

community profile

By MEK

Upon entering Jim Trzepacz's office in Winooski City Hall, I was quickly impressed by Jim's openness as a gay man in city government. Jim Trzepacz (say TRAY-pazz) loves Winooski and is so very proud of his role in bringing gay consciousness to planners and assessors in the national arena. He proudly shows me his computer screen with a picture of his cat, the moon and his boyfriend. There's the yellow equal-sign-on-a-blue-background Human Rights Campaign Fund sticker when I enter his office. He makes sure I see Tinky Winky (sans purse) sitting on top of his file cabinet and the hairy bear on the wall – which Jim says is how he classifies himself in the gay community.

After a discussion of the different colors that are found in khaki (pink, yellow, green and sunset), he shows me the blood blisters on his hands (from removing woodwork at home), and talks about his male cat, who, he says, now has "a vulva" since its operation. Then we get down to business.

OITM: Jim, what is your job as a Planner and Assessor? What do you actually do?

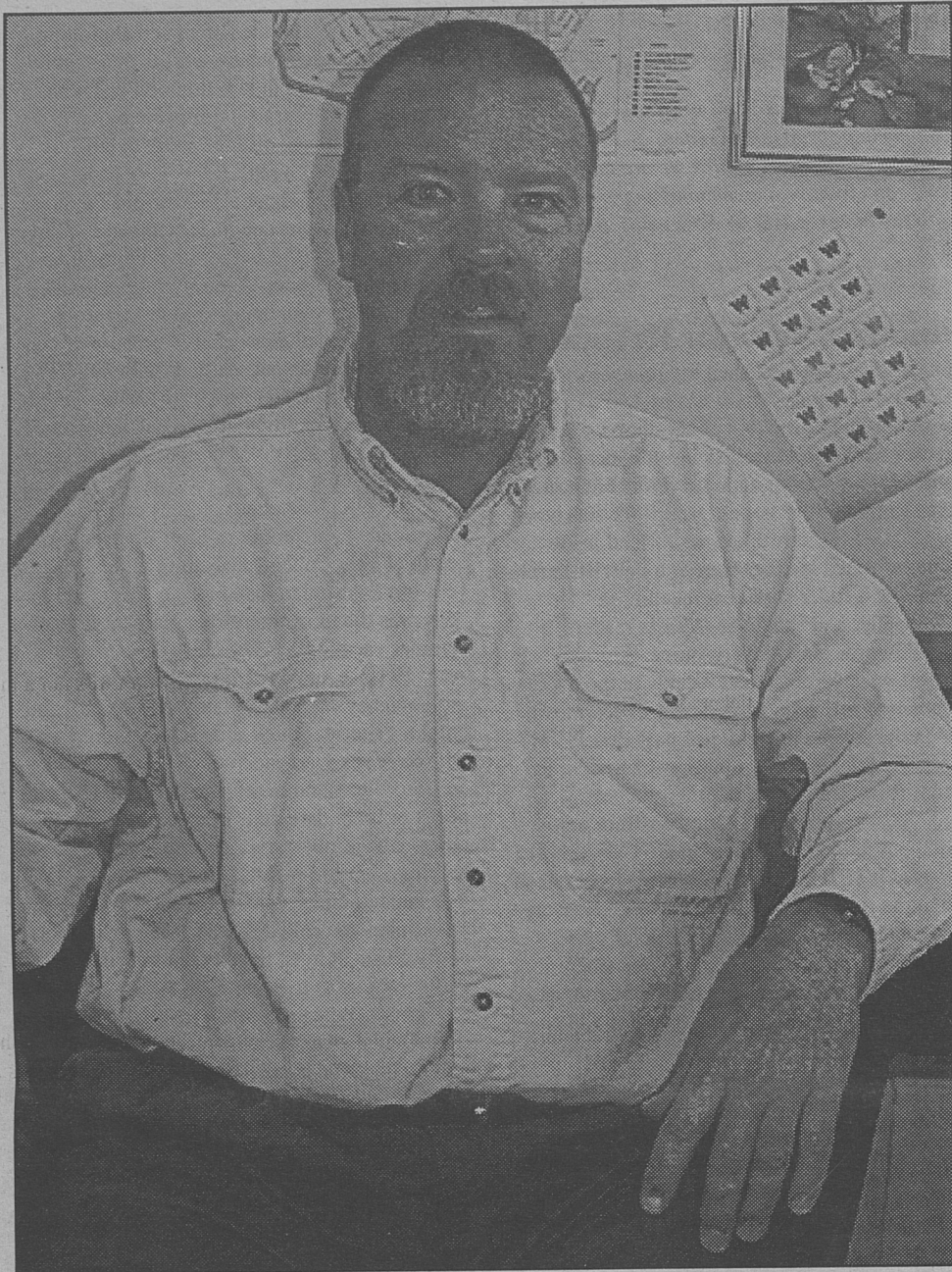
Jim Trzepacz: My title is City Planning Director and Assessor. As Assessor, I appraise properties for taxation. In this capacity I visit many homes. As the City Planner I work with the department to take care of growth and development in Winooski. This involves a lot of work with policy development. My chief objective is to get community input and participation. Visiting as many homes as I do, on the job, I see a lot of symbols of gay identity and pride like P-Flag stickers, pink triangles and pride magnets in people's homes.

OITM: How many gay and lesbian people do you think live in Winooski?

JT: According to the 2000 census, there are 300 households self-defined as having an unmarried partner. This number is commonly used to identify same-sex couples. I sense that's a fair representation of Winooski's gay and lesbian population.

OITM: Do you think Winooski is tolerant of their gay and lesbian residents? Has there been any change since Civil Unions?

JT: Winooski takes the Vermont motto of "Freedom and Unity" to heart. People stick together, but give each other the freedom to be who they are. The city has been supportive and tolerant [of gays and lesbians] because they've had gay and lesbian employees. Since Civil Unions, there are domestic partnership benefits. There has not been a backlash against civil unions in Winooski. The words that I like to use for Winooski are "tradition", and there is a lot of it and it shifts; "tolerance", as there has always been tolerance for the newcomers with different abilities, means and ethnic backgrounds, including gay and lesbian people; and "transformation", which gently maintains the tradition by keeping what's good, and making improvements through



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Winooski Planning Director Jim Trzepacz Speaks Out

better neighborhoods, including a wide range of household types. Winooski is known for being more tolerant to gays and lesbians in the state. What I see as positive for Winooski is that [gays and lesbians] are also part of the transformation. Transformation also includes planting more street trees.

OITM: Winooski has a rich history of immigrants because of the mills. Would you talk more about diversity in Winooski?

JT: (Showing the 2000 census data) There are people whose ancestry is Arab, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, French Canadian, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Scottish-Irish, Scottish, Slovak, Sub-Saharan African, Swedish, Swiss, Ukrainian, United States, Welsh, and West Indian. Currently there

are white, black or Afro-American, American Indian and Alaska Natives, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, Samoans and other people living in Winooski. All of this diversity is part of the tradition, tolerance and transformation in Winooski.

OITM: How did you get to Winooski?

JT: There used to be a gay following at Sneakers in the 1980s.; I became familiar with Winooski in that way. [Career-wise] I'm trained as a Natural Resource Planner. I started in Burlington and was hired by "the Man" – Bernie Sanders – and worked for the Burlington Planning Commission. Afterwards, I was hired to work on the Winooski One Hydro Project as the front person for the City; essentially I was the chief local regulator; this was in my capacity as Planner.

OITM: Are you involved with the Winooski Downtown Plan?

JT: The city staff is presently in a hands-off mode until the financial piece is in place. However, I've had input with the landscaping, street trees and the lighting. There are proposals for translucent glass canopies, stonewalls, water features and other components which would be classified as public art. Considering that we're planning an urban area, gays and lesbians will be part of the population mix. The welcome mat is out. Although this may sound as though I'm stereotyping, I think in general, gay and lesbian planners have a greater appreciation of aesthetics and beauty. Did you know that Winooski has been featured in national planners magazines?

OITM: Well, no. That's obviously the next question.

JT: Winooski and I, as a gay planner, have been featured prominently in The American Planning Association's glossy professional magazine, *Planning*. The association has a gay and lesbian division, of which I am a charter member. Along the theme of "we are everywhere," Winooski was featured on the front cover of the maiden publication of Gays and Lesbians in Planning (GALIP) newsletter. Not to be a cliché, but we really are everywhere; there are hundreds and hundreds of gays and lesbians in my profession. I am grateful to live in a place where I can be myself and contribute "openly." I have some professional acquaintances down south where being open is out of the question.

OITM: Why don't we end by getting to know you personally a little bit better. What else would you like to share about yourself?

JT: I grew up in upstate New York. I attribute my willingness to be accepting to my varied background. I'm ethnic – just look at my last name! – and I'm a fag. I've traveled extensively in Europe, did the usual touristy things in the Caribbean, and have taken several trips to Venezuela. Recently my travels and professional associations have taken me to many of the gay meccas in the U.S. I have a rich history and background. I've worked in a zoo and a vet's office and originally thought I wanted to be a vet, but I couldn't take the pain of the animals. In my personal life, I was in a relationship for seven years and then took 10 years off to enjoy my gay adolescence. I met Tim this past summer at Rainbow Woods, a gay campground near Schroon Lake in New York.

Someday I'd like to live in the Winooski neighborhood known as the Flats. I like working here and would enjoy living here. People are always leaving Winooski to find some place "bigger and better." I'm focusing on "retention" matters in the course of my work; getting people to stay in Winooski. We want Winooski to be a permanent destination that includes gays in lesbians, of course. ▼

MEK lives and writes in Winooski.