

CONTROL GROWTH NOW

News

Save Sarasota County



March 13, 2023

www.controlgrowthnow.org

Vol. 34, No. 1

Sarasota and North Port Commissioners Should Tell Developers:

HANDS OFF OUR PARKS!

Join Today

Will our local growth be controlled as needed to protect our environment, neighborhoods, mobility and taxpayers?

That's up to you, and other voters.

Be part of the solution.

Join or renew in Control Growth Now today.

Return the
Enclosed
Card

In cities at opposite ends of Sarasota County, development interests and their allies in and out of government are courting Commissioners with schemes to take public lands from public hands, for private gain. Whether it is The Bay Park in Sarasota or Warm Mineral Springs in North Port, the need is ever greater to protect the public interest.

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See You at the Picnic

Saturday March 25



Please see page 8 for details and return the enclosed card for your reservation. **Free to members and guests.**

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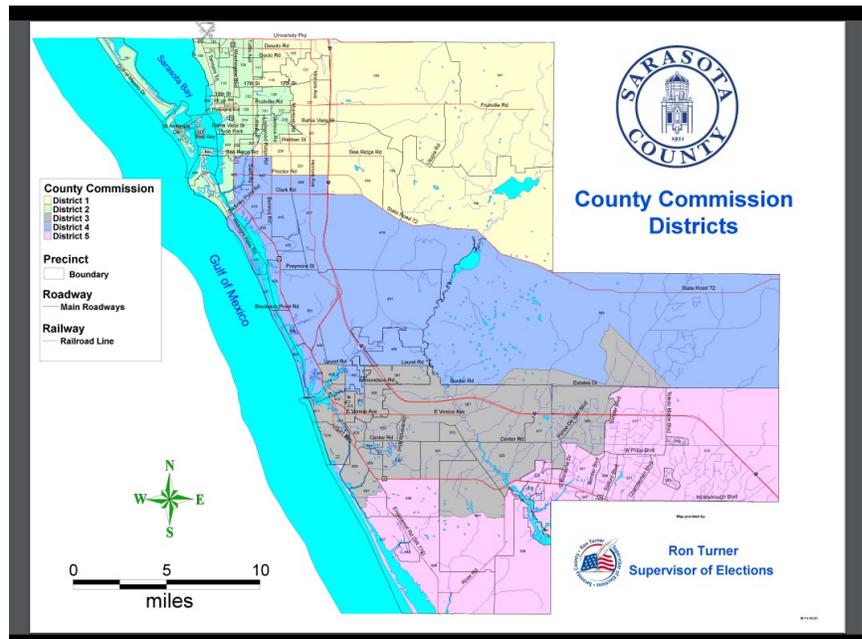
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President's Message



Elections Count

We have won on some important issues. Single Member Districts in County elections, preserving impact fees on developers and limits on City of Sarasota building heights are among them. On far too many others however, including overbig Siesta Key hotels and Sarasota densities, urban sprawl and inadequate impact fees, we continue to struggle.

The key to greater success is appreciating that politics determine policies. That Elections Count. The developers understand that and are already looking ahead to 2024. For the public interest to prevail, first we need good candidates. In the map above, the County Commissioners in Districts 2 (beige), 3 (grey) and 5 (pink) are up for election. Already, the developers have picked Teresa Mast as their candidate in the open seat for District 2 and are supporting Ron Cutsinger's reelection in District 5, two reliably pro-developer extremists. We need good candidates too, and in the many City Commission and other elections, all in 2024. Let's seek and support them. It's never too late to try to better our community at the ballot box.

President, **Control Growth Now**

Hands Off Our Parks - Continued from p. 1

City of Sarasota staff and development interests (including a lawyer and a planner for developers) seek to allow extensive private commercial development of our public Bay Park.

A scheme to allow that is through a proposed City Comprehensive Plan amendment by the Bay Park Conservancy (BPC), a group of private business interests and others. To date they have been behind a generally positive plan to improve 53 acres of City property on the bayfront into a signature park.

Now, however, begin the problems.

The amendment is up for a single public hearing of the Sarasota City Commission on Monday, March 20, following a few items at a meeting that begins at 9 am. The City Planning Commission voted 4 to 1 against it.

The amendment would eliminate the supermajority City Commission vote to expand allowable land uses – including retail, restaurants and even some residential development – by moving that change from the Comprehensive Plan to the Zoning Code.

And they want to take away public hearings and votes of the Planning Board and City Commission and replace them with backroom administrative approval for Bay Park site plans by supportive City staff.

That could include a site plan for massive restaurant development which the BPC leaders have proposed. Followed by who knows what else.

All this while suppressing public comment and engagement.

A requirement for a “public community workshop” prior to administrative approval “for structures of less than 10,000 square feet” was added in November. That’s an obvious typo in that “less” should be “more.” In any event, as one Planning Commissioner noted, even that ineffective event could be avoided by dividing buildings into multiple structures.



Phil DiMaria, Planner for Benderson Development **and** the Bay Park Conservancy

Indeed, that is exactly what the BPC recently showed the City Commission in a Powerpoint presentation (which they now try to disavow), for huge restaurant construction on all three sides of the boat basin at the north end of The Bay Park, to be built between 2026 and 2028.

Although the restaurant buildings total 26,000 square feet of rooftop dining and 14,750 square feet of indoor dining, for a total of 40,750 square feet (compared to the large Selva Grill restaurant in the UTC Town Center, at 5,000 square feet) none of the buildings exceed a perimeter of 10,000 square feet.

The extensive commercial development at The Bay which has been announced by the BPC would be initially for those massive restaurants all around the boat basin. BPC representatives have even stated that this development is consistent with The Bay Park Master Plan, which it clearly is not, with only one modest food and beverage facility depicted on that Master Plan.

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BPC leaders have also said that the Master Plan is “outdated” and should be changed in ways they do not disclose.

At present, most of The Bay Park is appropriately limited by the Comprehensive Plan to “Recreation, Entertainment, Museum, and Cultural Facilities - (Civic Center Complex),” which is consistent with the Master Plan adopted by the City Commission.

Centennial Park at the north end of The Bay Park (now used for public boat ramps and their parking) is presently limited by the Comprehensive Plan to “Open Space-Recreation-Conservation,” which is for “natural areas, recreational sites, and limited accessory structures used for recreational activities or supporting infrastructure” and is intended “to protect the defined areas from development.”

Some “minimal” development for “food, beverage, and entertainment uses” is now allowed in that area, but not “the type and scale of activities which have been associated with the ‘Marina Jack’ facility.” Again, this is consistent with the present Bay Park Master Plan.

All of this would be replaced for the entire Bay Park (as Metropolitan Regional Land Use Classification No. 5) with a new Action Strategy 2.13, to read as follows (emphasis added):

Bay Park Zone (BPZ): Within the Land Development Regulations, the City shall implement the Bay Park Zone district to provide for a park and cultural facilities with a flexible mixed-use district that permits uses including but not limited to parks and open space, government uses, restaurants, performing arts centers, museums and cultural facilities, galleries, retail, and mixed-use development with a maximum residential allowance for 10

live/work units within (The Bay Park). An administrative review process shall be incorporated with the zoning code and utilized for the BPZ district to provide for long-term flexibility in the implementation of The Bay Park Master Plan as originally approved by the City Commission on September 6, 2018, as amended.

Anticipating public opposition to this commercialization of The Bay Park – and who knows what else is planned – the scheme is to make the approval easier, including to cut out the public from the process to the extent possible.

Indeed, that has already started by the covert manner in which this Comprehensive Plan amendment is being pushed through and public comment is being suppressed. At the November 18 Planning Board meeting, representatives of The Bay Park Conservancy and the supportive City staff were given over an hour to make their pitch, and members of the public were given only three minutes each to respond.

Clearly, development interests, through attorney Bill Merrill, Planner Phil DiMaria and others, are working their will in this process, to their advantage, with the full support of City staff even before the City Commission takes a stand.

We have fully expected this, after Phase One was completed with mainly environmental improvements to great acclaim. Does the general public, however, want extensive commercial development in their public park? This is a major issue which at a minimum should be subject to extensive public engagement and input, if advanced at all.

Not just three minutes at a single, unpublicized City Commission meeting on March 20.

Hands Off Our Parks (Continued)



A recent report from Quicken Loans lists **North Port** as the second fastest growing city in the country. That of course courts the interests of developers seeking a fast buck. However, it also underscores the need to protect the community's natural treasures from uncontrolled growth.

One of those treasures is the 83-acre Warm Mineral Springs Park, which includes the largest natural mineral water spring in the world. The 21.6 acre spring site (with the lake itself at 1.4 acres and a depth up to 250 feet) and 61.4 acres of surrounding parkland were acquired by the City of North Port in 2014 and is open to the public for swimming and other activities under a management agreement.

The hot springs, with 51 minerals, are said to have meaningful health benefits, including for those with arthritis.

It also has been a major archaeological site, with Native American bones and artifacts discovered by divers dating back about 10,000 years, in part from a ledge about 43 feet below the surface.

A downstream run of the springs forms a very

important warm water habitat for manatees.

Old wooden buildings on the site have deteriorated over the decades. In 2019, the City of North Port released a master plan for the property after intensive public input. It called for considering only the potential for "low-impact" improvements, such as an open-air amphitheater and picnic areas.

Warm Mineral Springs has proven to be increasingly popular in the post-pandemic appreciation for open natural spaces. Over 150,000 people visited the park in 2022. Despite modest admission fees of about \$20 or \$15 a year, the City nets a profit of about a million dollars a year from Warm Mineral Springs.

City officials now estimate that completing all of the projects in the 2019 plan would cost the City about \$18 million, about twice what the City has allocated for that purpose.

That has opened the door to the idea of a "public-private partnership" with a developer so that the park site could "reach its full economic potential." The City is inviting proposals. One that has been made public is a plan by Warm Mineral Springs Development Group LLC to build a 250-room resort plus 300 residential units, a wellness center, a restaurant, and more, across the 60+ acres that surround the 20+ acre spring.

Citizens are outraged at the threat of private development in the popular and sensitive public property. "This small property is was never meant to accommodate such massive brick-and-mortar development," said Barbara Lockhart, president of the Environmental Conservancy of North Port and Surrounding Areas.

An initial public workshop conducted by City staff

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Bits and Pieces

was well attended, with almost all speakers opposing the idea of a public-private partnership for development and supporting a return to the 2019 plan for low-impact activities on the parkland outside of the springs site.

Unfortunately, however, some in City Hall have seemed at least initially enamored with the concept of private commercial and residential development in Warm Mineral Springs Park, including at least two City Commissioners and the City Manager.

To allow the private development, the City Commission would have to amend the North Port Comprehensive Plan to change the Future Land Use Map for about 30 acres from Recreation/Open Space to Activity Center (the same designation as for intense commercial and mixed use development in several other areas of the City) and to set limits for the density and intensity of the development.

City staff has recommended adding a minimum open space requirement of 28.5 acres, which is 35% of the overall property, as well as a maximum area of 24.4 acres for impervious surfaces, as well as a 40-foot maximum building height (about three stories).

North Port has promised abundant opportunities for public input. If the scheme does move to consideration of a Comprehensive Plan amendment, at least two City Commission public hearings and votes, months apart, are required by law.



- In the City of Venice, growth control activists have achieved a big victory. They used a City Charter provision and petitions to force a referendum on pro-developer amendments to the Land Development Regulations. In a compromise, the City Council agreed to revoke bad changes on building heights and Planned Unit Development, to avoid a rebuff by voters.
- The scam of using “affordable housing” as a cover for developer giveaways has reached new lows. The Sarasota County Commission, which used requirements for such housing, greenways, mixed use and walkability in exchange for allowing urban sprawl in the 2050 Plan has, after repealing those other requirements, now effectively removed the requirement for affordable housing as well.

And in the City of Sarasota, Planning Director Steve Cover, after failing to increase building heights (“We need a skyline of distinction ... like Chicago”) has worked with developers to quadruple densities downtown in exchange for a small portion of “attainable housing” serving as much as 120% Area Median Income. And he parrots developers in absurdly claiming that will actually “reduce traffic.”

- Ignoring pleas to “Keep the Country Country”, the Sarasota County Commission has extended Lakewood Ranch South in 4,120 more acres to the east, adding another 5,000 houses to our urban sprawl.
- Miami area developer Rodrigo Trepp is building one of the tallest buildings in the downtown Sarasota core, under a Code exception, but ironically says he has moved here because of our subdued growth. In a recent article, he praises Sarasota for being “so comfortable, so quiet, so calm” and also fun.

Valerie Buchand Is Our Citizen of the Year



Valerie Buchand will be honored at our annual meeting and picnic as Control Growth Now’s 2023 Citizen of the Year.

Valerie is the President of The Newtown Nation, “a diverse group of concerned citizens dedicated to creating solutions for a healthier, happier and safer community through cooperation and education”, focused on the Newtown community in North Sarasota. (newtownnation.com). They work for Civil Rights in an inclusive atmosphere of love, respect and compassion for all. The mission of Valerie and her group are to engage, empower and improve the quality of life in the Newtown community. Their projects include the Newtown Farmers Market, Community Beautification and events such as the We Are One! Multicultural Festival, Big Mama’s Collards Green Fest and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service.

Valerie’s community involvement has

included over 15 years of service on the Board of the Sarasota Housing Authority (and as President of its Resident Council) and on the Sarasota Commission on the Status of Women, as well as the Sarasota City Council of Neighborhood Associations.

A woman of abundant faith, Valerie is a minister in the Community Bible Church and is active in the Community Ministers organization.

Valerie also serves on the Board of Directors of Control Growth Now.

Ever principled, Valerie understands (as she has put it) that “people in power will trample over you if they can, unless you stand up to them,” to strive for what is right.

Control Growth Now stands with the Newtown Community to direct public resources to serve need rather than greed, to empower self-sufficiency, to promote renewal and preservation rather than uncontrolled gentrification, to facilitate true affordable housing — including measures to help people stay in their homes — to seek clean and safe streets, to assist local merchants and other measures to enable a better tomorrow for all of our residents.

Please join us on March 25 to honor Valerie Buchand for her example in civic leadership and service.

Saturday **March 25** **11:30 - 2**

Join Us for Our **CONTROL GROWTH NOW** Picnic



Again at the beautiful
Colonial Oaks Park
5300 Colonial Oaks Blvd.,
Sarasota

We Provide The Burgers, Hot Dogs, Veggie Burgers and Drinks.

Bring a Side Dish or Dessert to Share, If You Can

Free To Control Growth Now Members And All Of Our Welcome Guests

(Or Join Now For \$20)

Reservations Required —

Return Enclosed Card or Click Eventbrite Link at www.controlgrowthnow.org or call (941) 955-5622