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Jay Hellman: The accidental developer

Jay Hellman isn't your typical developer. The MIT graduate downplays making money, relishes a good zoning battle and labors over spreadsheets and abstracts. One thing is for sure: You'll never forget your first meeting with him.

Washington Business Journal - by [Douglas Fruehling](#)



Joe Brier

Developer Jay Hellman is waging a crusade to change the way Montgomery County zones the Woodmont Triangle area of Bethesda.

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Jay Hellman arrives looking spiffy in suspenders and a paisley tie, carrying a stack of plastic binders, loose papers and reports several inches thick.

"I spend most of my time thinking," he tells me in the first minute we meet. A developer who thinks. Now that's novel, I say to myself.

We get a cup of coffee and he orders a slice of chocolate mousse pie. It's 10:30 a.m. Hellman's hand trembles, shaking the cup and saucer and splashing coffee all over the counter and his tan dress shirt. He offers an unsolicited explanation.

"It's not serious. The doctors tell me it's an essential tremor," he says. "But it's not essential to me. I can do without it."

I laugh as we find a table. Hellman tells me his background: He grew up in New York and went to the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#). Seven years later, he left. Not with one degree. Not with two. With five.

"Here's an aside," he says. He did his thesis on development around a river basin in Argentina. One of his professors was Amar Bose. Do I know who that is? He founded Bose, the consumer electronics company.

Another aside: Have I seen "Stand and Deliver"? I have to rent the movie if I haven't. It's a film about doing what you love.

By the way, have I eaten at Prime Rib? Hellman convinced the Baltimore brothers who had the original restaurant to open one in D.C. "That's just an interesting little aside," he says.

It's the third time he's used the "aside" phrase since we sat down. I check my watch. I have to be downtown soon.

"It took me 14 years to get my thinking down to one page," he says, pulling a white page with nifty diagrams from his stack of materials.

"What I've always told my kids is thinking is hard work. If you're not sweating, you're not thinking. It's like pumping iron."

Hellman dabs his upper lip with a napkin, erasing small beads of sweat. He shows me a report from the 1970s about density, smart growth and building heights. Then he pulls out an issue of Business Week. And

another. Then Newsweek. A story from [The Washington Post](#), passages highlighted in yellow.

“Most people spend way too much time perseverating on heights when heights is not the issue. It’s density.”
I remind myself to look up perseverate.

Jay, I have to go. He hands me a report.

“Doug, read that for homework.”

I arrive late for my next appointment. Forty-five minutes late.

Philosophical side

Such was my first meeting with Jay Hellman, developer, activist, genius. You may not have heard of him. The owner of D.C.-based development company [The Hellman Co.](#) Inc. is not one of the developers you read about in the papers. He tends to have only a couple of projects going at a time. Some succeed. Others don’t.

The 61-year-old Hellman, it’s fair to say, gets bogged down in a project or two and spends years working to make them perfect, even in the face of long-shot odds.

I came across his name doing research on development in Bethesda’s Woodmont Triangle, but I couldn’t find out much about him. At the time, his firm didn’t have a Web site. All I could find was an e-mail address — an MIT e-mail address. This piqued my curiosity. What was a developer doing with an MIT e-mail?

I asked around. Many didn’t know Hellman. The ones who did used one word to describe him.

“Surreal.”

While most developers are motivated by money, Hellman’s inspiration comes from a philosophy rooted in livable communities and development based on the advancement of technology. He has even registered a trademark — “Virtual Adjacency” — to represent his philosophy and recently launched a Web site at [www.virtualadjacency.com](#). That philosophy all laid out on his one-page “Hellman Transform,” which shows the correlation between transportation and communication via time and space domains.

Wait — don’t stop reading. Stay with us.

Hellman says smaller computers and cheaper and faster bandwidth will forever change the office building. Most people will work at home and use the office more like a club to get their human interaction fix. He has trademarked another slogan: “Be where you want to be, do what you have to do.”

Make sense now?

The nutty developer

You sort of get the feeling Hellman might still be in school if he weren’t a developer. He’d no doubt be the mad professor. Or the nutty one.

“After the fifth degree, my wife said, ‘No more school. You’ve got to go to work.’ ”

Hellman’s first job was with Boston Financial Technology Group, where he found equity money for real estate development. He left after two years to come to D.C, where he got a job at Swesnik & Blum Realty Corp. Only 27, he helped develop three office buildings, including 2020 K St. NW. He proudly notes that he came up with the idea to base escalation clauses in leases on a stipulated base number, now a common practice.

He left to start his own firm in 1976. His first project was developing Lafayette Centre, a mixed-use, block-long building between 20 and 21st streets NW. He worked with the city to rewrite zoning laws to allow a one-stop planned unit development process, a practice still in use today.

In between, Hellman developed three large residential tracts, put together development plans (which he later sold) for what became the [National Association of Realtors](#) site on New Jersey Avenue NW near Capitol Hill, and dabbled in smaller projects in NoMa and even LaPlata, Md., where he owns land.

Around 2000, he helped co-found an ill-fated company, CTN Telecommunications Inc., with attorney David Irwin as part of his “Virtual Adjacency” philosophy. Their plan was to rebuild rural telecom networks

with fiber-optic cable, but the venture never got off the ground and Hellman lost his investment.

“I’m an overeducated real estate developer,” he says. “And I think sometimes I’m my own worst enemy.”

Hellman is impassioned, albeit to a fault. I can’t help but wonder if he couldn’t be making more money by, well, just developing.

“I will accept that as a compliment,” he says. “But my wife tells me sometimes I take it too far.”

Another developer, Scott Ross of [Ross Development & Investment](#), says Hellman’s passion is authentic.

“He really believes in these refined and cultivated concepts and believes they will produce a better community for people to live in, as compared to people who just do this for a living,” Ross says.

Hellman tells me, “Even though I make life difficult for myself, I believe I’m doing the right thing.”

Taste of success

Hellman’s latest crusade involves a small property he owns at 7725 Old Georgetown Road in Bethesda, now a BP gas station. He has spent the last couple of years closely following Montgomery County’s plan for the Woodmont Triangle area. In 2006, the county approved amendments to the Bethesda-Woodmont plan that would allow density transfer, encouraging development in the triangle, an area just north of downtown Bethesda filled with small businesses.

Hellman applauds the two major changes in the amendments, but he wants the county to go another step. Like many concerned citizens, he has compiled a lot of information to support his position.

Repeat after me: A lot of information.

It starts with a 12-page report. Here’s a taste of the preface: “This is not an abstract, conceptual treatise. It is an urgent plea.” Let your imagination fill in the rest.

His argument is based, in part, on good transit-oriented development. Woodmont Triangle is only 1,500 feet — about five minutes — from the Bethesda Metro station.

“You gotta add density,” he says. “How do you do it?”

Ah, a zoning connoisseur’s dream.

Here’s what Hellman proposes: He wants to be able to buy density from small-scale adjacent properties, letting his project go taller while preserving the nature of the smaller properties.

Owners of the smaller, preserved properties would get half the value in cash. The other half would split between an amenity fund to improve the smaller properties and Woodmont Triangle’s public spaces.

The plan would benefit Hellman’s property and his wallet, but he claims it will boost the entire community as well.

He has enlisted some big names: Mal Rivkin, a growth expert at the University of Maryland and former Montgomery official, and Roger Lewis, a University of Maryland architecture professor emeritus who pens a column for *The Washington Post*.

“I would describe Jay as the Energizer Bunny of developers in this community,” Lewis says. “He’s just nonstop. You can’t turn him off.”

Lewis argues that Hellman’s economic analysis — despite its schizophrenic presentation — is compelling and, of course, logical. Lewis supports the arguments and wants to do what he can to get the county to listen.

If only Hellman would turn down the hyperindex a notch or two. He has “more of a rifle than a shotgun approach,” Lewis says.

I ask Hellman if he thinks his proposal, outline and report are too complicated?

“I think it is,” Hellman admits, like a child whose bubble has just been burst.

But then he pulls a tattered scrap of paper with a quote from his wallet: “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

Whether the Montgomery Council will ever take up his plea is anyone’s guess. Montgomery planning officials say it isn’t on their horizon, and you can bet that the council will never eliminate building heights all together.

I ask him what happens if he doesn’t win.

He pauses, for once.

“I probably won’t answer it till I fail,” he says. “To me, that’s disruptive thinking.”

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