

In Atlantic City, the widow vs. the real-estate mogul



Associated Press / ALLEN OLIVER

"If they give me a good price, I'll sell now," Vera Coking says of her Atlantic City house. It has been eyed by casinos for years.

TRUMP from A1
"He did it," she said of Trump. Nobody else is doing it but him. How could it be a blight? How could it? How could it do all that damage? I did it? I went upstairs and broke everything down? He did it, but he doesn't want to admit it."

The trial yesterday only hinted at the real battle going on between Trump and Coking: the so-far unsuccessful attempt by the state to seize her property and two others by power of eminent domain and give them to Trump to use as part of his casino expansion.

In the New Jersey Supreme Court, Coking is now challenging the use of eminent domain to benefit a private developer, a case that has drawn national attention and the assistance of a Washington public-interest law firm, the Institute for Justice.

The issue is perhaps the most volatile in the city, where people who hoped to improve their lives by investing in casinos 20 years ago have instead lost their homes or businesses to casinos and casino-related projects.



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Glenn Zeitz, (left) attorney for Vera Coking, questions Donald Trump during a hearing yesterday in Atlantic City.

Next week, the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority is expected to adopt new regulations regarding condemnations that place a bigger burden on casinos that want to absorb neighboring properties.

Glenn Zeitz, Coking's attorney, said he will fight to have those new regulations applied to Coking's case, despite the CRDA's contention that the new rules are not retroactive. He says the fact that Trump com-

pleted the \$55 million expansion of Trump Plaza Hotel & Casino without acquiring Coking's home proves that her home is not essential to their project.

Yesterday, Zeitz had hoped to show that Trump and his contractor did not properly safeguard her house during the demolition of the adjacent structure because they assumed they would be acquiring the property and tearing it down.

But Superior Court Judge John G. Himmelberger refused to let in any reference to Trump's desire to acquire the house or to the other ongoing court battle. As a result, the testimony focused mainly on whether Trump and Iaconelli Contracting Inc. were responsible for an estimated \$126,000 in damage to her house during the 1993 demolition of the adjacent structure.

Scott Lazar, attorney for Trump and Iaconelli, contends the damage predates the demolition. Trump went even further, saying he believes Coking purposely keeps her house in a "slumlike" condition.

"The uglier it is, the more pressure it is on us or the CRDA to pay more money because it is a blight on Atlantic City," he said.

For the most part, Coking watched impassively. Occasionally, she shook her head or whispered to her daughter when Trump said something she disagreed with. Her daughter, Barbara Torpey, was visibly upset by the proceedings as she leaned forward in her seat. "I just want to get a good look at the man who wrecked our lives," she said.

The eight-member jury was shown a videotape taken before the demolition in which the contractors say debris and cracks are visible on the house.

Trump testified that he thought Iaconelli did a good job and took all necessary precautions. "He was extremely safety-conscious," Trump said.

Zeitz asked him how often he visited the site during demolition and said that the first time was to allow the media to take pictures. Trump denied that was the reason, but said the unfinished Penthouse site was a blight that needed to come down. "It should have been a photo op," he said.

"That's been your feeling about her property as well," Zeitz responded, as Trump's attorney objected. Trump just shrugged.

"She got here 35 years before you did," Zeitz said, again to objections. Under questioning by his own



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The former boardinghouse Vera Coking owns, in the shadow of Trump Plaza. Another casino owner shrouded her house in steel. She's suing Donald Trump for damages in tearing down the steel.