



Meet Councillor Paul Zimmerman

by Andrew Choi Tsz-hong

It was a rare sight – a tall bearded westerner standing on a street in Pokfulam, waving at strangers passing by. “Hello, I am Zimmerman. Please give me a vote. Thank you,” he was shouting out in imperfect Cantonese.

Paul Zimmerman’s campaigning sure paid off.

In September he beat his rival, Ellis Lau Ying-tung from the Savantas Policy Institute to win the district council seat for Pokfulam in the Southern District, with 60 per cent of the vote. It was an unexpectedly hotly contested by-election with a 40 per cent turnout rate.

For the 52-year-old Zimmerman, it was fourth time lucky. He had previously lost out in the 2006 Election Committee, an 800 member electoral college for the Chief Executive, the 2007 District Council and the 2008 Legislative Council elections.

But Zimmerman does not think his victory was down to luck. Nor does he think the support from the Pan-Democrats – he is a member of the Civic Party – or the fact that more than 20 per cent of Pokfulam residents are expatriates were major factors.

Instead, Zimmerman puts his success down to his persistent fight for good city planning in Pokfulam over the past six years.



Zimmerman lives in the countryside with four dogs and they jog together.

Courtesy of Daniel Chan

“Residents will vote for somebody who can make sure their living district is nice,” Zimmerman said.

It is this aspiration to live in a better and greener environment that drove the Dutchman to enter politics and made him decide to reside in Hong Kong 26 years ago.

The idea of Asia was planted in his head as a child listening to his father’s tales, “My father was trading textiles in Asia when I was a kid,” he recalls. Zimmerman junior liked to edit the films that his father shot on his journeys – the fascination started then.

After he graduated from Erasmus University, he decided to head for Asia. In 1984, the young Zimmerman arrived in “busy, hot but fun” Hong Kong with a traineeship at a Dutch bank.

At that time, Zimmerman did not know anyone in the city but that only encouraged him to explore. “Every night, after work, I would go home, change my clothes and walk the streets.” He walked everywhere but liked to hang out in Lan Kwai Fong and at dai pai dongs.

After just three years, Zimmerman struck out on his own and started a business. He founded Bridge Design Inc, a corporate communications company. It was a success and 10 years later, in 1997, he sold it and made his first fortune.

Once he was financially secure, Zimmerman started to think about what he wanted to do with his life and where he wanted to spend it. He had grown up in the Netherlands and spent some time in Australia, both of which he found boring. He also spent a few months in Shanghai. That was exciting initially, but



Zimmerman canvassing residents in Pokfulam district.

Courtesy of Daniel Chan



Zimmerman and members of the Civic Party thank voters for their support in the 2010 by-election.

Courtesy of Daniel Chan

People

the crowds and lack of outdoor activities and greenery soon got to him.

“After I sold my business and had the money to be able to think about my life, I looked at all the options: the Netherlands, Australia, Shanghai. I decided in 2003 to remove the question mark and stay in Hong Kong forever.”

Zimmerman loves the fact that Hong Kong is an urban centre where everything is just 10 minutes away, including the beautiful outdoor environment. “Hong Kong is like a combination of New York and Hawaii,” he says.

He loves the city too much to just sit and watch while it deteriorates around him. Once he had decided this would be home for his family, he threw himself into activism. Zimmerman co-founded Designing Hong Kong, which advocates the adoption of sustainability, good design and quality of life as core values in urban planning.

Zimmerman cited several problems that are challenging us and our environment – blue skies are missing, roads are congested, and the air is polluted.

“From Victoria Harbour to Tai Long Sai Wan, we are killing the city,” he says. He believes both the government and the community are responsible. On the government’s part, he says outdated thinking and outdated regulations have led to outdated policies.



Courtesy of Daniel Chan

(From left to right) Lai, Zimmerman and Tanya Chan have been colleagues and friends. They work together to protect our precious heritage.



Courtesy of Daniel Chan

Zimmerman and other concerned citizens urge the Hong Kong government to protect Tai Long Sai Wan’s natural environment.

“We are only efficient in building roads and infrastructure but not other social aspects.” He wishes the government could have been more sensitive to the problems and tackled them earlier.

The community is not much better. He has observed a lack of effort in solving the problems that have led to our predicament.

Destruction of the environment and over-development is repeated over and over again: from Victoria Harbour, to Sai Kung’s Tai Long Sai Wan and Hoi Ha Wan, but the city never unites to fight against the threat.

“People have to do something.”

Zimmerman fears that by the time the pain is too great to bear and the community finally decides to speak out, it will be too late. “We should not only focus on political reform,” he says.

He himself is man of action rather than just words. Zimmerman helped to

halt the redevelopment of the Seaview Building in Repulse Bay which would see part of Repulse Bay beach become a private area.

He also campaigned against a proposed section of the Route 4 Highway that would run along the coast and impact on the Pokfulam waterfront and took part in efforts to preserve Kin Yin Lei. Campaigners forced the government to strike a deal with the owner of the 73-year-old mansion by offering an alternative plot of land.

Apart from his energy and enthusiasm in fighting for the causes he believes in, friends say it is the willingness to engage in and win over opponents that makes Zimmerman an effective agent for change.

Albert Lai Kwong-tak first became friends with Zimmerman when they joined forces to defend Victoria Harbour. Lai is the vice-chairman of the Civic Party and the current chairman of The Professional Commons.

His experience as an engineer and veteran of the environmental movement allowed him to raise concerns about the controversial Express Rail Link and provide a professional alternative proposal.

Lai says Zimmerman always conducts thorough research and never stops trying to convince the opposition to change their mind, no matter how diverse and far apart are their beliefs initially.

Lai linked Zimmerman up with the Civic Party to not only promote a more democratic political system, but also to advocate for a better utilization of Hong Kong’s resources to serve the people’s interests.

“Zimmerman is exactly the right person to be the catalyst to speed up the process of empowering people, and to be a decoder who can explain complicated

issues as understandable ideas,” says Lai. “This may, in the end, get people involved in the city’s development.”

He certainly has his work cut out for him. Zimmerman says he has no plans to step up his political participation and contest a seat in the Legislative Council because of the restrictions on legislators’ nationalities. But he hopes to serve the Pokfulam district for another three or four terms.

On top of that, he is studying for a master’s degree in Transport Policy and Planning at the University of Hong Kong and continues his work with Designing Hong Kong. In all the areas of his work and study, he will remain focused on better and more sustainable infrastructure planning and making Hong Kong a greener, more livable city.

Despite his limited Cantonese, Zimmerman is not worried about a cultural gap with his colleagues and constituents, “To me it’s not a barrier. I have lived here for 26 years.” He points out that his family, his staff and members of the groups he works with are all Chinese.

He has everything he needs here, family, friends, business and recognition. “Hong Kong is going to be my place forever,” he says.

He still visits the Netherlands once a year. And every year, during Christmas, members of the Zimmerman family, who reside around the world, in Switzerland, the



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A picture of his new-born daughter is Zimmerman’s computer wallpaper.



Courtesy of Daniel Chan

Zimmerman’s family is a great support in all things.

USA, Hong Kong and the Netherlands, will meet and catch up with each other somewhere around in the world.

“If you do not have a healthy relationship with your family, you cannot persevere with anything,” he says, with his eyes trained on a computer screen showing a photograph of his infant daughter. And for a moment the busy rookie district councillor, seasoned green campaigner and former entrepreneur is just a proud father. ▣

