

Sidewalks for Safety? Town Passes \$707,000 Project with 4-3 Vote



Florensa



St. Denis



Webster



Clair



Whatmough

Town Staff, Mayor, Commissioners Vote Safety Over Dollars

Lia Martin
Associate Editor

During the meeting on Monday night, Commission Randy Clair wanted to know why there were no supporting documents attached to the agenda to inform the Commission of the past history of the bike path sidewalk project, which had been on a back burner since 2005.

Clair was concerned when he learned that the bike path/sidewalk extension project between the Florida Department of Transportation and the Town of Longboat Key was now going to be more expensive to finance.

Because of time passing and cost increases, the \$400,000 investment the Town would make jumped to \$707,000.

Clair pointed out this nearly \$1 million chunk of money when given to FDOT would be in the form of a non-refundable lump sum, which would not be reimbursed if something were to happen to the project.

Public Works Director Juan Florensa was quick to explain the intricacies of what had happened, while Town Manager Bruce St. Denis assured commissioners that from now on they would have all the workshop and prior data attached to their agenda.

To understand the complexity of the sidewalk extension project, you have to go back in time.

Florensa explained that when the Town first appealed to DOT, it was a \$400,000 matching grant which included an escalator if it was a future build. Unfortunately,

when they put the project out to bid there were no takers.

For whatever reason, contractors did not want the federal job.

The project never got off the ground, according to Florensa, and the Town pulled the plug.

Now the project will cost more.

Sidewalks would be placed on the west side of Gulf of Mexico Drive at three different points: from the south end of the Island at New Pass Bridge to the area around the Charthouse restaurant, from the Colony along the Islander to Sea Gate to Avenue of Flowers Shopping Plaza, and from Broadway to Longboat Key Bridge.

Florensa says that if the Commission agrees to the sidewalk project, by July 2007 the design must be done.

And, then by July 2008, there would have to be a \$500,000 deposit made to show FDOT good faith.

According to Finance Director Terry Sullivan, there is money in place to finance the sidewalk project.

The Town would also have to come up with the \$40,000 to landscaping.

Sullivan says there is \$1 million in the infrastructure fund they can use, as well as \$2 million in the road and bridge fund.

Clair came back with another question.

He asked if someone had approached either Sarasota or Manatee counties to see if there might be some money in place to help Longboat Key.

Florensa said that for years he has been sitting in meet-

ings, and he was sure the counties would not fund this project.

"Counties will not fund projects in cities," Florensa said emphatically.

St. Denis supported Florensa, and assured Clair that the counties could not help them on this project, that the money would have to be federal money.

"That's where we started," St. Denis said emphatically. "Both said 'No,' to contributions."

Commissioner Jeremy Whatmough urged everyone to reconsider the sidewalk project because of the investment nearing the \$1 million mark, and whether they should not ask themselves if it really would help improve safety on the west side of Gulf of Mexico Drive.

"I am in favor of safety as much as anyone else," Whatmough appealed to the commissioners. "However, people cross wherever they want. That is part of the charm of Longboat Key. Do we really think we will get the people to cross at appropriate places?"

Mayor Joan Webster thought that the safety on the Island should be the determining factor, and that she for one supported the project.

"We have built some expectancy here," Webster said to commissioners.

Whatmough turned to look at Webster and said, "I can't think of one phone call I have had in favor of it..."

Commissioners Bob Siekmann, Clair and Whatmough did not approve the project. It passed by a 4-3 roll call vote.

Decision on Election or Special Election Undecided



Spoll



O'Connor



Persson



Siekmann



Whatmough

Referendum for Density Change On Table For Resident's Vote

Lia Martin
Associate Editor

Howard Horton, who has owned three lots on General Harris Street for 23 years, asked the Town Commission in November to approve the request for beginning a referendum process which would change the density of his property.

What this could mean down the road for the neighborhood is that land use could be changed from a C-1 zoning to a residential one.

Horton admits through his land use consultant Peter Dailey, that what he has in mind are three single-family residences planned for 512, 520, and 528 General Harris Street.

Land use consultant Peter Dailey, who represents Horton, presented 740 petition signatures to the Town Commission on Monday night.

It was explained by Town Clerk Jane O'Connor that there were 343 certified signatures from Manatee County, with the rest being verified by Sarasota County, who will respond by the end of the week.

There must be more than 600 certified signatures to place a referendum on a ballot, which is a 10% sampling

of Longboat Key residents.

In the November meeting, Town Attorney David Persson remarked that only twice before in Town history has this process been chosen by a petitioner.

The reason for the unusual handling of a density change is the matter of time.

It may be quicker to have residents vote, then to go through a first and second reading of a proposed density change with the need for a public meeting.

Commissioner George Spoll asked if there was a financial advantage to having the referendum ready for the March 13th election, as opposed to waiting six months.

O'Connor gave two options to the commissioners on how the election could be held, both with their own set of pros and cons.

If the election was held in six months as a special election, it would cost the Town around \$15,500 if you add up the ballot printing, poll worker and early voter costs, according to O'Connor.

If the election was piggy-backed on the Sarasota County general election on March 13, the costs would be significantly less, but there was a narrow window of opportunity to gather the materials together in time to make that happen.

Commissioner Jeremy Whatmough had strong reservations about changing the zoning, though he understood that if a land owner wants to petition for a change it has to be allowed.

"What do our ordinances permit our developers to do?" Whatmough asked. "How many homes are we looking to put on this little bit of property? How high is it going to be?"

Persson stressed that the referendum would not rezone the property, only that it would allow the Town to rezone the property from C-1 zoning to residential if the planning board chose that option.

"This is only the first step in the process," Persson stressed. "If Dailey has signatures, he can schedule a referendum to consider conversion from C-1 or limited commercial to residential use."

"It would be politically correct to hold the election when people are here," Commissioner Bob Siekmann reminded the Commission.

The commissioners approved the possibility of a special election, but they will meet at 8:30 a.m. on Jan. 22 to have a look-see at the petition signatures, and discuss options open to them.