

# CLEAR TAKEOVER

## » TAKEOVER continued from 10A

is owned by the church, because the church owns its parishioners,” said De Vocht, the former executive in charge of real estate, who reported directly to Miscavige.

In a letter, the church said the *Times* is misinterpreting Scientology policy and that other religions also practice shunning. It said information in parishioner folders is sacrosanct and claims of blackmail have “long since been disproven.”

Former parishioners say the church has a history of interfering in Scientologists’ downtown business.

Aaron Smith-Levin, a former Sea Org member, said a church ethics officer in 1993 pressured Smith-Levin’s father-in-law to sell Scientology a downtown property it wanted for expansion.

Another Scientologist, Rick Argall, owned a building on downtown’s Garden Avenue that housed six Scientologist-run businesses, including a chiropractic clinic he operated with a fellow church member. But after he forwarded an email critical of the organization in 2012 to another parishioner, the church began an excommunication process that would have forced his partner of 24 years to stop working with him and his tenants to move out.

Argall left the church and was forced to abandon his business of more than 20 years. Concerned he wouldn’t be able to pay his mortgage, Argall said he deeded the building, appraised at \$780,000, back to the previous owner. He walked away with nothing.

### VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It’s too soon to say how the shift in ownership will affect downtown.

Andrus, the former church operative, has broken ground on a condo tower near the city’s boat ramp and filed plans for another housing complex nearby. Tal Ezra, a Scientologist who recently bought four parcels around an office where he has run his fuel management company since 2005, said he’s considering office space and possibly a retail shop.

“I saw a business opportunity,” Ezra said. “No one from the church dictates to me what to buy, what to sell, what to do.”

None of the other parishioners whose companies bought property since 2017 responded to questions about their plans.

Right now, at least 30 businesses owned by non-parishioners are renting from Scientologists. But Scientologist-controlled companies are also sitting on at least 26 vacant lots and 31 empty storefronts and offices.

Businesses without ties to the church are moving into a few of those. Agami, the developer whose family gave \$10 million, leased a storefront to a non-Scientologist that has become a successful restaurant since opening in 2017. Agami also signed two more long-term leases on the same block with restaurants owned by people not connected to the church. Both are supposed to open soon.

But far more non-Scientologists are moving out. Seven businesses have left following recent purchases, and at least three more are leaving this year, including Clearwater Plumbing and Gulf Coast Marine. Both have been there for decades.

Looking at the *Times’* map of the new ownership, City Council member David Allbritton recalled a moment from 2017 that now seems telling.

When the city was considering buying the aquarium’s lot, Miscavige threatened to stop communicating until the 2020 election, when term limits would force most of the council out of office. Then he would try again, with new council members.

“He’s starting to assemble properties,” Allbritton said. “If the council in 2020 isn’t on board with doing something his way, he’s going to do it himself.”

City officials say their dedication to redeveloping the waterfront hasn’t changed. Assistant City Manager Michael Delk said the



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**Emily Lares, 75, and Peter Lares, 82, who are not Scientologists, stand outside Emily’s Restaurant, a building they’ve owned for 28 years. Although a Scientologist broker has tried to buy the building, the couple are not ready to sell.**

### HELP SUPPORT INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

*Tampa Bay Times* reporter Tracey McManus interviewed more than 90 people and collaborated with a team of journalists to analyze real estate deals in downtown Clearwater. McManus spent six months working full-time to bring you this story.

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For an interactive view of how the church’s influence has grown, visit [tampabay.com/cleartakeover](http://tampabay.com/cleartakeover).

calls for several new projects on the waterfront with residences and retail. Delk described the projects — which require voter approval — as key to the plan’s success.

But even when the church isn’t in control, its presence can deter development.

In summer 2017, Mark Searcy, a longtime Clearwater real estate agent who is not a Scientologist, assembled a 1-acre site by getting the owners of three adjoining properties to agree to sell.

Searcy felt like he’d created a canvas for a dream hotel, condo and retail project: near the bridge to Clearwater Beach, no height restrictions, all under \$5 million.

He promoted the site to about 75 hoteliers and developers across the country.

They all passed. “The main reason why developers didn’t want it was they didn’t want to be near the Church of Scientology,” Searcy said.

Then Fischler called with a buyer. Nearly two years after the properties were sold to a company run by two Scientologists, no redevelopment plans have been submitted.

And Fischler is still making offers.

In 2018, Peter Lares got a call from Fischler, asking if he’d sell the prominent building in the center of downtown that houses Emily’s Restaurant. Lares and his wife, Emily, sold the

diner inside a decade ago. But they weren’t ready to sell the building, which they had owned for 27 years.

Lares declined again when Fischler met him at a restaurant in Pinellas Park for lunch, and once more when she tried in May. He’s still holding out.

“We’ve spent a lot of happy years here,” Lares said.

In summer 2018, Fischler walked into Bob Lee’s Auto Repair on Park Street to make owner Dennis Bosi an offer. Bosi wasn’t interested.

He had committed to downtown in 1997. He took over Bob Lee’s Auto to continue the business’ legacy and served on the Downtown Development Board for a decade.

But the promised downtown revival never came. Over the past two years, the properties surrounding the shop have been sold to Scientologist-controlled companies.

Fischler approached Bosi again in September. By then, he had found an auto garage he could buy in Dunedin. Fischler offered Bosi \$1.4 million, almost three times what the property was valued.

“I had to make a decision,” Bosi said. “Do I spend another 10 years and see what happens in downtown Clearwater?”

Bosi took the deal.

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### ABOUT THE ANALYSIS

*Times* reporters built a database of hundreds of properties in the center of Clearwater’s downtown.

Reporters analyzed thousands of rows of data and pulled more than 1,000 records from the Pinellas County Property Appraiser, the Pinellas County Clerk of Court and the Florida Division of Corporations. The analysis considered property within the general boundaries of Cedar Street to the north, Missouri Avenue to the east, Chestnut Street to the south and the Intracoastal Waterway to the west. The goal was to capture the area immediately surrounding both Scientology’s headquarters, City Hall and the city-owned waterfront.

The analysis did not include residential parcels except in cases where they were bought in conjunction with commercial property or vacant land. The *Times* counted each parcel that was assigned a value by the property appraiser as a single property with five exceptions. In those cases, four or more parcels purchased together clearly comprised a single piece of real estate.

The *Times* described sales as cash transactions when they were paid without a mortgage filed in public records. The *Times* used the date that transactions were recorded in the Clerk of Court’s official record as the date of sale.

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Stantec

**The Imagine Clearwater plan aims to transform the waterfront into a park with a concert green and mixed-use projects. The hope is that businesses will fill nearby storefronts, which Scientology now overwhelmingly controls.**

#### April 2016

The city hires New York consultants to develop a master plan to revitalize the city-owned waterfront and create a strategy for a new public park to help revive downtown business.

#### July 2016

Miscavige meets one-on-one with each City Council member to discuss his desire for a key piece of waterfront land: a grassy lot owned by the Clearwater Marine Aquarium. The city had been preparing to buy the property for its waterfront revitalization.

#### February 2017

The City Council adopts the consultants’ concept called Imagine Clearwater — a \$55 million plan to overhaul the waterfront with a new concert green, lush gardens, a winding trail with views of the Intracoastal and mixed-use projects.

#### March 2017

After the *Tampa Bay Times* details the church’s retail redevelopment strategy, Miscavige meets with Council members about the plan. Miscavige offers to spend millions renovating Cleveland Street facades, recruiting high-end retail to empty storefronts and building an entertainment



#### April 2017

The City Council votes unanimously to buy the lot from the aquarium for \$4.25 million. Scientology had offered \$15 million. Miscavige cuts communication.

complex involving actor Tom Cruise. The offer hinges on the city stepping aside and allowing the church to buy the aquarium’s lot.

#### February 2018

The council hires Tampa consultants to design Imagine Clearwater. It remains in the design stage today, but construction estimates have reached \$64 million. So, far the city has demolished the Harborview Center and vacated the City Hall building to prepare those sites for redevelopment.

#### January 2017 to present

Scientology and companies managed by parishioners have spent \$103 million buying 92 mostly commercial properties in the downtown core. Now, as majority landlord, church members have enormous control over what businesses and developments fill their downtown buildings and vacant lots.

*Tracey McManus, Times staff writer*