

The Greenbelt News Review at the Supreme Court



Elaine Skolnik and Barbara Skolnik, wife and daughter of Alfred Skolnik, smile on the steps of the Supreme Court building following the resolution of the case. Greenbelt News Review, photograph by Earl Zubkoff

In May, 1970, the Greenbelt News Review made history by advancing the cause of freedom of the press. In a unanimous 8-0 decision, the U. S. Supreme Court reversed the \$17,000 libel judgment against the Greenbelt News Review awarded to developer Charles S. Bresler as a result of a Prince George's County jury verdict in January, 1968. The verdict had been upheld by the Maryland Court of Appeals in May 1968.

The case began in July 1966, when Bresler sued the Greenbelt News Review and its president Alfred M. Skolnik, for \$2 million. The main issue in the case involved the publication by the News Review of remarks made by citizens at two city council meetings in October 1968. Citizens characterized as "blackmail" a proposal of the developer that sought city support for rezoning one tract of land at higher density in exchange for making available at an acceptable price another piece of property for a senior high school site.

The lawsuit further charged that the newspaper exposed Bresler "to public scorn, hatred, contempt,

disgrace and ridicule" and denigrated him "in esteem and opinion of the residents of the City of Greenbelt and the State of Maryland."

The Greenbelt community formed the Freedom of the Press Committee, co-chaired by Charles Schwan and Albert Herling, and raised over \$30,000. The Washington Post recommended its own law firm to defend the News Review. Roger A. Clark and David Reich, represented the News Review. Bresler hired Abraham Chasanow, a respected Greenbelt attorney and realtor, to represent him.

In the decision rendered by Justice Potter Stewart, the court held "that as a matter of constitutional law, the word "blackmail" in these circumstances was not slander when spoken, and not libel when reported in the News Review. Thus ended the nearly four-year ordeal suffered by Greenbelt's volunteer cooperative community newspaper.

Sandra A. Lange
News Review Volunteer for 46 years