

Ellen Wascou interviews Robert Edwin Field

“By the Way” on WROZ (101.3 FM) and WLPA (1490 AM)

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Ellen Wascou: Good Sunday morning to you, hope you're having a great day so far. Welcome to “By the Way” on The Rose and WLPA. I'm Ellen Wascou.

The \$139.8 million dollar convention center/hotel project in downtown Lancaster.

Should it be built? Shouldn't it be built? A \$65,000 dollar donation for a feasibility study, Project Forward Leap, Common Sense for Drug Policy, executive producer of movies; just a few of the areas of interest and involvement for my special guest this morning, Mr. Robert Field of Lancaster. Welcome to the program.

Robert Edwin Field: Well, thank you for having me.

Ellen Wascou: You're a very interesting person; read a little bit about you, don't know a lot about you but you got involved with the hotel/convention center project some months back. How did you get involved with that? What brought you to get involved in that?

Robert Field: A guilty conscience.

Ellen Wascou: A guilty conscience? On your part?

Robert Field: Yes, because I have over 40 years of background in real estate development, hotels. First, apartments. We built these in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, West Virginia, but my first was at Manor House when I was 29 years old. People used to come by and say they wanted to talk to my father. Now if I go onto the construction site they want to talk to my grandchildren.

Ellen Wascou: Oh, that's funny. So you've been in Lancaster, you're not originally from here.

Robert Field: No, I'm originally from Philadelphia by way of Oberlin, Ohio; by way of University of California at Berkeley; by way of National University of Mexico; and ultimately to Lancaster, and I've been here 40 years, so I'm still a newcomer.

Ellen Wascou: Oh no, I was just gonna say you're, but after 30 years you're a native. [Laughs] So you're now a native of Lancaster. So you've been involved with this community. You built Manor House Apartments, is that right?

Robert Field: That was the first. That was a very thrilling experience and I've been using the swimming pool there for 40 years, but I'll never forget the first time I got into that swimming pool and came up out of the water and looked around and saw all the trusses going on buildings and so forth. Certain things happen in your life which just stick with you and are very meaningful.

Ellen Wascou: So were there any other big building projects in Lancaster that you were involved with that we should know about?

Robert Field: It's strange, isn't it, with all the growth of Lancaster, that I never did get involved in other projects. What we sort of did, we were on the cutting edge of developing quality apartment communities, average size about 250 units. Manor House for example is 276. And we just moved across the state: Wilkes-Barre, York, Williamsport, Altoona. Then to West Virginia: Charleston, Huntington, Beckley. To Atlantic City and so forth.

Ellen Wascou: You've been all over the place but you kept Lancaster as your home base.

Robert Field: We came here temporarily. Temporarily! We stayed in an apartment. Well, we had young children and wanted to get out of the city, and ended up buying a country home which was built in the 1760's, enlarged it. Been here long time. Now my daughter lives in it. Karen and I have moved into suburban Lancaster.

Ellen Wascou: Well that's great. Lancaster has been good to you and you to it. It is a beautiful place to live.

Robert Field: Yes, it's a wonderful place to raise a family. And, you know, it's becoming...It has the benefit of the university and the college and one can see how Lancaster is developing a genuine culture maybe 15-20 years ago there was a tendency to pretend, where today, the downtown is becoming a very interesting community with a lot of attractions for young people and seniors.

Ellen Wascou: Yeah, lots of new things and exciting things happening. And one of those things is this convention center. And, you know, last year you were in the news quite a lot, you know, with, you know, offering to donate \$65,000 to have yet another feasibility study done. Let's talk about it. I know you really want to talk about this convention center project, so go ahead. Let's talk about it. What made you donate this money? Why did we need a feasibility study after, when at that point it was probably like seven and a half years into this project?

Robert Field: Well, I have to go sort of step by step because, you know, it's a matter of conscience. I sort of watched from afar and I have to start off by saying, in all the maybe 20 cities where I've done development in this country and now overseas, I always held up Lancaster as an example of a city that had a well-functioning community and leadership. Above all else I admire the Steinman family for all the things that they have done. But there have been many who made contributions. I always had the sense partly, even though the newspapers are monopoly newspapers and maybe because the morning and the afternoon played separate roles, often took different sides of issues, there was...

Ellen Wascou: They have completely different staffs.

Robert Field: Yes, there is a well-functioning sense of democracy here in Lancaster. And again I would give this as an example of a well-functioning community. But I began to be concerned by the way this convention center was being presented in the press. Let me say this right off: I have absolutely no objection to the fact that Lancaster Newspapers, Inc., are investors, limited partners in the convention center. I think this is consistent with their decades of service to the community and encouragement of projects. There's no problem there. My problem is, with when

the editorializing in the newspaper and news reporting seems to become influenced by some sense of commitment. And so...

Ellen Wascou: So wait, okay.

Robert Field: So that's what first got me. So last year, oh, I guess early part of last year, I wrote an article to the Sunday News, which they were kind enough to publish, entitled "Past Folly and Future Hope," in which I discussed how the Prince Street project has been ballyhooed some 30, 35 years ago but crashed.

Ellen Wascou: The Prince Street project?

Robert Field: Well, where originally, I'm trying to think of the department store. Gee, isn't that terrible, a senior moment. But where the Hilton Hotel was...

Ellen Wascou: Okay, on Queen Street...

Robert Field: On Queen Street, okay, excuse me. And I remember when the department store opened, the Wall Street Journal...

Ellen Wascou: Hess's you're talking about.

Robert Field: Hess, thank you. The Wall Street Journal ran a front page article saying that this was the first downtown department store to open in 20 years. Everybody ...

Ellen Wascou: For Hess's.

Robert Field: No, for anybody. Because their point was the department stores were all fleeing the cities to the suburbs. But within a few years, Hess's of course was out of business because they couldn't make a go. And the Hilton, you know, was also in big trouble.

Ellen Wascou: Okay, we have to hold that thought, we have to take a break but we're gonna come back. Much more with Mr. Robert Field. Stay with us. You're listening to "By the Way" on The Rose and WLPA. I'm Ellen Wascou and we'll be right back.

Ellen Wascou: Welcome back to "By the Way" on The Rose and WLPA. I'm Ellen Wascou along with my guest this morning, Lancaster entrepreneur, Mr. Robert Field, and before the break, Mr. Field, we were talking about how you became involved and, um, you know, pretty vocal about the downtown convention center project which is kind of underway, kind of not underway. Let's pick up kind of where we left off and how you got involved.

Robert Field: Well, Miss Wascou, I had my concerns, from a distance, about the economics of a hotel downtown because the current Brunswick had been offered to us for sale a couple times over the years, and we analyzed it, and both times concluded there just wasn't sufficient market for us to acquire the hotel even at tiny, tiny fraction of reproduction cost. Frankly, we wouldn't have taken it for free, if we had to operate it, because unless you have a 60-70 percent level of occupancy at a decent room rate, these things can become bottomless holes, [laughs] as we've occasionally found out for a while. A full service hotel can lose a lot of money very quickly. So...

Ellen Wascou: It could be, you know, a full service hotel can lose a lot of money whether it's a new one in the suburbs, or an existing one in the city.

Robert Field: Oh, yeah. I'm saying, we did not make an acquisition. So I was sort of ympathetic to the commissioners when they were expressing misgivings about guaranteeing certain debt. But the newspapers began hammering them about being out of step, they weren't listening to the public and so forth, so finally I went over to Fox 43 and I offered to fund a poll of Lancaster citizenry on the issues of the convention center. And they engaged Opinion Dynamics who does Fox's national polling, ahightly-esteemed firm, and they ran a substantial poll for the population, , so as far as the numbers are concerned it's accurate within two or three percent. And one of the questions which they built up to is, let's see if I can find it here... Under the proposed plan, the County of Lancaster will be responsible for paying up to one and a half million dollars each year for 40 years, if the Lancaster County Convention Center Authority is unable to pay its debts. And it asked whether people were in favor of that or against it. And of those who ventured an opinion, 78 percent ... 78 percent said they were against the county guaranteeing that debt. So, I mean this was the absolute opposite to how it was being portrayed in the press...

Ellen Wascou: But was the, and I'm playing the devil's advocate here...

Robert Field: Please do.

Ellen Wascou: But is that... You know, you ask one question, like, in that poll, that, you know, without offering, you know, what are the chances of that happening? You know, you're just asking, are you willing to have the county pay, you know, one million or so dollars in debt if the project fails.

Robert Field: Well, the...

Ellen Wascou: The other side that the convention center authority and Penn Square Partners have released information that said, you know, the chances of that happening are miniscule.

Robert Field: Well, we didn't try to deal with that issue, that issue we dealt with later. The issue that we were dealing with was: Was it correct that the commissioners were out of step with the public? But you raise excellent questions. So, I'll get onto that because the next thing, I guess because of what we did there, suddenly I received copies of the studies that were done by firms that were ordered by the sponsors, two of the copies being Price Waterhouse Coopers' original 2000 and updated 2002. And when I started reading them on a Sunday, it dawned on me that these were not feasibility studies, even though everybody was being told there feasibilities on it. After going through them carefully a couple of times, I even went over to the office to dig out feasibility studies that had been done on some of our hotels to make sure that I wasn't missing something.

Ellen Wascou: You know, but, a feasibility study, if you do the study today, and you waited two weeks and you did it again, wouldn't you get different results?

Robert Field: But you're assuming they had a feasibility study. And they didn't.

Ellen Wascou: But they had lots of studies.

Robert Field: No, they did not. We engaged American Valuation Group, Inc., which is a reputable national firm, because I learned a long time ago people aren't that interested in my opinion -- they want to know the facts.

Ellen Wascou: Right.

Robert Field: And they concluded, they studied this thing...

Ellen Wascou: Facts according to this group. I mean, every group...

Robert Field: Well, they studied the reports. And their conclusion was, quote "In conclusion, my review of the five reports discussed above indicates that they are intended to be market or marketability studies, and neither are represented as feasibility studies nor include sufficient information and analysis required to be considered feasibility studies," unquote. That was their conclusion. And a market study...

Ellen Wascou: Now did it...

Robert Field:...is a portion of a feasibility study. And frankly, when I read those market studies, they weren't even positive. They raised all sorts of objections to the project. But you know, those studies were never shared with public officials. Luis Mendoza asked for them. He was on council at the time. He asked for them repeatedly. He couldn't get a copy of them.

Ellen Wascou: Okay. So this project...Your opinion on this project is it should not happen? It should never have happened?

Robert Field: Well, that led to the next question. What would a real feasibility study determine? And the commissioners, who are constantly criticized, but Molly Henderson and Dick Shellenberger showed the incredible courage to order a real feasibility study, which incidentally at one point Mayor Rick Gray asked them to do, and that was released last week. And its conclusions were, quote, "Our findings lead us to conclude that the potential economic benefits are not likely to be sufficient to justify the risks involved, including the potential need to raise the hotel tax to fund operating deficits after several years should the reserves become depleted. We therefore recommend that prior to proceeding further with this project; the parties involved consider exploring a downsizing of the project or an alternate use for the site." Unquote.

Ellen Wascou: Okay, and Mayor Gray came back, he was a little upset with the study, and said according to the newspaper report that the report authors had no historical perspective and suffered from a lack of vision and objectivity. And that, you know, he's tried many cases with expert witnesses, and that uh, because he was an attorney before becoming mayor, and he knows that if you shop hard enough you can find people who can put things in the best light for you when faced with questions and assumptions. This is eight years later for this project. Should it be scrapped? Is that what you're saying?

Robert Field: Well, first, my friend Rick Gray.... we have worked together on a very important public health thing and for whom I have high regard, and I was supportive of his campaign ...first

he went and asked for the report, then he refused to cooperate for the report. He's been playing the role of Hamlet. The report speaks for itself and it's a firm that has a national reputation.

Ellen Wascou: So did Price Waterhouse; so didn't the other firms...

Robert Field: Pricewaterhouse never did a feasibility study and never wrote a positive market study. They pointed out the same problems as PKF. And they withdrew their report last year saying that it was no longer even applicable...

Ellen Wascou: Because...Right....

Robert Field: Because the size and the scope had changed.

Ellen Wascou: Okay, because the project changed. We're going to take another break and we're gonna come back. More with Mr. Robert Field. You're listening to "By the Way" on The Rose and WLPA. I'm Ellen Wascou.

Ellen Wascou: Welcome back to "By the Way" on The Rose and WLPA. I'm Ellen Wascou along with my guest this morning, Lancaster entrepreneur, Mr. Robert Field. We're talking about the planned convention center/luxury hotel for downtown Lancaster and basically, even though there was just a letter to the editor from you in the newspaper saying you're not, you know, an opponent of the convention center project, I would say probably that you lean more towards being an opponent than a proponent?

Robert Field: I wasn't then, I am now. What I said was, up until the release of the PKF report, whatever the report showed I would go along with. I would be delighted if it was positive or even lukewarm. But now that it's negative there's no way I could support it. But there's another aspect here, Miss Wascou, and that is how the \$17 million has been spent by the Lancaster County Convention Center Authority. I mean, even three of their board members have expressed great concern, and the same law firm that is now under heavy criticism for apparently billing many more hours than they actually spent for Conestoga View.

Ellen Wascou: Well, we don't know that. They were billed for a lot of hours. They've now pulled out of the project. But I'm sure, well, it's thoroughly gonna be looked at.

Robert Field: They have received from the Convention Center Authority over \$6 million in fees and their 230 invoices, the only piece of information given on those invoices says "For professional services rendered to the Lancaster County Convention Center Authority." There is no back up whatsoever, same thing as with Conestoga View, as to how many hours were spent, who did it, what were their rates of pay, and what they were working on. Unlike with Conestoga View, there is a very professional contract between the Authority and the law firm. But none of the information that is required under the contract is given to them, and the leaders of the Convention Center Authority absolutely stonewall and refuse to explain why they keep on approving these invoices. Now yesterday...

Ellen Wascou: Does that mean that the law firm doesn't have accurate records in their office?

Robert Field: Well, I would love to have those. I mean, that's what the convention Center Authority should be asking for. What businessperson, what other government official would pay over \$6 million and never ask "Give us your records, as it says you should in your contract, showing what hours were worked, who did it, at what rates, and for what purposes?" But they don't seem to be interested. And there's a lot of other things being paid that way from them and this is...But let me not talk about what Robert Field thinks, because I'll make a revelation. Maybe by Sunday, it may be news or maybe not, but earlier this week, a letter was sent from Common Cause. You know Common Cause the national organization?

Ellen Wascou: Yes, yes.

Robert Field: "To the honorable Edward G. Rendell, governor." And in this letter they call for a reassessment of the project funding. And they refer to it...they use language such as, and these are all quotes: "Troubling political influence" "disturbing lack of transparency" "possible violations of open record laws" allegations that false information has been presented in documents." Now that's pretty strong language. If I had time I'd read you the whole letter.

Ellen Wascou: Mmmm-hmmm

Robert Field: But hopefully, the newspaper will cover this story, but they haven't yet.

Ellen Wascou: Maybe they're doing some investigating reporting on it.

Robert Field: Could be. And I look forward to reading it.

Ellen Wascou: I'm sure, you know, the newspapers cannot afford to be biased in this situation and I'm sure their editors would not permit that.

Robert Field: Well, I think history speaks for itself. But enough of the convention center.
[Laughs]

Ellen Wascou: Okay. So why didn't you get involved from the beginning?

Robert Field: I'm very involved, you know, in other matters having to do with public health. Locally, nationally, and internationally, I'm involved with education of young people. I mean, there's just other things which I'm having to tend to business. I have a 13 and a 7-year-old youngster. And I have grandchildren. So there's a lot of demands. This did not seem like something that required my attention. It was only conscience. I just finally felt that I had to start talking.

Ellen Wascou: Because you were reading newspaper stories?

Robert Field: Yes.

Ellen Wascou: So you were reading the newspaper stories.

Robert Field: Yes, but I knew from my experience that what was being said just didn't seem to be accurate. And it seemed just so biased and so lacked factual basis.

Ellen Wascou: Well, I'm sure time will tell, as it will with the sale of the county home and everything that went on there, because, you know, that's a real mess as well. So we've got two big messes going on that hopefully will be resolved soon because I think the voters and citizens of Lancaster County are just fed up with the whole thing. You know, whether you're talking about the county home or the convention center, let's move and get it going. Okay? [Laughs]

Robert Field: I really appreciate being on your show and it's nice to meet you after 40 years of being here in Lancaster together.

Ellen Wascou: And you know, let's just quickly, we have about two minutes left, let's just talk about, you know, Common Sense for Drug Policy, what's that, that you're involved in that?

Robert Field: That is an organization that was established by Kevin Zeese, myself, and Mike Gray, who incidentally, would be known best for having written the screen play for "The China Syndrome."

Ellen Wascou: Oh, okay.

Robert Field: But it is basically an educational organization. We run those ads, giving a lot of facts about harm reduction and drug policy, what changes should be made what improvements should be made. We do a lot of research, we help various organizations, and, my idea and all my endeavors have been really what George Soros has made the mantra of his organization, that an informed public, over time, will tend to make better decisions. So I like to concentrate on facts.

Ellen Wascou: Mmm-hmmm.

Robert Field: And getting facts out, and that's basically been what Common Sense for Drug Policy has endeavored to do over the years, and I think we've had some success.

Ellen Wascou: Okay, and Project Forward Leap?

Robert Field: Mel Allen and I founded it about 16, 17 years ago. I'm not that active in it though I continue to help out a little bit. They've done a very good job of taking middle school youngsters away to summer camp on campuses for five weeks each summer, three summers in a row, giving them an intensive education and they also continue to help them over the course of the year. The idea is to take youngsters of potential so that they in turn will become the seeds for a better future for all of us.

Ellen Wascou: That's wonderful. And you're an executive producer on some pretty interesting movies, I must say.

Robert Field: Yes, they win all sorts of awards, now when are we going to start making some money?

Ellen Wascou: [laughs]:Soon, I'm sure. I want to thank my guest this morning, Lancaster entrepreneur Mr. Robert Field for coming on the program. Thank you so much and hopefully I didn't scare you too much this morning and you'll come back again.

Robert Field: I thank you very much. It's been a great honor to have been on your show and been able to communicate with my fellow people here in Lancaster.

Ellen Wascou: Okay everyone have a great Sunday. We'll be back next week for another edition of "By the Way" on The Rose and WLPA. I'm Ellen Wascou.

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