



The Fort Myers Beach **TIDELINES**

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Edition

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REDUCING PROPERTY TAXES:

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By: Lee Melsek
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TWO LOCAL HEROES

By Lee Melsek

Thankfully, some folks are willing to stand up to the power brokers and tell them when they're wrong. We have a couple of such people here on our island. If there was a contest for local heroes I'd nominate both of them.

Joanne Shamp and Frank Schilling took on the power structure of this county and beat it to smithereens. They turned back not only the town government but also the county and the federal governments as well. And they did it without a big budget or an army of volunteers.

They dug in and dug up the truth about the county's horribly flawed beach renourishment plan for our island, one that would have pumped in new sand where it isn't needed, required public access onto private property and cost taxpayers at least \$12 million.

Joanne, an aspiring artist and retired businesswoman who ran her own business making artificial limbs and orthopedic braces, owns a home on the Gulf. She's smart, tireless and demonstrated amazing tolerance by ignoring the snide attacks aimed at her as she stayed focused on her mission. It was Joanne who a few years ago returned from a renourishment seminar with news of newer, higher tech ways of maintaining beaches. But the politicians gave her the cold shoulder, refusing to consider anything other than the very expensive and disruptive way it had always been done. Now, years later, the town is finally willing to look at that new technology.



Joanna Shamp

Frank, a grandfatherly looking gentleman who seems comfortable around anyone, once ran General Electric corporation's international medical equipment plants. Politicians and their pals attacked him as someone who didn't know what he was doing. They had no idea of the degree of intelligence they were up against until it was

too late.

The local politicians and their partner, the Army Corp. of Engineers, ended up beaten and bloodied by this most unlikely duo of bodacious bulldogs. A barrage of political promises to get the project done crashed and burned after a flurry of Shamp-Schilling visits to land owners who were being pestered by politicians to sign easements across their property.

Undaunted by the government's refusal to listen to them, Frank and Joanne knocked on doors and sent letters to those owners warning them of the serious threats to private property rights and the unnecessary expenditures in the county's plan.

Frank sent repeated letters to the more than 100 property owners whose Gulf front land would be affected by the county's plan. He paid for the stamps himself.



Frank Schilling

Joanne became a researcher, scrutinizing each pronouncement by town, county and federal officials and digging up the facts that disputed much of it.

For years, these two fearless warriors persisted despite enduring nasty allegations from the plan's political backers and their pals. Former Vice Mayor Herb Acken suggested they should be arrested. County Commissioner Ray Judah took to the newspapers to as much as call them liars. His bumbling bureaucrat, Steve Boutelle, the man who fashioned the ill advised plan and failed for 10 years to sell it, time and again failed to overcome the pair's disturbing revelations about the plan.

In the end, Shamp and Schilling turned back the project and won the day for the island's tax payers. And proved once again you can beat city hall. And county hall. And the federal government.

GOODBYE TO A FRIEND

Blanche Santini Townley Lee died recently. She was an icon here, the first woman born on the island and an early businesswoman when men dominated the island's business world.

Her Husband, Doc Townley, and his parents, were in the shrimp business with my dad. There were lots of good times throughout the fifties with those shrimping industry folks. Parties on the beach and listening to Blanche spin stories of the thirties and forties on a tropical island of few people. Her sons are carrying on their family tradition, owners of Sanibel Seafood.

Blanche was on the board of directors of the Estero Island Historic Society when I was president of that

organization in the early part of this decade. Whenever I would trip over a fact of island history Blanche would quickly correct my misspeak. And she always did it delicately, reminding me that I was simply too young to remember whatever it was I misspoke. I always liked it when she said I was too young.

I'll miss her. Lots of folks who knew her will. Her sister, Fran, is still here, full of great stories and facts about this island's earlier days. She's the same treasure trove of history Blanche represented.

Hopefully, there will always be a Santini here to keep our history accurate.

CODE OFFICERS CLEANING UP THE STREETS

By Lee Melsek

Slowly but surely more businesses and condos are beginning to comply with the town's decade old dumpster law.

But some continue to stubbornly ignoring both the law and the town's notices of violations.

The law, which requires dumpsters to be hidden from view, was ignored by property owners and the town for years. But after a Tidelines investigation in February 2009 revealed that a total of 82 businesses and condos were ignoring the law with dumpsters that were littering our roadsides and neighborhoods town officials finally began taking notice. An attempt to go after the violators earlier this year was interrupted when the town's then-code enforcement officer left.

The town has since hired to new enforcement officers who have vigorously pursued the law. By the time they got here some had moved or shielded their dumpsters. But others continued to ignore the law.

As a result, town Code Enforcement Officers Shane Hidle and Elmer Toro sent out 33 notices of violations in early September. They've gotten responses from about 10 of those violators who now plan to comply. A number of other businesses and condos had earlier begun the permitting process to build fences around their dumpsters.

"We're getting cleaned up," Hidle said.

Meanwhile, about 24 other property owners have not responded to the letters and Hidle says he may be taking owners of those properties before the town's Magistrate late this month. The town's codes call for fines of up to

\$250 a day. Special Magistrate Joe Madden of Fort Myers determines the fines.

Among those who have recently complied or are in the process of seeking permits for fences the Shamrock Irish Pub, Matanzas Restaurant, Wachovia Bank's south end branch and the liquor store at the Topps parking lot, whose dumpsters had been sitting for years on the side of the street.

Among those still not in compliance but are talking with Hidle about permits are the Yucatan Grill, Hooters, the county-owned dumpsters at Bowditch Point. Those who are in the process of getting permits will have until November to get them. After that they can be fined.

A number of condos along Estero Boulevard as well as the Beach Medical Clinic and McDonald have not responded to the letters of violations.

Hidle is also busy enforcing the town law requiring lids on top of cans put on the road for pickup. He's also issuing warnings to those who put cans the roadsides days before pickup. The law prohibits cans from being on the road prior to 24 hours before pickup.

The town is also aggressively going after owners of abandoned and foreclosed homes and lots that are overgrown with weeds and vermin and are considered nuisance properties. Hidle is sending notice of violations to banks and other companies that now own the foreclosed homes. The unkempt, nuisance properties may be lowering the property values of nicely kept properties that are for sale next to them.

OUR MISSION

The Fort Myers Beach Civic Association is the island's largest home-based organization. Our mission is to make Fort Myers Beach the finest community in the Sunshine State. We do that with a single minded commitment to protect the environment, promote civic pride, support our town's comprehensive plan and vigorously insist on accountability in our town government. We are a non-profit association, have no affiliations with special interest groups and exist only to benefit all of the residents of our island.



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TOWN EXPLORING LOCAL SALES TAX IDEA

Town Manger Terry Stewart is exploring a local option sales tax, a move he says could significantly reduce town property taxes.

Stewart told Tidelines he believes an additional sales tax of either a half cent or one cent on each dollar could "significantly reduce" our property taxes. He has quietly gotten council permission to at least explore the idea.

The idea of a town sales tax has triggered a full range of passions on the island in the past.

Over the years some business people voiced strong opposition to such a tax. But during discussion of it by the town council in 2006 officials with the Lee County tourism bureau said such a tax would not hurt tourism. Stewart has told Tidelines that bureau now is researching the idea.

But creating the additional sales tax could be difficult. State law requires the referendum leading to approval of such a tax. The county would then receive the tax and dole it out to municipalities according to their populations. Although our town's population swells to more than 42,000 in the winter months, the town's permanent population of 7,000 residents would be the basis for how much the county could return to the town.

Stewart said he was told at a recent taxation seminar he and some council members attended that there may be another way to create a sales tax for the town through special legislation of the state Legislature. He said he is having the attorney's look into that. If that fails, he said, he may continue the quest anyway.

Twenty counties in Florida have initiated an extra half cent to one cent in its sales taxes. The money can be used only for certain expenses, largely for infrastructure such as water and sewer operations, roads, sidewalks and schools.

Stewart said he'd like to get an idea of how much revenue the tax could bring to the town.

"We'll do an analysis. We'll get data from the state on what's already being generated here. I want to see what the return would be. I suspect it would be substantial. We should also look at an extra penny on our town's bed tax," he said.

The bed tax is paid by visitors at hotels and is controlled by the county. Those collections also can only be spent on tourist related items such as beaches and beach maintenance.

Continued on Page 5



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wasn't included!*

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SALES TAX DEBATE: "IT WILL WORK: NO IT WON'T"

The issue has raised the full spectrum of passions - from anger to applause - among residents and business people.

Boback, the former mayor, is a huge supporter of a town sales tax, but only if it replaced the town's property taxes.

"A sales tax would bring in more money than we ever will with property taxes. With that extra money we can do a lot of enhancements to this town in infrastructure repairs that are good for business and for the residents.

But Boback said he'll only support a sales tax provided property owners are assured it will replace the town's share of property taxes.

"If all they do is do a sales tax and reduce the property taxes that isn't good enough because they'll just raise the tax again later,"

Boback said a sales tax wouldn't hurt tourism on the island at all.

"The tourists aren't going to squawk over a penny sales tax. It's a shame some business people don't see how good a sales tax could be for this island. But any referendum on this would have to say that the town property tax would be done away with. Any little bit of tax relief is well deserved in this economy," Boback said.

Former Mayor Anita Cereceda, once an opponent of a sales tax, now says she might support it if there a guarantee of lower property taxes. Cereceda, a Times Square businesswoman, now says she might support such an idea if property owners were guaranteed lower property taxes as a result.

"I would want to know that there would be some mechanism in place to assure that the revenue would replace or lower the property taxes. Otherwise, I would be afraid we'd just grow the government some more.

Stewart said he isn't willing to say a sales tax should replace the town's property taxes, only that it could reduce those taxes.

"It's not wise to do anything with the property taxes but if there is a significant collection in a town sales tax it could reduce the property taxes. I desire to have diversity in our revenues," Stewart said.

Boback's former colleague on the council, Bill Shenko, disagrees with Boback, claiming a sales tax would simply be means for government to squander more money.

"There's not a chance in hell it will reduce what government takes out of our pockets now," Shenko said. "It will never happen. All it means is more money for our government to figure out how to squander. It's the nature of government."

We're still growing

The Fort Myers Beach Civic Association's membership numbers 250 households and well over 500 individual members. We mail Tidelines to each of those households and also to the five town councilmen, the five Fort Myers Beach Fire District Commissioners and the five Lee County Commissioners.

We Also put Tidelines in 30 beach businesses for distribution to the general public.

New memberships are coming in all the time and the board of directors hopes to reach 600 members by this winter. Our membership is open to all Fort Myers Beach Residents and Families. If you would like to join an organization whose members are diverse, civic minded and entergetic as volunteers please fill out the membership form at the bottom of this page and send a check for \$25. That's all there it to it.

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By Lee Melsek

The Board of Directors of the Fort Myers Beach Civic Association has decided to endorse candidates for our island's local public offices. We begin this month with our three members of our fire board.

Our board believes that since the organization watches and provides critical oversight of the town government and the fire district, it seemed logical that we interview and recommend the people we believe can do the best job of guiding those agencies.

Most voters don't get the opportunity to spend time with candidates, quiz them on the important issues and get the answers. Our board accomplished that by assigning a committee of its members to do those interviews

and get those answers. The committee then presented those answers to the full board, which selected the endorsements.

Only commission seat five candidate Flip Harby declined our invitation to be interviewed. Seat three candidate Al Agathon failed to show up for his scheduled interview.

We will interview the candidates for the March elections of three town council seats in February.

The following fire commission endorsements are merely recommendations to the voters based on the answers we believe best serve our island's interests.

END BACKROOM SECRECY AT THE FIRE DISTRICT

Beach Fire District commissioner Carol Morris deserves another four year term on a board that otherwise needs cleaning out.

Morris has tried admirably to cut costs and taxes at this costly public agency and has brought critical oversight to a board that otherwise crafts budgets in cloak-room privacy.

It's a shame that her ally on the board, Joe Schmid, has chosen not to seek another term. But candidate Ted Schindler is our pick for Schmid's seat. He appears ready to help Morris clean up the mess that outgoing commissioner Ted Reckwerdt and Commissioners Betty Goodacre and John Scanlon have created. Neither Goodacre nor Scanlon are up for election this year.



Carol Morris

Morris and Schindler have been offered help in their campaigns by the firefighters. Troy Messick, the district's union representative, told Tidelines he and other firefighters have offered to help Morris and Schindler in their campaigns because they feel the two can best do the things that need being done to build a better department.

Morris is a retired logistics expert in military supplies within the Department of Defense who moved here in 2002. She wants to revamp the department's pay scales, trim the size of the department by not replacing those who leave and keep the department vehicles longer than 60,000 miles, as is currently being done. It was Morris who joined Schmid last month in attempting to trim the department's \$14.3 million budget but were stonewalled by the other three commissioners.

Morris also wants to save tax dollars by making employees pay part of their health insurance premiums, an action many private employers have been doing for decades. And she wants much more commission involvement and public exposure in preparing the department budget. She also wants to begin competitive bidding for fire trucks and other expensive equipment. She would

also change the department's long habit of charging for ambulance rides to the hospital, accepting only what the insurance company or Medicare pay for the ride rather than dun the patient for the entire bill.

Her opponent, Al Agathon, didn't show up for a scheduled interview with our board's committee. He also didn't call to say he wouldn't be there. We have to wonder if that's the way he'd conduct himself as a fire commissioner.

We like all of Morris' positions. Seat 5 Candidate Schindler has many of the same ideas.

Schindler is a certified financial planner and small business owner who has lived here for 10 years. He's a retired Air Force Command pilot who served in both Viet Nam and Desert Storm.

Schindler says it's time to use competitive bidding in the purchase of expensive vehicles. He also wants to

begin discussions on consolidating purchasing and other functions with other fire districts to save money. That's a dialogue that needs much more attention paid to it. He also wants much more transparency in budget preparations and a much more in-depth look at cost cutting.



Ted Schindler

will pay and not the exorbitant sums that too many of our residents and visitors are currently stuck with.

His opponents are Keith Szperski and Flip Harby. Szperski is an accountant and nice guy who has to travel all the time in his consulting business. He said if he doesn't have a job locally by mid October he plans to pull out of the race. Harby is also a Viet Nam veteran and former fire commissioner who lost his bid for reelection. He declined our request to be interviewed and give us his views on what's needed at the department.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

By Lee Melsek

The Good

Our new park: Grass and sand, picnic tables, no fence

Lee County Parks manager Barbara Manzo said the new park at Times Square will get some grass and sand but a rumored fence around the land will not be built.

Manzo told Tidelines her first priority is to make the property safe. That means repairing the top of the seawall along the shoreline end of the park and removing busted building material that is lying just below the land's surface. She said the county also has to put in a couple of handicapped parking spaces on what is now the asphalt end of the property and a handicapped path from the land to the shore.

Manzo said getting the permits for those jobs should not take long but she doesn't know at this point how long it will take to make all the repairs.

Mayor Larry Kiker claimed during a council meeting in August that the county would walk away from the park after opening it.

Manzo sharply denied that.

"That is absolutely untrue," Manzo said. "It is a regional county park and it will be maintained as such, just as we take care of our other beaches. First I have to make it safe for people to use. We cannot open the way it is," she said.

Meanwhile, at the county's other new property across the street at Seafarers Village, the plan was to knock down the building and put in a ground level parking lot. But that plan may be on hold. Kiker has been upset with the county, believing officials there haven't worked close enough with the town to plan either side of the street.

Kiker has also suggested running a third lane on Estero Boulevard through the new park's perimeter along the boulevard.

The county finally closed on both parcels on Sept. 15.

Kiker also has suggested the town purchase the building. But three council members, Tom Babcock, Jo List and Bob Raymond have balked at the idea. Raymond said he'd take it only if the county gives it to the town. Kiker said the town would want \$1 million for it.

The county used tourist tax money, much of which comes from our island, to buy the new park and Seafarers.

The Bad

Once again, three members of our island's Fire District Commissioners stonewalled attempts to make deeper cuts in the department's budget. Twenty two people were there to protest the higher tax rates and a bulging, \$14.3 million budget. Only two people stood up to defend the commission.

"New blood is needed on this board," island resident Tom Cameron told the three commissioners who have shown no intention of spending public meetings taking critical looks at the spending. They obviously talked details and made their decisions one-on-one behind close doors with the chief and the finance director.

There was an insinuation by one defender of the board that the protesters were being anti-firefighter. But none of the budget protester said anything to suggest they don't like firefighters. On the contrary, they all aimed their wrath straight at the three elected officials who stonewalled commissioners Carol Morris and Joe Schmid's attempt to cut more fat from the budget. It is Betty Goodacre, Ted Reckwerdt and John Scanlan, not the firefighters, who are generating the heat from many of the island's taxpayers.

Most of the audience argued that too much of that budget has nothing to do with fighting fires or saving lives. Continuing to pay 100 percent of not only the active firefighters' health insurance premiums but also the retired firefighters' as well has nothing to do with fighting fires and saving lives.

The Ugly

Stimulus money paints us blue.

How's this for the haves and have nots:

The town of Marco Island has received \$25 million in federal stimulus dollars. They plan to build a new bridge to their town with the money.

And how much stimulus money will our town be getting? Just enough to buy a few gallons of blue paint.

That's right. Florida Department of Transportation officials say they'll use stimulus dollars to buy the paint to paint our sky bridge blue. That's it. That's all our island will be getting in stimulus funds.

The federal dollars are passed to the state which passes them to the counties to be passed to the various communities. Turns out that because Lee County didn't have a single project in the works for our island we didn't qualify for the stimulus money.

Those who have followed our island's relationship with the county for a long time know that isn't surprising. Our representatives on the Lee County Commission have a history of doing little to nothing for our island.

OPPPS. I WAS WRONG

I said in in Septembers For The Record column that there are no public beach accesses to the Gulf between Lynn Hall Park and Bowditch Point Park.

Turns out there are a couple. I missed that because the signs announcing those public accesses were taken down six months ago or more by the folks fixing the road and weren't put back up. I apologize for the error.



Valerie VanSelow
Kathy VanSelow

Valerie's

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