

## The 25 most powerful people in Central Florida: 25-11

Scott Maxwell | TAKING NAMES

December 24, 2008

They decide what time your children go to school, whether you'll get a new Walmart in your neighborhood and maybe even how much money you make.

Some have thousands of employees. Others have a direct line to the White House.

All of them have clout.

They are Central Florida's power players.

Every year, this column compiles a list of "The 25 Most Powerful People in Central Florida" with a goal of lifting the curtain and showing you who is pulling the strings in this community. They are the people with the ability to get things done and the power to stop something dead in its tracks.

This isn't my list. Instead, it was created by a panel of 15 plugged-in observers -- leaders from business, religion, nonprofit, education, government and even the grass-roots sectors of our community.

They cast their votes. I tallied them.

Central Florida is a vibrant and diverse community. And the new faces on this year's list reflect that.

Today we'll look at those in spots 11 through 25. Coming Sunday: the top 10

25. Ron Blocker. You can certainly argue that the superintendent of the nation's 11th-largest school district should have always been on this list. But this is the first time the Orange County schools leader has shown up, thanks partly to an increasingly higher profile and, as one panelist said, "his single-minded purpose" of improving schools. Interestingly, Blocker earns such praise right after county residents voted to create a new elected school-chairman post -- partly because of a perceived lack of leadership in the schools.

24. Jeff Fuqua. Some of the biggest deals in town are done at Orlando International Airport. That's where the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority hands out multimillion-dollar contracts for everything from legal services to terminal construction without much attention or scrutiny. That's why the 64-year-old Fuqua, who chairs GOAA --

and, go figure, runs a construction company himself -- makes the list. You may not know his name, but this town's big-money guys do.

23. Val Demings. This marks the first time a top cop has made the list -- something even Orange County Sheriff Kevin Beary never did. Some panelists viewed the 51-year-old Demings and her husband, incoming Sheriff Jerry Demings, as more of a power duo. (In fact, he's on the "just-missed" list.) But with Chief Demings already established at City Hall -- where crime is an increasing concern -- she made the cut. Where she ranks next year depends on how she handles that concern.

22. Bob Mandell. As a successful home builder and friend of both mayors, Mandell has always moved in Central Florida's power circles. But the 61-year-old took a big step up this year when he became one of the earliest and biggest local backers of Barack Obama. The verdict's still out on what that means for Mandell's future and what mark he wants to make locally. But as one panelist wrote: "He spent election evening with Obama in Chicago. This has to be worth something."

21. Dick Batchelor. You're hard-pressed to find a community group with which Dick Batchelor hasn't worked through the years. In the past year, this 60-year-old consultant and former legislator kept up his profile by championing the new school-chair position and, more recently, by knocking legislators' heads around. Batchelor has been vocal in asking state lawmakers how they'll sleep at night if their budget-cutting measures disproportionately hurt kids and disabled people. It's a good question -- one that too few other people on this list are asking.

20. Corrine Brown. When Republicans controlled Washington, this Democratic member of Florida's snakelike 3rd District barely registered on Central Florida's power meter. But now that Dems are that running the show -- and even Republicans credit her as crucial to getting more transportation money and a new veterans hospital -- the 62-year-old, eight-term congresswoman makes her power-list debut.

19. Mel Martinez. Florida's freshman senator took one of the biggest tumbles on this year's list -- all the way down from fourth place. That's mainly for two reasons: 1) Martinez, 62, announced he's not seeking re-election. 2) He'll soon no longer be buddies with the guy in the White House. Still, U.S. senators are big deals. And this Orlando Republican remains more plugged in to his hometown community than many Washington pols.

**18. Charlie Gray. The namesake of Orlando's GrayRobinson law firm remains a constant on the power scene for several reasons. He has the ear of both mayors and U.S. senators. He stays active in community issues. And the 76-year-old legal patriarch employs a lot of other powerful people. The firm also earned good will this year when it announced that it would forgo its extravagant holiday party to instead cut a six-figure check to local charities.**

17. Harris Rosen. Year in and year out, Rosen remains the independent cog in Central Florida's powerful tourism wheel. Part of the reason is that this 69-year-old self-made multimillionaire isn't afraid to speak his mind. He

doesn't always get his way. And his motives when it comes to spending public money are often self-serving as much as altruistic. But he's not alone in that regard. Rosen also stands out as a big philanthropic presence.

16. Jim Seneff. The CEO of CNL Financial Group tumbled a few more spots this year, down from his sixth-place apex three years ago. The 62-year-old remains one of the key players in the downtown scene and a quiet and constant presence on the arts and philanthropic ones. But Seneff -- and perhaps his sizable CNL group in general - - hasn't been as vocal about big-picture goals for the future.

15. Andy Gardiner. Just when he was slipping down the power ladder to the 20th spot, this outgoing member of the state House went and snagged himself a Senate seat. Expect the 39-year-old Republican from Orlando to become Central Florida's go-to guy in the state's GOP-controlled Senate.

**14. Fred Leonhardt. He may be conservative at his core -- as evidenced by his constant presence at all things GOP, from conventions to fundraisers. But Leonhardt is awfully adept at joining the winning team, no matter the party. Consequently, the 59-year-old partner at GrayRobinson has easy access to everything from County Commission offices to Charlie Crist's wedding.**

13. Al Weiss. Ever since Weiss was promoted to president of Walt Disney's worldwide Parks and Resorts division, he has yielded the local spotlight to Meg Crofton, his successor as top Disney dog in Orlando. That's how it should be. Still, Weiss, 54, remains a powerful presence with the region's largest employer. Plus, his personal efforts to help set up churches throughout the world have put Weiss on the radar of religious leaders across the country.

12. John Morgan. If you know Morgan only from TV, you probably associate his name with your remote control's "mute" button. But the politically connected players in this town know Mr. "For the People" has a direct pipeline to national Democrats, having hosted everyone from Howard Dean to Barack Obama at his Lake Mary home. Plus, Morgan is one of the few Dems with strong connections to the Governor's Office as well. So now that this has beefed up his clout -- he was 23rd last year -- what's he going to do with it?

11. Clarence Otis. Darden Restaurants has long been one of Central Florida's most important business assets. Aside from being the region's only Fortune 500 company, Darden set a high bar for philanthropy that more companies should clear. But now, as the company redefines itself and sets its eyes on national stature, locals will be watching to see whether Otis, 52, and his company remain focused on this community as well.

How the list was made: To compile this list, Taking Names columnist Scott Maxwell assembled a panel of 15 plugged-in observers who are in a good position to judge influence in Central Florida. They come from the political, business, religious, nonprofit, grass-roots, judicial and educational communities -- and are diverse in age, gender and ethnicity. Panelists voted anonymously and were prohibited from voting for themselves.

Observations

\*MOSTLY MEN. Two high-profile women leaving the Orlando Sentinel (Publisher Kathy Waltz and Editorial Page Editor Jane Healy), as well as Orange County Commissioner Teresa Jacobs leaving office, hurt the estrogen team in the battle of the sexes. Only three women made this year's list.

\*STANDING OUT. Speaking of Jacobs, no rank-and-file politicians made the cut this year -- though Seminole County Commissioner Carlton Henley, a political patriarch in Seminole who proved willing to throw some elbows across county lines this year, was darn close. In Orange, Commissioner Linda Stewart received the most love from the panel. No one on Orlando's council got much attention, as Dyer is pretty adept at tending his flock.

\*FROM THE PULPIT. On the religion front, Bishop Thomas Wenski and Longwood Rev. Joel Hunter continue to receive attention. Neither man is shy about wading into controversial issues. And don't forget that Hunter actually prayed with the president-elect on Election Day.

\*ALL DISNEY. Walt Disney World is obviously the biggest mouse in town. Universal's presence is conspicuously absent. SeaWorld's, too.

#### Up-and-comers

Some of those who received attention from our panelists in the "Up-and-comers" category include downtown developers Steve Kodsí and Craig Ustler; UCF med-school dean Deb German, lawyer and GOP fundraiser Marcos Marchena, Orlando Chief of Staff Brie Turek, consultant and former Dyer campaign aide Kelly Cohen, Central Florida Sports Commission President Sam Stark, Walt Disney vice president Shannon McAleavey, public-relations exec Laura Guitar and Mears Transportation exec Roger Chapin.

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