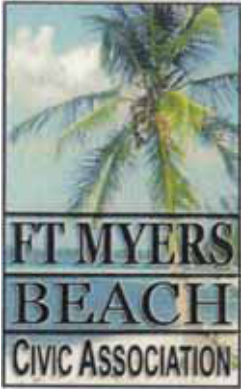


VOTE TUESDAY, MARCH 8TH KOSINSKI, LIST, RAYMOND



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TIDELINES

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RESCUE MISSION

**As our Fire Department spirals toward bankruptcy,
three Commissioners offer tough reforms**

By Lee Melsek

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For the RECORD **OPINION**

THESE LEADERS MUST ALTER THE FUTURE

By Lee Melsek

Our new majority on the fire board is facing a dismal future, one thrust upon all of us by prior boards that never saw a toy they couldn't afford, never saw a department payroll they couldn't pad.

Unless the toughest of tough decisions are made, and made fast, our fire and ambulance services will be broke in the next two to three years. This dismal future now is theirs to have to alter.

It won't be easy. If they bite the bullet and cut the salaries, benefits and other expenses that have soared to unbelievable highs, they will surely be pummeled by the union and its apologists. They are convinced its members should be paid and cared for in much greater style than our island's average guys and gals laboring for less while paying the bills the union gobbles.

If the new majority doesn't bite that bullet, the department goes bankrupt, angering everyone.

One of the best reasons for some tough reform is etched coldly on the financials of the department's payroll records. There are now more than 20 of the 50 employees making more than \$100,000 a year in salary and benefits, thanks to former boards that never learned how to utter the word no. They are making those wages in the second smallest of the county's 17 fire districts. Not so long ago beach firefighters were the second highest paid among those 18. Bonita has the highest paid employees in a district with far greater tax base than ours.

If you're going to grovel, get something

Our Town Council's annual pilgrimage to the county's trough didn't travel far this year - only to our Bay Oaks Recreation Center where the county commission's five exalted exchequers had agreed to plant their keesters for a two hour joint meeting in our town's latest Groveling for Dollars show.

This year, the council asked the five wise ones from east of our bridge to hand over to us their two county parks - Bowditch and Lynn Hall. Their leader, Frank Mann, seemed conciliatory to such a notion. A reasonable request from such humble subjects, he seemed to feel as he verbally patted their heads. His sidekicks gestured politely at the council's five outstretched hands thrust in front of them. A few inane but obligatory questions ensued as hope danced in the heads of our council.

Great, our council left believing. We may get those parks for our own, they thought. This may finally be our year to actually receive something, their supporters felt.

Alas, yet another mirage in a long line of such illusions. Not long after that meeting Mann, and his jester, Ray Judah, were telling islanders privately what they had

mercifully withheld from the town's dancing bears - no chance, no way.

And the Great Pretense from the five city slickers east of our Eden continues.

Plurality elections: A mindless way to pick councils

Turns out the annual Shrimp Festival Queen's contest isn't the only beauty contest on our island. Our council elections essentially amount to the same thing.

That's because the Boback-Meador-Shenko council of four or so years ago made a terrible mistake in taking the issues out of council campaigns and replacing them with little more than empty popularity contests. In all fairness, Boback warned against it, but he was out numbered.

By ending elections for specific seats we also ended debates. Challengers no longer have to challenge incumbents. They simply have to say elect me, I love our island and I served on a committee. There no longer is any competition of ideas. And isn't debating and exchanging ideas how you get better government?

There's no need to utter a word, nary a word, on what their plans are for solving our biggest problems or spending our hard earned tax dollars or running the small government envisioned by the voters who made us a town. Where did you hear even one of those things being discussed in this election?

Plurality doesn't work, not if you still believe in real debate, in real exchanges of ideas, in real contests that match opposing beliefs on how to run a government. Plurality destroys all of that and creates nothing more than a contest of empty slogans.

And that's pretty much all we got in this election.

The government you elect is the government you deserve, Jefferson said.

An icon of satire and the newspaper business, H.L. Mencken, put it much better. "People get the government they deserve, and they get it good and hard."

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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.

REDUCE SALARIES AND MANPOWER, CLOSE A STATION

By Ted Schindler
Beach Fire Commissioner

When I was running for this position I knew the financial situation was dire, but now that I am a commissioner, I can really see that "dire" may be a sugar coated assessment.

Right now it looks like we can make it two years before we're bankrupt, give or take a few months. Anyone who has looked at our financials will also know that we are driven by manpower costs. They represent around 80% of our budget. The district was able to enjoy a surplus for years and during the property tax hay days it was easy to save even when spending was not really controlled. Not unlike many personal household budgets in recent years. Previous free-spending boards are responsible for our condition, but that is water under the bridge.

Making things worse, our income is much lower now and will not significantly increase for many years, while expenses are almost the same or larger.

The obvious target for fiscal change is the manpower segment, but the rest cannot be ignored as it heavily contributed to our present dilemma. On the manpower issue to reduce costs we have several options of which none are really stand alone. Combinations of them should be looked at.

The choices, as I see it, are, number one, pay cuts for firefighters, management and staff. Two, have the firefighters contribute to retirement and other perks with their own funds. To make the latter more palatable, cafeteria type plans can be used where pre-tax dollars are used to fund the medical and other benefits. Three, reduce staffing.

Actual pay cuts would ideally be handled by attrition (retirement of firefighters) and hiring replacements at a lower scale. The adoption of a lower pay scale would "encourage" many senior folks to retire soon. This would provide the opportunity to hire more at the lower scale. I think that firefighters deserve high wages and benefits, but they must be commensurate with the private sector and current financial situations. Anyone who has the job requirement to go into a burning building, etc. and risk their life needs to be compensated accordingly.

However, beyond what we can do as the commission is how the retired pay calculations are done. They are made on total pay to include overtime. I believe that this should be calculated on base salary only. The military, who risk their lives as well, do this. Combat pay, flying pay, housing allowances, etc. are not used in figuring retirement compensation, only the base pay. This must be handled at state level, but it must be done. Remember that part of personnel payroll expense is retirement contributions that comes out of the district's budget.

The other way to cut expenses is to reduce the number of employees. This would entail a reduction of firefighters below the recommended standard of 15 (basically our present level).

The magic fifteen is based on what is needed to fight a

fire. Our calls for "real fires" are almost non-existent, so we must find a way to handle the fires if we reduce the manpower. Agreements with surrounding districts should be able to cover this. We survived for years here on the beach with less than the recommended fifteen.

One station closure would reduce our payroll costs by almost a third that is the kind of savings we need to avoid bankruptcy. Furthermore, if we can couple a reduced salary structure to the manpower reduction, we can have long term survivability.

The oldest station (31) is the obvious choice, but rather than complete closing, I suggest we look at keeping it as an ambulance station only during season. This way we can handle 99% of our calls, which are non-fire, and keep our excellent response times intact.

During my campaign I spoke about selling the administration building and moving the staff to a remodeled station 31. While that can be done it is not a priority item right now. Station 31 would require considerable dollars to remodel and the parking dilemma would have to be overcome.

If we could run the district like a business without dealing with unions much could be done right away. But with the constraints we have and the need for union adoption of wage concessions, the station closing as a true fire station is most likely the one option that we can employ relatively quickly.

A use of pool of firefighters from the county is an option that should be looked into as a supplement to this proposed

lower manning lever. We must now do what prior boards have not really done. That is, continue to monitor and scrutinize all spending. We not only have to worry about avoiding bankruptcy, but we must also try to start building up reserves again so they can be used to eventually replace equipment on as a needed basis. We, of course, will be making every effort to extend the life of all of the equipment, but some items must eventually be replaced.

An option that I left out is higher taxation, I think we are taxed enough now and that a tax increase would be the last resort. I do see one way to increase funding from taxation without actually costing the taxpayer any additional burden - that is to try to get some "kick-back" from the county for the taxes they collect for county ambulance service. We obviously provide ambulance service and this is a sort of double taxation. Channeling some or all of the county's tax for ambulance service back to our district would be a win for the district and the taxpayers.

As you know I have been encouraging public input and welcome it electronically or in person at workshops and board meetings. The board does not have all the answers or ideas, we need the public input. We have so many retired folks in the area who have expertise and experience in the public and private sectors, it is a travesty if we did not solicit their help.

Contact me if you have any questions or comments. My



Ted Schindler
Beach Fire Commissioner

REDUCE OVERTIME, SHARE ADMINISTRATIVE RESOURCES

By Carol Morris
Beach Fire District Chairman

Our department currently runs on about an 80/20 percent for personnel costs versus general operating costs. This makes it obvious that the biggest cutbacks need to occur in the personnel costs. But we should not lose sight that there are ways to cut the general operating costs also.

Unless we drastically raise ad valorem taxes for the residents, we will be bankrupt in a few years if the cuts do not occur. I am not in favor of putting the burden on our beach taxpayers who already pay more taxes than most other areas. I do not want to have to fire firefighters in an economy where money is tight and jobs are scarce. So then the question becomes, how do we do it?

We are currently under negotiations with the union and I believe both sides are looking at ways to cut the costs. I cannot discuss specifics while the negotiations are ongoing but I can say that for years we have been paying 100% of the health care costs for both the firefighters and their spouse and dependents which I have always stated needs to be changed. We spend too much money in overtime and that is an area that we need to fix.

The salaries of the firefighters have more than rapidly increased over the past ten years and that is due to the way we were giving them both promotions and educational incentives. Firefighter's salaries and other perks are much higher than many other high paying executives. So how do we actually make the cuts happen?

Pooling firefighter's

One suggestion from the public was to use a pool of county certified firefighters who want to work a second job and could be called to fill in vacancies needed by the various Lee county fire departments. If this could be set up, then we could fill our voids with regular pay rather than overtime. That could be a huge savings in our overtime bill. We have numerous firefighters who will probably be retiring in the next year. I do not want to hire to fill their positions.

I believe that we must find ways to fill our voids by either using the other nearby departments to help out when required, or to try something like this new pool of available firefighters. We may need to look at consolidating with one or more nearby fire departments if we cannot find enough ways to cut within our own department. I do not want us to consolidate into one gigantic lee county fire department as the News-Press has been touting for the past years. On the other hand, I think we could cut some costs through administrative consolidations. We all do procurements, have technology software, have financial specialists, do vehicle maintenance, provide health insurance, etc. It seems that we do not need 17 repetitive processes for all that we do and that we could do things better and for less money if we looked at the administrative consolidation of these functions.

But the Beach cannot do this without the cooperation

of the other districts. In the past we had a Commissioners Forum (members from all of the county's 18 fire district commissions) that met bi-monthly and accomplished next to nothing. A few of us are going to try to resurrect a commissioners forum with less social aspects and hopefully more business related items. Such a forum also would provide a means to exchange money saving ideas from one fire district to another.

As to our 20% operating costs in the budget, we need to look at all the expenses and see where we can cut back. Just because these costs are less than the 80% personnel costs is no excuse for us not to shave an equal percentage off those costs by taking the scalpel and doing the line item review.

Retrieve our county taxes

There is one other important area that we need to address. During season we at the beach get a lot more total calls because of the increased population much of which comes from people going to the beach for the day. Many of these calls are not coming from the beach residents that pay taxes and help support the beach fire department. They are coming from people renting on the beach where the hotel taxes go to the county to help support the new stadium, and from people here in season, not staying on the beach but coming to the beach. Again no taxes are going to the beach. Why should the beach have to increase its staff at its expense to support all the extra calls when the tax dollars are with the county.

Let's face it, the beach is what provides a lot of revenue to our county. We, the residents of the beach, already pay the county for EMS service and then pay the beach fire district for EMS service as well, I am not suggesting that we stop providing the EMS service but rather that we all start demanding that the county at least help us out in season either with money or personnel. When the department has asked in the past for assistance, the response was not very encouraging.

Let's stop asking and start demanding.



Carol Morris
Beach Fire District Chairman



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CUT WAGES, BENEFITS, NOT A STATION

By David Brower
Beach Fire Commissioner

This fiscal year the District will spend almost \$600,000 more than its expected revenue. They also spent more than it collected last year. If we stay the course this pattern will continue until the District runs out of spendable reserves.

At the beginning of Fiscal year 2011 we had \$1,255,000 in spendable reserves. Obviously, if we continue on the current path we will soon be insolvent.

A one percent decrease in property values as of January 1, 2011 would result in the District being virtually out of spendable funds sometime in fiscal year 2012. Even a one percent increase in values will have the same result although somewhat later in the year.

What caused this problem? Some say the drop in real estate values caused the problem. An analysis of past revenue patterns shows this is not true.

History of uncontrolled taxing and spending

In the fiscal year ended October 30, 2001 the District had ad valorem revenue of \$4,707,091. By the end of fiscal year ending October, 2007 the District was collecting extracting \$11,791,899 in taxes from its citizens. In this same time period the CPI rose 24% yet the tax burden of the District rose 150%.

Tax revenues for this fiscal year is budgeted to be \$7,961,097, approximately the same as 2004 and much more than any year preceding 2004.

Clearly, fire district property taxes have spiraled out of control and spending has followed suit.

By the nature of the service provided, labor costs for fire and rescue departments like ours are in the neighborhood of 80% of their budgets. For the Fiscal year ended October 30, 2003 labor costs totaled \$4,514,497. That amount exceed the total tax revenue of only three years earlier.

In spite of this obvious massive increase, labor costs continued to climb, reaching a high of \$8,424,498 in 2009. That was an increase of 87 percent, while the CPI rose only 21 percent. In other words, our department's labor costs rose at over four times the pace of the CPI.

For the fiscal year ended 2005 the district had 48 employees and five years later we had 53 employees. Even with this 10 percent growth in employees, costs have outstripped the CPI and numerical growth. To be consistent with CPI and numerical growth labor costs should have only risen 33%, instead they grew 2.64 times that rate. To the district's credit the numerical job growth was in the number of people who do the actual job of the department, firefighters and shift commanders.

For fiscal year 2011 the district has budgeted \$1,411,000 for what I characterize as unavoidable expenses, things such as insurance, utilities, communications, operating supplies etc. The District has virtually no control over the cost of

these items and very little control over the amount used. We have budgeted \$7,426,660 for personnel.

The remainder of the budget could be characterized as discretionary, but it is not really 100% discretionary as it is made up of things like legal fees, dues and subscriptions, continuing education and other. Things that cannot be eliminated in their entirety. In any case those things only amount to \$284,000. Even if it were possible to completely eliminate those costs the District will still be out of money. At some point in time these costs will need to be addressed but at this time these issues are only a distraction, it sounds good and it appears if something is being done, but in actuality nothing of any consequence is being nor is it any real help in addressing the dilemma facing the District.

Cut labor costs

Clearly the only way to save the District is to reduce labor costs, but how to reduce those costs. Many have expressed the District could save money by closing a station. Sure, that will save some money on electricity, water etc. but will it save any meaningful costs. Would it save labor costs by

laying off the personnel that staff that station?

The answer is no, even if we laid off everyone assigned to that station, the number of firefighters required per shift would remain unchanged. They would be housed in two buildings instead of three, resulting in an increased response time to certain areas of the community.

Staffing for the District is currently at 14 or 15 operational personnel per shift. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards suggests that 15 fire fighters are needed within the first eight minutes to adequately and safely handle a fire in a residential structure. The standard clearly indicates we are operating at minimum staffing. Closing a station will place taxpayers lives or

property in jeopardy.

Some believe a hiring freeze is in order. Implementing a hiring freeze does nothing other than to increase overtime cost should we fall below minimum staffing levels. We have discussed this both at meetings and workshops and my calculations indicate that the District could save money by adding extra employees to work the overtime we are currently expending for paid time off and other reasons.

The only currently viable, proven and existing methodology for the District to remain solvent is to reduce our cost per employee. The benefits package is well in excess of what is offered in the private sector.

The District is currently in negotiations with the unionized employees to reduce our per employee cost. The proposal is for pay and benefit cuts, while these cuts are not enjoyable for anyone involved in the process they will restore permanent long term financial security to the District. Our employees will still enjoy above average job security, pay and especially benefits.



David Brower
Beach Fire Commissioner



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In last month's Tidelines, Civic Association Board member Tom Cameron shared with all of us the problems he's been forced to deal with in living next door to a weekly rental home in his single family neighborhood.

It's a story too many other islanders have shared as their once-quiet single family neighborhoods turn into rowdy commercial districts of what are essentially motels.

Former long-time resident Martha Anderson told Tidelines before her death a few years ago that the one thing she wished would be corrected on the island where she raised her daughter since 1954 was the mistake of allowing weekly rentals in our single family neighborhoods.

"It's destroying the neighborhoods. Nobody knows their neighbors anymore," she said then.

She was right. And the problem too often has become the same from neighborhood to neighborhood:

Renters banging loud music through the walls of neighboring homes, throwing loud pool parties til the wee hours of the morning, parking cars in residents' front yards and on the street, barking dogs, putting garbage on the streets days before pickups, speeding down the streets and cramming more people into the homes than the places were meant to accommodate.

These things all are happening to Tom Cameron, and he lives in what is supposed to be a "quiet zone" where weekly rentals long ago were banned.

Like Martha warned, weekly rentals are destroying our neighborhoods and it's time for our town council to address this issue. It's time for our town leaders to get involved on behalf of our neighborhoods.

The council needs to direct Town Manager Terry Stewart to be the lead person in restoring peace to our single family neighborhoods. He should meet with the real estate folks who rent these homes, the folks who collect commissions for putting people in them. They need to work out a plan that develops clear responsibility for policing the tenants.

Sure, residents can call the cops when the noise gets out of control. Sometimes that works, sometimes not. But the problems go beyond just the loud noises and that's where the rental agents must take some responsibility. They should see that the garbage is kept off the street, that the cars are put where they belong, that the tenants keep their dogs quiet and that they understand they are visiting in a neighborhood where our island's residents once were used to peace and quiet.

That shouldn't be too hard. Since the rental agencies are paid commissions for the rentals, they should be held accountable for the folks they place in those homes. They can place a sign in the yards of the rental homes with their names and phone numbers printed on them so neighbors know who to call when the renters begin disturbing and cluttering the neighborhood. And they can post instructions on the walls of the homes instructing tenants not to put the garbage on the streets but leave it for the rental agency after they're gone. The instructions should also make it clear that they are living next door to island residents who would appreciate some respect for

their peace and privacy.

Allowing single family neighborhoods to become commercial locations for weekly rental homes is something that was created by a council way back at the turn of this century. Many islanders didn't like it then and predicted it would destroy our old neighborhoods. Some of us believe it has done just that. It replaced a time when residents knew all their neighbors, knew them by first names, knew they could count on them to keep the neighborhood clean and even collect their mail when they were gone. The council that decided to put weekly rentals in those neighborhoods began an evolution that has been slowly destroying that lifestyle. Too many of us today see only strange faces replacing one another week after week next door to us.

As if to admit a bit of guilt in what it was doing, that council created what it referred to as "quiet zones," neighborhoods where weekly rentals aren't allowed. In other words, it separated our island into the haves and have nots. The quiet and the not so quiet neighborhoods. Somehow, the folks in the middle and southern ends of our island were entitled to keep their quiet neighborhoods while the folks in other spots were not. How they settled on such discrimination has never been all that clear to many of us. But there it is, this resident is entitled to peace and quiet and that resident is not.

It's time to end that. We'd like to see weekly rentals once and for all prohibited in all of our single family neighborhoods, just as other towns and islands do. If we can't get that, we at least expect some accountability from those who prosper from those rentals.

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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BEACH RELAY FOR LIFE BEGINS MARCH 19th

By Kim Southworth
Civic Association member

Relay For Life on Ft Myers Beach will be held at the Diamondhead Beach Resort beginning at 2pm on Saturday, March 19. The two day even ends the next day after 18 hours. Relay For Life is American Cancer Society's largest fund raiser.

Team Chapel is one of 14 teams that had been formed by the first of this month to raise money to fight cancer.

Team Chapel has already held a Spaghetti Dinner with Team Bay Oaks, rummage sale, parked cars, a book sale, sold hot dogs and brats, and has sold craft items at a number of events. In this month's two-day event team members walk a small track at Diamondhead while other team members sell food, massages and other items there.

The chapel team's goal is \$14,000 and our theme is Get Along Little Doggie, Take a Bite of Cancer. The Beach Relay overall goal this year is \$75,000 and the theme is Corral the Cure.

You may ask, "Why do you continue to volunteer for Relay For Life?" Let me explain, on September 10, 2001 I received the call for the doctor informing me the tumor in my saliva gland was cancer. I was very lucky for when I saw the oncologist, he told me that my cancer was very curable. Six years later I remained cancer free.

On December 21, 2004, my first husband, Steve, was informed by an oncologist to put his affairs in order. He

was told he had very advanced liver cancer. There was nothing they could do, we were told. He died just three weeks later.

Each day too many people hear what Steve and I heard that day. Let's take those words away from cancer diagnosis. Relay For Life provides monies for research and so many programs through the American Cancer Society. Having seen both sides of cancer diagnosis, I will work very hard with Relay For Life to cure cancer once and for all.

My current husband, Dean, is a 3 year bladder cancer survivor. Even with this history my passion for Relay For Life had begun to wane until September. A very dear friend, Adelle Fitchfield Allegier, died just 2 weeks after learning she had pancreatic cancer. We have come so far in our fight against cancer however it is still just not far enough.

You can still join us for this year's relay. If you'd like to join a team or even start a team please call Audra Holowesko with the Lee County American Cancer Society. She, too, is a cancer survivor. She can help you join us and can give you any additional information you might want. Her office number is 239-936-1113, extension 3903. Her cell number is 239-834-8583. You can also e-mail her at audra.holowesko@cancer.org.

TWO NEW MEMBERS JOIN CIVIC BOARD

Civic Association members elected two new members to their board of directors last month.

Doris Grant, a Kentuckian who owns a home here with her husband, Joe, is an avid fisherwoman (she catches lots more fish than he does) and volunteered her time in planning the Civic Association's fifties dance last year. Doris also plans to be a contributor to Tidelines and has an article coming in April.

Kathleen Cameron joins her husband, Tom, on the board. Kathleen has taken the lead in planning, permitting and laboring at our annual Town Birthday Party for the past two years. It was her hard work on that popular

event that made it such a huge success in those years.

Both new board members bring good ideas for what we need to do in our association's future in advocating on behalf of our island's residents and raising money for our youth programs.

Kathleen and Doris replace Betty Simpson and Cherie Smith, whose terms ended. They join board members, Sandi Suter, Dennis Boback, Pat Smith, Dean Southworth, Frank Schilling, Lorrie Wolfe, Tom Cameron and Lee Melsek.

Welcome aboard, Doris and Kathleen.



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