Edwards, who has worked with Pew in a handful of capacities over the past 20 years.

"I have enjoyed working with Ralph because he is a professional and he ... always receives the input from the public or staff or other team members and considers that input," she said. "He doesn't come forward and say, 'This is what I have. The end.' Sometimes, we are on opposite ends of an issue, but we have a high respect for each other."

Sean Lake, one of Pew's law partners, said he admires Pew's ability to "get projects done and get things approved" while maintaining both his ethics and his dedication to his family.

Still married to his high-school sweetheart, Janene, Pew has six children and eight grandchildren. He travels frequently to Mexico to assist poor families there, putting his Spanish skills to use while building "safe and dry and functional" homes through a non-profit, Families Helping Families.

For years, he has taught college-level courses on topics ranging from land uses to religion.

That hectic schedule explains not only the draw of a tranquil hour of gardening, but also part of why Pew has stuck around for so many years despite the challenges of his career.

"For me, it's always been busy enough out here in the East Valley to limit the focus of my work to this part of town," he said.

"The other thing is, to be able to do this, you need to know the system and the people and the attitudes," he said. "And my roots are here. My heart is here."

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April 14, 2014, 10:10 a.m.

Zoning attorney Ralph Pew's accounts of his experiences representing tough cases in the Southeast Valley.



Maria Polletta/The Republic

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