

# CONTROL GROWTH NOW

**News**  
Save Sarasota County

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## Rays of Hope?

Will Our Local  
Politicians Start  
to Heed the  
Voters?



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# Control Growth Now News

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## President's Message



### Be a Voice That Matters

We're not sure yet that our politicians realize that they are elected to serve all of their constituents and not just contributors to their campaigns (locally, read big developers for the most part).

But they should, and it's our duty as the majority affected by their decisions to remind them when the occasion arises.

Please join Control Growth Now, or renew for the year, and otherwise join with the many citizens who seek to give voice to the voters. (And one way or the other please sign up for our pot luck picnic April 5 — See you then!). All at [controlgrowthnow.org](http://controlgrowthnow.org). Thank you.

President, Control Growth Now

# Rays of Hope?

We are used to the domination of our County and City Commissions by puppets of the big local development interests.

We are used to the consequent traffic congestion, urban sprawl, urban overcrowding, flooding, environmental degradation, neighborhood intrusions and the squandering of our tax dollars to subsidize developers rather than make growth pay its own way.

But then came the 2024 Manatee County Commission elections. Rabidly pro-developer Commissioners, despite being heavily funded by their patrons, were swept from office by challengers who tapped into the public sentiment that uncontrolled growth creates uncontrolled problems. Now a new Commission majority is pulling back the urban growth boundary, restoring wetland protections and seeking to limit development to available roads and other infrastructure.

Not quite the same sweep happened in Sarasota County, but for the first time in recent memory the hand-picked candidate of the Developer Cabal — appointed incumbent Neil Rainford — was unseated by former Sheriff Tom Knight despite massive funding for Rainford’s vicious and deceptive campaign. Reformer Alexandra Coe also ran a good effort against the developer’s recruited candidate, Teresa Mast, but could not overcome the funding disparity, and the developers’ incumbent in south County, Ron Cutsinger, was unopposed.

Then, something very unusual happened in Sarasota County.

First, on February 11, all five Sarasota County Commissioners agreed to reverse a previous approval to pay \$14 million taxpayer dollars for half the cost of an extension of Bee Ridge Road which would serve no purpose other than as an entrance to the huge planned Hi Hat Ranch development. On January 28, the vote had been 4 to 1 for the developer bailout, with only Tom Knight opposing. The switch came after reporter Michael Barfield of The Florida Trident exposed the behind-the-scenes dealing between a developer lobbyist and County staff, including the County Administrator, and social media buzzed with outrage. Commissioners agreed to postpone the question for six months and

hold a workshop on it.

Then, the next day, on February 12, after a six-hour public hearing, the Commissioners voted unanimously to deny a rezoning to DR Horton for 126 houses on 51 flood-prone acres adjacent to the environmentally sensitive birding sanctuary, recreation area and stormwater facility known as the Celery Fields. Neighbors and naturalists worked together to make a compelling case both at and before the hearing, with Commissioner Teresa Mast acknowledging hundreds of emails and being “grabbed in the grocery store and in church” by residents urging her opposition.



Will the sweep of the 2024 Manatee County Commission elections by George Cruse and other public interest advocates send a wave across Sarasota County?

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# We Like Mike Hutchinson

Control Growth Now's **2025 Citizen of the Year** is east County activist Mike Hutchinson.

In 2020, Mike very narrowly lost a Republican primary for County Commission to incumbent Mike Moran, by only 368 votes, less than a 3% margin.

He continued fighting for the public interest, however, as he has for the past ten years, as a leader of "Keep the Country ... Country," an organization dedicated to constraining urban sprawl in east Sarasota County.

He also has sought reform in his party as an active member of the Sarasota County Republican Executive Committee.

Mike Hutchinson is a graduate of Virginia Tech and worked for the Department of Defense as a computer programmer early in his career. Mike came to Sarasota in 1973 to work for EMR Telemetry where he started as a software engineer but also worked as a project manager and supervised various engineering groups. In 1996 Mike went to work for Harris Controls in Melbourne, FL, where he worked on software for monitoring large power grids. In 1999, Mike returned to Sarasota to work at L-3 Communications on "black box" recorders.

Mike Hutchinson retired in 2007 and has spent his time volunteering in our community.

Mike joined the Sarasota Technology Users Group (STUG) soon after retiring. From this network, Mike started volunteering on the PC Refurbishing Project

(PCRP) in 2008. The PCRP restores donated used computers for use by students or adults who can't afford to buy one. In January 2009 Mike became a STUG Director. Mike was President of STUG from 2011 until 2015. He continues as a director and is now the team leader of the Refurbishing Project. Since 2014 the PCRP has donated over 1,000 computers a year to the community, over 23,000 since inception. Starting in 2018, the project started a program called Komputer for Kids which supplies refurbished computers to schools for use by disadvantaged students.



In addition to volunteering his time on providing refurbished computers to disadvantaged children, Mike has volunteered his time with the Bern Creek Improvement Association (BCIA), a homeowners' association which manages The Ranches at Bern Creek. The BCIA has opposed the government's efforts to change land use patterns in eastern Sarasota County that will harm the rural lands.

Determined to protect the Old Miakka community, in November of 2022, Mike and his wife Eileen, principals of Keep The Country Inc., sued Sarasota County over its approval of the Lakewood Ranch plan for 5,000 homes and whether the county's growth plan amendment for the development complies with state law. The developer proposed creation of a new land use designation for the property – "Village Transition Zone." This designation allows the property to be developed at more than three times the residential density that was previously permitted. The lawsuit moved to appeal in January of this year and was denied.

## Rays of Hope? (Continued)



Then, on February 25, County Commissioner Joe Neunder joined Tom Knight and Mark Smith in a 3 to 2 opposition to an extension of Lakewood Ranch to the east and south to add another 1,400 houses on 548.3 acres in a presently rural area. At a previous meeting on January 28, only Knight and Smith had been opposed to this uttermost urban sprawl. Commissioner Neunder stated that this proposed urbanization of the country area is “a little bit before its time.”

At the request of the developer, a 65-day continuance was granted before a final Commission vote. It can be expected that between now and then, the pressure on Joe Neunder by developer Rex Jensen will be intense. One major factor to be determined (and perhaps never known) is the extent to which other big developers put their political clout behind Jensen.

So is this a hopeful trend or a temporary aberration?

One possible scenario is that Pat Neal, who has long led development interests politically in the area, has decided to become more focused on his specific objectives and less involved in those of others. For decades, Neal has worked through a

former Republican activist named Bob Waechter to line up public policy decisions for development interests behind the scenes. Waechter even at one point stole the identity of controlled growth Republican Lourdes Ramirez to falsely make campaign contributions to liberal Democrats in a scheme to discredit her in a coming primary election for County Commission. That led to his arrest and conviction but did not stop his activity behind the scenes and even occasionally in public for development interests.

However, Pat Neal is brilliantly savvy, in a Machiavellian manner, and may see the merits of a more nuanced approach than his all-or-nothing war against the public interest of the past. Better perhaps to count on politicians when they are most needed while letting them be heroes to the public in matters of less or no concern to him — thereby lessening the risk of a Manatee-style blowout.

Neal’s development interests are now less in Manatee County than they once were and more focused in south Sarasota County and even further south. And Bob Waechter is now 82 and may be less available as a political operative.

We will see, with a particular eye on Joe Neunder — a very nice guy, we might mention, if you get to know him — to see if there is a majority on the Sarasota County Commission and at times even more, to stand with their constituents and not just their big developer contributors when the public interest is at stake.

And with some promising results in recent City elections in Sarasota, Venice and North Port, while there can be no room for complacency there can at least at present be room for reflection on Rays of Hope that, if sustained, may offer a promise for a better tomorrow.



# SCRAP the SPAC

When it was proposed in 2018 that the Van Wezel Performing Arts Center be demolished and replaced with an expensive new Sarasota Performing Arts Center (SPAC), Control Growth Now — together with Harold Bubil, at the time Real Estate Editor of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* — were among the first to object.

We opposed the expense of hundreds of millions of City and County taxpayer dollars, the impracticality of putting the parking underground and the lack of need considering the continued suitability and appeal of the iconic Van Wezel. (Broadway shows do come here, and won't arrive sooner due to contract clauses in Tampa's larger market).

When it became clear that public sentiment was against the scheme, the Van Wezel was soon put back on the map of the overall project called The Bay and the pitch was to "repurpose" it into something different, perhaps an open-air plaza leaving the walls and little else.

Now, seven years later, the SPAC scheme is struggling against increasing reasons why it is not viable.

County Commissioners have wisely said they will not help fund it and the promise of 50% funding of a \$400 million plus portion of the project by private donations is more illusory than ever. There is no parking plan. The idea of some underground parking, initially abandoned, just came back up to meet just part of the need, but at a cost of at least \$30 million taxpayer dollars the City does not have.

The City's expert financial staff estimate that even with a special district that skims off increased tax revenue for the project, and the donations promised by the SPAC Foundation, the City will be hundreds of

millions of dollars short, forcing the City to pledge taxes from its current budgets for public services in its planned bond for the project.

This has forced the SPAC Foundation to suddenly claim that the special tax district will produce hundreds of millions more than the generous estimates of City staff, but with no data or analysis to back up the claim. And the Foundation is seeking to counter support for keeping the Van Wezel by accepting its existence as a downsized facility for smaller shows — that the Foundation gets to control — with even more unanswered challenges for parking and costs.

And all the while, the City of Sarasota faces unmet demands for the replacement of crumbling pipes and other infrastructure, unfunded public pension obligations, inadequate sidewalks and other facilities in Newtown and elsewhere, a state mandate to house the homeless and other needs, while it considers squandering tax dollars on this half-billion dollar boondoggle.

The SPAC Foundation, in one of its many falsehoods, claims that its "survey" of City residents finds 71% support for the new SPAC. In fact, however, a "push poll" by their marketing agency called people to read a paragraph promoting a new SPAC and then to ask whether they prefer that great new thing or improving the Van Wezel at an unlimited expense. Even, then they could not get a positive response from a majority of those they called.

With all of this at stake, it is amazing that this may come down to the vote of one City Commissioner, Debbie Trice. Fortunately, at a meeting on March 17, she gave good reasons why she is not yet a "Yes." Time will tell as to whether she continues to resist the pressure of the elites backing the unfeasible and unwise SPAC.

## 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.

Reserve for the Picnic and/or Join/Renew as a CGN Member at:

[www.controlgrowthnow.org](http://www.controlgrowthnow.org)

# T-Shirts On Sale at Picnic

## Cash Only, Please



**Saturday**

**April 5**

**11:30 - 2**

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Link to Eventbrite at  
**[controlgrowthnow.org](http://controlgrowthnow.org)**