

Leah Remini joins forces with a political campaign that threatens the power of Scientology in Clearwater, Fla. **BY MICHAEL GIOIA**

CLEANING UP CLEARWATER

THE WAR AGAINST SCIENTOLOGY IS ON

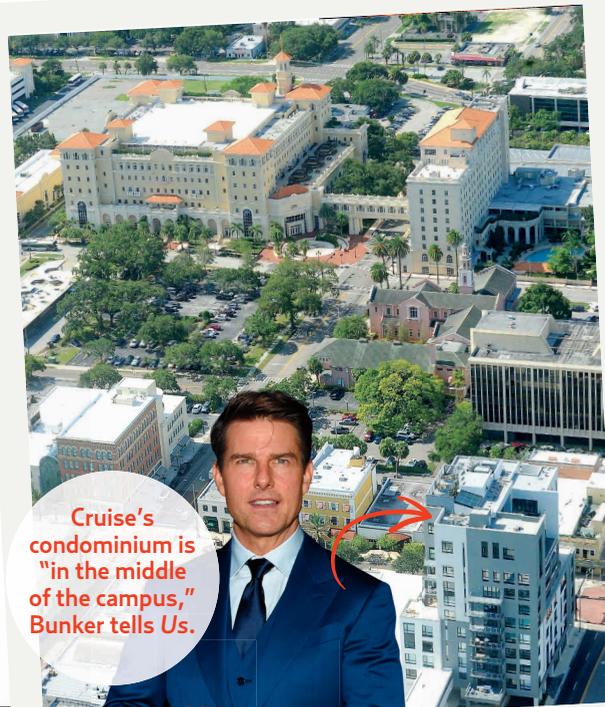
Just blocks from the Church of Scientology's worldwide spiritual headquarters in the heart of downtown Clearwater, Fla., Tom Cruise — the church's most high-profile member — will move into a 10-story condominium. Over the past three years, Scientology has doubled its footprint in the city as a \$64.5 million project to overhaul the downtown area takes shape.

But before Clearwater invests in what's considered the global hub for the controversial religion, questions are being raised

— and one of Scientology's most outspoken critics is determined to bring residents' concerns to the forefront. Mark Bunker, who's been endorsed by former church member Leah Remini, is after a seat on the City Council in the upcoming March 17 election. The journalist tells *Us* that when it comes to the multimillion-dollar Imagine Clearwater project, he won't let the city take a "gamble" on a neighborhood that's driving everyone away.

MAKING WAVES

Bunker, 63, is one of 13



Cruise's condominium is "in the middle of the campus," Bunker tells *Us*.



"It's so important to have [the support of] somebody like Leah," Bunker tells *Us*.

candidates running for the three seats up for grabs in the upcoming election. "If it weren't for me," he explains, "Scientology would not be discussed at all in this race." (See box for other prospective council members who've taken a stance on the influential organization.) And if elected to the council's second seat, Bunker plans to help those who claim to "have been abused or defrauded" by the church. The church has repeatedly and vehemently denied all claims of misconduct and unlawful practice.

"I'm not attacking a religion," Bunker says. "I'm attacking these practices that are not faith-based." At the top of his list is persuading the IRS and FBI to further investigate the church's tax-exempt status, which was granted in 1993. While the church says they're "the largest taxpayer in downtown Clearwater and have been for decades," former Scientologist Aaron Smith-Levin, 39, tells *Us*, "If they

didn't have exempt status, Clearwater would be generating up to \$17 million a year in tax revenue." Most importantly, Bunker wants Clearwater residents to feel safe. "There's got to be a way to curb these abuses," he says, explaining that he's heard accounts of Scientologists being dragged back to headquarters by church security after desperate attempts to escape.

A-LIST ALLY

In Bunker's corner is a critical force: Remini, who's been exposing what she calls the organization's toxic tactics since she left. When the actress, 49, met Bunker, she was "a loyal and dedicated Scientologist." However, she says, "Though I was supposed to hate Mark, I couldn't. Mark believes it is important to stand up for those who can't do it for themselves. What greater quality could there be for an elected representative? I know Mark will not take a payout to be silent." **US**

MEET SOME POTENTIAL CANDIDATES



Mark Bunker

Bunker's made it a point to bring down Scientology, saying: "I needed to jump into the race to try to make a difference," adding that he moved here in 2000 to help those affected by the controversial religion.



Michael Mannino

Up against Bunker for the second seat, the Clearwater native thinks the relationship between the church and the city has been "built on a fragile foundation of mistrust, dishonesty and a lack of communication."



Morton Myers

Myers, who's running for mayor, has ties to the church, as his father and brothers are part of Scientology's Sea Org. Regardless, Myers insists to *Us*, "I am not running for them."