

THE SARASOTA

No. 41 — June 28, 2013

News Leader

The Progressive Voice Of Southwest Florida



S.O.S. FOR S.O.S.

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A.K.A. HELP

SARASOTA NEWS LEADER

The Progressive Voice of Southwest Florida

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Welcome

Sometimes on Thursdays, when I start to compose this letter, the first thing that pops into my mind is the theme from *Love Story*: “Where do I begin ...”

I know where I have to end up this week, because Cleve Posey, our production manager, has chastised me again about being too verbose for the space allotted.

With that being said, I will focus on the acronym I learned about early in journalism school: KISS. And though that may seem complementary to the *Love Story* note above, it has nothing whatsoever to do with romance. It means *Keep It Simple, Stupid*.

Diversity is the real theme again of this week’s issue: horrific allegations about what is really going on at Save Our Seabirds; the significant reduction in county crime Sheriff Tom Knight and his officers have achieved; the temporary closing of Warm Mineral Springs; a new crime-fighting initiative under way in the city; a bit of controversy over the fast-moving effort to put a replica of the iconic U.S. Marine Corps/Iwo Jima sculpture on the bayfront; more controversy over a medical spa proposed on the North Tamiami Trail; the latest tourism figures and a proposed new program to keep them rising; the success non-profits realized in the last legislative session, thanks to efforts of the Community Alliance of Sarasota County; budget talks; trash in Siesta Village; and Nik Wallenda.

If you read this issue thoroughly, I think you will know all the most important things you need to know about what has happened in the community over the past week.

Rachel Brown Hackney

Editor and Publisher



A DECREASE IN CRIME AND PERSONNEL



EMPHASIS ON 'TEMPORARY'



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S.O.S. FOR S.O.S.



Owls peer through the wire of their cage at Save Our Seabirds on June 26. Photo by Norman Schimmel

FORMER VOLUNTEER MAKES DISTURBING CLAIMS ABOUT THE CONDITIONS AT SAVE OUR SEABIRDS

By Cooper Levey-Baker

Associate Editor

Within weeks of coming home from a military deployment in Afghanistan last July, Greg Para found himself out at Save Our Seabirds — the City Island nonprofit dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing injured birds that took over the old Pelican Man property in 2008. Para, an avian specialist with a lifelong love of parrots, calls his time at SOS “pet therapy.”

“I was there six days a week, just healing and helping out and volunteering,” Para says.

According to an affidavit he will be presenting to the Sarasota City Commission Monday, July 1, Para spent between four and six hours a day at the facility. But that all ended this March, with the departure of SOS founder Lee Fox. Now, Para charges, SOS is a mess, and he is organizing a rally outside the facility Saturday morning to bring attention to the situation.

“*This has been my life’s work for 27 years.*”

Lee Fox
Founder
Save Our Seabirds



Para’s affidavit makes a number of disturbing claims — arguing that SOS does not have any



A wooden building stands at the entryway to Save Our Seabirds. Photo by Norman Schimmel

staffers qualified to care for birds, that it is improperly housing birds, that it is euthanizing birds rather than helping them recover and that it is scaling back its rescue operations — points, he notes, that violate the nonprofit's lease with the city.

Fox says things at the nonprofit started to change with the arrival of CEO David Pilston last year. SOS stopped sending out volunteers to pick up injured birds, she adds, and began only accepting birds brought to the facility. The decision “incensed” her.

In January, Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary, a bird rescue located in Indian Shores, stopped accepting injured birds because of funding issues, and SOS was asked to help house some of the critters. Fox's immediate response was “absolutely,” she tells *The Sara-*



A sign welcomes visitors to Save Our Seabirds. Photo by Norman Schimmel



A parrot peers out from its cage. Photo by Norman Schimmel

sota News Leader. The Sanctuary was helping 10,000 birds a year — Fox says she knew SOS couldn't handle that volume, but the facility could accommodate at least some of them. But the board said no, and prevented volunteers from going to pick up some of the birds.

"Why are we there?" she asks. "That's why I went there, to help the birds in the area."

An FAQ (frequently asked questions document) distributed to the media by Pilston claims that Fox "wanted to treat all" of the Sanctuary birds in Sarasota, a notion that just wasn't "practical": "SOS has continued to take in at least as many birds as we always have from Sarasota and Manatee Counties."

According to the FAQ, the SOS board was "left with no choice but to terminate" Fox this

spring after she rejected a one-year employment offer that would have had her working in Wimauma rather than City Island. The FAQ says the "issues" with Fox "were numerous, serious, and openly communicated" to her.

Fox, who is cautious about describing her departure on the record, calls the decision "unbelievable."

"This has been my life's work for 27 years," Fox says. "I've given up a lot."

Para is less circumspect: "They fired the founder from her own organization."

Since Fox's leave-taking, Para alleges, conditions at SOS have only gotten worse. His affidavit describes "dead or maimed parrots from rat attacks," and rats he saw "enter and



Parakeets share quarters at Save Our Seabirds. Photo by Norman Schimmel

leave inadequate bird enclosures.” He’s also concerned about the decision to euthanize birds more quickly. Fox says that during her tenure, severely injured birds were given up to five days to show signs of improvement before SOS would euthanize them. That patience is now gone, according to Para: “They’re putting down anything that needs more work.”

The FAQ acknowledges that putting down birds is taking place, but defends the SOS process: “Anyone who has been involved in wildlife rehabilitation knows that euthanasia is sometimes necessary, for two reasons. First and foremost, if a bird is suffering and there is no reasonable way to alleviate that suffering, the bird should not be forced to live in pain. Second, the regulations on which our permits are based are very strict and very clear about what birds should be kept alive and what birds should not. Lee Fox routinely ignored those regulations, but we are determined to comply.”

Para says the euthanasia debate is part of a bigger dispute: The process may be up to code, but the organization lacks someone with the qualifications necessary to make those life-and-death decisions. “They need to bring somebody on staff who knows what’s going on,” he points out.


Pilston confirms that SOS permits were held in Fox’s name, but he says that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allow for a “grace period” when a permit-holder leaves a rehab operation. He tells the *News Leader* that SOS received word this week that its new application for a permit has been recommended for approval.

A Florida Fish and Wildlife representative says transferring a permit to another name is usually “a pretty easy process,” but that it does require proof of experience, letters of recommendation and even an inspection. She couldn’t answer definitively whether there is a deadline for when an organization must apply to have the permit transferred.

The goal of Saturday’s rally, which kicks off at 10 a.m. outside SOS, is to bring attention to all these matters, Para says, and — he hopes — to force the organization to either bring back Fox or to hire someone else equally qualified. The SOS FAQ says Fox has “caused so much irreparable harm to SOS” through her “false statements to the press and others that a return to SOS is out of the question.”

Para recently spoke at a meeting of Florida Veterans for Common Sense, discussing the “healing” he experienced at SOS and asking the group for support. The anti-war veterans group sent out an email alert about the rally, as well as Para’s appearance at the commission Monday, encouraging veterans to support his cause.

Para says many volunteers feel the way he does, even some who believe “any care is better than no care” and have remained working at SOS. The goal of the rally is not to harm the organization, but to strengthen and refocus it, he notes: “In no way do we want them to go away or go out of business.”

Asked about the rally, Fox is hesitant. “I’m not sure how it’s going to turn out,” she says. “I know there’s going to be a lot of people.” 



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A DECREASE IN CRIME AND PERSONNEL

“*One word that characterizes our agency over the last four years is ‘accountability.’*

Maj. Kevin Kenney
Sarasota County Sheriff's Office

”

THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE HAS REDUCED COUNTYWIDE CRIME BY 25 PERCENT AS A RESULT OF ITS INTELLIGENCE LED POLICING PROGRAM, AND THE SHERIFF IS SEEKING HIGHER PAY FOR THE OFFICERS MAKING THAT PROGRAM WORK

By Rachel Brown Hackney
Editor

Thanks to Sarasota County Sheriff Tom Knight’s implementation of an Intelligence Led Policing program since he was first elected in 2008, the county has seen a 25 percent reduction in crime. The decrease from 2012 over 2011 was 18 percent, and the crime rate was down another 14 percent for the first quarter of 2013, Knight told the County Commission during its June 21 budget workshop.

Almost as great a point of pride for him, Knight noted, is the fact that citizen complaints coming into his office have declined 22 percent over the past four years.

Because of the effectiveness of the Intelligence Led Policing (ILP) program, Knight also

wants to provide pay raises to the sergeants and lieutenants who carry most of the load, he told the commission — “the law enforcement individuals I believe are responsible for our crime decrease.”

He is seeking \$91,873,196 for the 2014 fiscal year, while his current budget is \$86,554,672.

However, Knight pointed out, \$3,546,424 of the projected expenses for the new fiscal year, which will begin Oct. 1, are beyond his control, including a \$1.7 million hike in payments to the Florida Retirement System. Because most of his employees are in the “special risk” category for health benefits, the Sheriff’s Of-



Cost Breakdown by Expenditure Category

	FY 2012/2013 Final Adopted	Percent	FY 2013/2014 Preliminary	Percent
Law Enforcement	\$56,554,536	65.34%	\$60,274,143	65.61%
Corrections	\$24,076,488	27.82%	\$25,741,954	28.02%
Courts	\$ 5,923,648	6.84%	\$ 5,857,099	6.37%
TOTAL	\$86,554,672	100.0%	\$91,873,196	100.0%

A graph compares expenses for the Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office for the current fiscal year and FY 2014. Image courtesy Sheriff’s Office

office's new chief financial officer, Lisa Kiesel added, the office also will have to absorb greater expenses for them.

The total healthcare benefits hike was put at \$1,573,050.

"There's not a thing in the world you can do about increased [state retirement] costs or health costs," Commissioner Nora Patterson told him.

However, when she asked whether Knight planned on providing merit pay increases or general raises for the sergeants and lieutenants, Knight was clear about how law enforcement agencies have to be careful in linking sal-

ary adjustments to job performance, because that can lead to unwelcome results. With the Florida Highway Patrol in years past, he pointed out, "It turned into [traffic] tickets for pay."

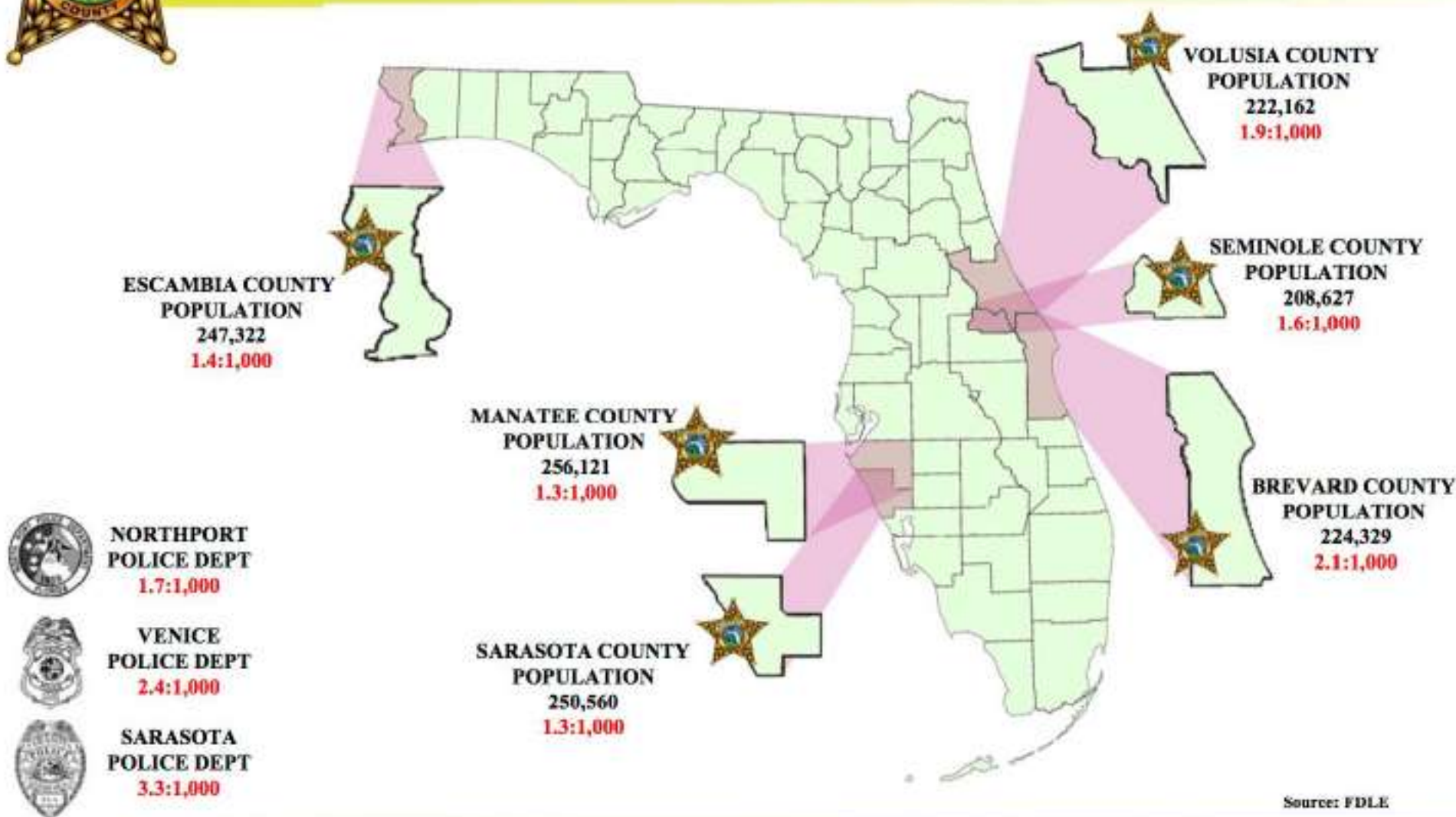
Nonetheless, Knight said, he would be providing the raises on a merit basis among his lieutenants and sergeants.

When Patterson asked what he planned for the "rank and file," Knight responded, "Contractually, it's status quo," meaning step increases built into union wage plans.

In response to another question from Patterson, Knight said he planned no raises for deputies in his department.



Officer to Population Ratio



A chart shows officer-to-population ratios for select law enforcement agencies. Image courtesy Sarasota County Sheriff's Office

POLICY AND STATISTICS

According to graphs Knight and his executive staff presented to the County Commission, the cost per capita for the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office as of April 1, 2011 was \$352. That compared with a statewide average of \$464 among sheriff's offices. Manatee County had a cost of \$362, while Charlotte County's expense was \$395.

Over the past seven years, the Sarasota department has seen a reduction in personnel from 1,060 in the 2007 fiscal year to 992 planned for FY 2014. Of the latter number; 405 will be sworn law enforcement officers, while

379 will be civilians; the remaining 208, certified corrections officers.

The Sheriff's Office has 1.3 deputies per 1,000 population, Col. Steve Burns told the commissioners. Nationwide, the average for sheriff's offices is 2.2 deputies per 1,000 residents, he added. In the state, the average is 1.65 per 1,000.

If the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office wanted to match the state average, Burns pointed out, it would need to hire 88 new deputies at a cost of more than \$11.2 million.

In response to another question from Patterson, Burns provided follow-up statistics for



FY2012/2013 Agency Costs Per Capita



A chart shows the average cost per capita for a number of sheriff's offices in the state. Image courtesy Sarasota County Sheriff's Office

municipal police departments statewide: The average is 2.3 officers per 1,000 residents.

As *The Sarasota News Leader* reported last week, the number for the City of Sarasota Police Department in 2011 — the last year for which data was available — is 3.3 officers per 1,000 population.

Maj. Kurt Hoffman told the County Commission, “What the sheriff has tasked each of us with at the senior staff level is reviewing every single position that comes up for a vacancy.” Discussions ensue over whether a position can be turned over to a civilian, for example, he said, or consolidated with the work of another employee or made part-time.

Knight also pointed out that it costs a minimum of \$123,650 from the time a person applies to be a deputy until that person is trained



Sheriff Tom Knight is shown on the video stream in the County Commission Think Tank as he presents his 2014 fiscal year budget on June 21. Photo by Rachel Hackney



(From left) Sheriff Tom Knight, Col. Steve Burns and Maj. Kurt Hoffman appear before the County Commission on June 21. Photo by Rachel Hackney

and on the road — about 10 months. Therefore, he said, retaining deputies “is huge.”

Moreover, Knight said, “We’re always out scouting for the best candidates.” His view is that quality of personnel is more important than quantity, he told the board.

Salary and benefits for a rookie deputy are \$61,181, according to a graph presented to the County Commission. That figure accounts for 49 percent of the cost.

Maj. Kevin Kenney pointed out to the commissioners that a reduction in force normally leads to decline in service. “We have not recognized that whatsoever,” he said.

Knight came into office with a plan to change the culture of the agency, which is difficult to do, Kenney added. “We can’t do that without complete buy-in at the mid-management and direct supervisor level,” he continued, “and that’s where we focused our attention. ... We worked very hard as senior staff to get those folks trained effectively, consistently and put the accountability on them.”

Kenney continued, “One word that characterizes our agency over the last four years is ‘accountability.’”

Reinforcing Kenney’s comments, Maj. Jim Lilly said, “We try to instill the thought, ‘Good things don’t happen; they’re made to happen.’”

Chairwoman Carolyn Mason said that from what she understood of the Intelligence Led Policing program, “it’s a *huge* asset to the

community, but that doesn’t mean that you have abandoned community policing.”

“No,” Knight replied.

“And it can’t be done without the cooperation of the surrounding jurisdictions,” Mason added.

“It works better when you get collaboration and cooperation,” Knight told her.

The Sheriff’s Office was in the forefront of community policing initiatives in the 1990s, Knight continued. “[ILP is] hugely based on analytical data and actual data.”

The Sheriff’s office “is very well engaged with [the] North Port [Police Department],” he added, and “Venice is on board with us. ... We’re always looking to partner and share information.”

ANOTHER POSITIVE TREND

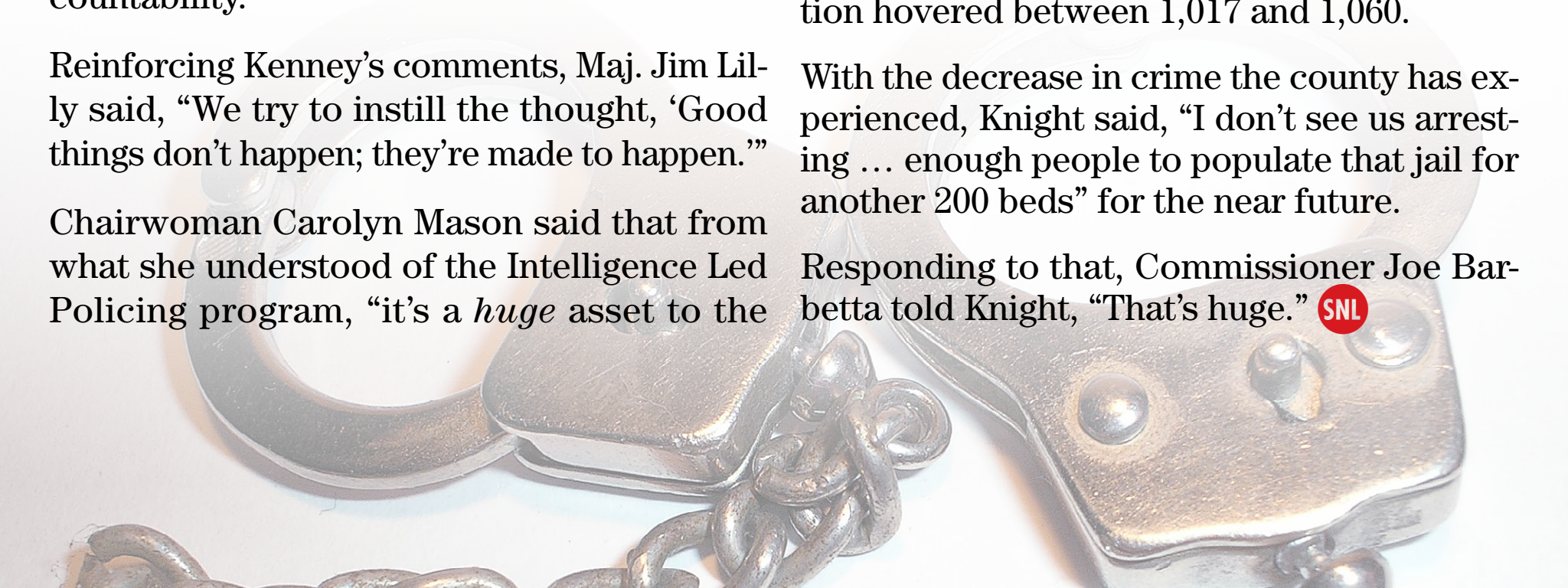
Regarding the jail, Maj. Jim Lilly told the commissioners the department had been able to maintain the population between 860 and 950 a day over the past 12 months, in part as a result of work-release and other programs coordinated through the judicial system.

Several years ago, Lilly said, the jail population hovered between 1,017 and 1,060.

With the decrease in crime the county has experienced, Knight said, “I don’t see us arresting ... enough people to populate that jail for another 200 beds” for the near future.

Responding to that, Commissioner Joe Barbetta told Knight, “That’s huge.”

SNL



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EMPHASIS ON 'TEMPORARY'

Swimmers enjoy the water on a late June day at Warm Mineral Springs. Photo by Stan Zimmerman

WARM MINERAL SPRINGS WILL CLOSE AT 5 P.M. SUNDAY, BUT THE CITY OF NORTH PORT HAS BEGUN THE PROCESS OF HIRING A SHORT-TERM MANAGER, WITH THE CITY COMMISSION HAVING APPROVED A NEW AGREEMENT WITH THE COUNTY

By Rachel Brown Hackney
Editor

Sixty days: That is the time frame within which the City of North Port hopes to have responses to an advertisement seeking a short-term manager for Warm Mineral Springs.

A special meeting of the North Port City Commission probably will be necessary in August to approve an agreement, City Manager Jonathan Lewis told his board during its regular meeting on

June 24. That is because after its last regular session in July, the City Commission is not scheduled to meet again until September.

According to the terms of a new interlocal agreement between the city and the county, the Sarasota County Commission will have 30 days to vote on the North Port board's action regarding short-term management.

Lewis' comments came just before the

“It's too bad it boiled down to ‘us versus them.’ It's bad for the citizens ... [but] I think it's all going to work out now.”

Carolyn Mason
Chairwoman
Sarasota County Commission



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A flyer distributed around the county early this week advertises the 'Everything Must Go!' sale planned this weekend by the management company at Warm Mineral Springs. Image courtesy Sarasota County

North Port Commission voted unanimously to approve that interlocal agreement with Sarasota County regarding the future of the 81-acre resort the two local governments purchased jointly in 2010 for \$5.5 million.

It was the first time since two new North Port commissioners were elected in November 2012 that the board had agreed to a Sarasota County Commission document regarding the resort without suggesting changes.

In the meantime, Sarasota County staff is working on arrangements for a temporary fence to be erected around the swimming area of Warm Mineral Springs, county spokesman Curt Preisser told *The Sarasota News Leader* on June 27. The resort will close at 5 p.m. on June 30, when the contract with its current management company, Cypress Lending, expires.

Signage also will be placed at the resort, Preisser said, to make certain the public understands the resort is not going to close perma-

nently. Anyone with questions will be directed to contact the county's call center at 861-5000.

Additionally, the county has requested that the North Port Police Department provide extra patrols around the property, and county staff is investigating the possibility of hiring private security guards to make certain the grounds are protected 24 hours a day, Preisser added.

While he had no information prior to the *News Leader's* deadline regarding the costs of the security measures, Preisser noted that a Memorandum of Understanding between the county and the city specifies that expenses will be split 50/50.

Staff has been working with both the City of North Port and Cypress Lending on a number of details, Preisser said.

NORTH PORT COMMISSION'S VOTE

Shortly after 11 p.m. on June 24, Lewis sent an email to County Administrator Randall Reid, saying, "The City Commission approved unan-



*Visitors to Warm Mineral Springs remark on the ambiance as well as the healing value of the waters.
Photo by Stan Zimmerman*

imously the interlocal that was approved by the County Commission on June 19, 2013.”

Lewis added that he had been directed to send the county a letter stating “the desire of the City to take any steps appropriate that might keep WMS open.”

Over two days of discussions — June 18 and 19 — county commissioners had crafted numerous changes to the interlocal agreement the North Port Commission had revised and Lewis had sent to the county on June 14. County Attorney Stephen DeMarsh had drafted the original version to “memorialize” decisions the two local government bodies made during an all-day facilitated joint meeting on April 17 to try to avoid litigation over the future of Warm Mineral Springs.

During the North Port City Commission meeting on June 24, Mayor Linda Yates brought up the latest version of the interlocal document, pointing to the changes the County Commission made last week — including reinserting a clause affirming the two local government bodies are equal partners in owning the resort.

In response to a question from Vice Mayor James Blucher, Lewis said a two-week period would be the minimum time frame in which he felt a request for proposals could be advertised for new management of the springs. “Realistically, 21 days,” Lewis added.

However, the interlocal agreement provided for the city to make “good faith efforts” to undertake the competitive bidding process within a 60-day window, Lewis pointed out. “That gives me some comfort,” he added.

If the City Commission approved the interlocal agreement that night, Lewis said, “We would begin work on [the advertisement process] immediately.”

Commissioner Cheryl Cook broached the idea of modifying the language further, to give the city more time. However, she noted that the County Commission would have to approve any changes the City Commission made in the latest document. “That means we have to go

another round, sending it back to the county and bringing it back.”

Lewis told her he had reviewed the interlocal document again before the meeting. “I was worried about the 60 days. I’ve been worried about the 60 days all along. But the revision [the County Commission] made this time — it does make me more comfortable than I was before.”

Lewis added, “Obviously, we make every effort, working with their staff, to get it done within 60 days ... That’s still ‘good faith.’”

Yates protested county commissioner comments that the Springs would have to close. However, she said she had noted the new agreement called for the two boards to select a short-term manager “as soon as possible to avoid prolonged closure of the springs.”

“I’m in the minority many times, but I will tell you, I have tried to keep [the Springs] open as a swimming place several times, and that just wasn’t supported, so this could all have been avoided ... We all need to apologize as commissioners, but I can’t speak for any other commissioner but myself.”

Linda Yates
Mayor
City of North Port

“This is saying the Springs is closing July 1,” Yates pointed out, adding county officials had said they felt there was no way the two local governments could provide staff to keep the resort open until a new operator was selected.

“There’s nothing we could do, even if we sign this, that could keep the facility from closing?” she asked Lewis.

“We’ve essentially got five days,” Lewis told her. The county commissioners were very clear that the city could not act unilaterally to keep the resort open “and then they just become a kind of conscientious objector,” he said.

According to state law, because the county is co-owner of the property, a competitive selection process must be used before any management contract is awarded. In early June, the North Port Commission discussed pursuing action on its own to hire an interim manager until the long-term future of the resort could be determined. The County Commission reiterated last week that that would be a violation of the law.

Yates then referenced Cook’s earlier point: If the City Commission did not approve the interlocal agreement that night, the temporary closing of the springs would last longer.

When Yates finally asked for a motion, Blucher made one saying simply that the City Commission approve the interlocal agreement with Sarasota County.

City Commissioner Tom Jones seconded it.

“I believe [this] is a starting point,” Blucher said — “something we need to do. ... Then we have a lot of work to do as a team.”



Mayor Linda Yates of North Port. Photo courtesy City of North Port

“It is a start,” Yates responded. “It is a very sad situation,” she added. “I’m in the minority many times, but I will tell you, I have tried to keep [the Springs] open as a swimming place several times, and that just wasn’t supported, so this could all have been avoided ... We all need to apologize as commissioners, but I can’t speak for any other commissioner but myself.”

Yates had joined Cook and City Commissioner Rhonda DiFranco in the past months on votes to try to maintain Warm Mineral Springs as a park. A July 2012 joint city-county agreement — prior to Cook’s and DiFranco’s election — called for the two local governments, as joint owners of the property, to pursue an Invitation to Negotiate for development options at the site.

Blucher’s motion passed unanimously, almost exactly 54 minutes after the discussion began.

COUNTY RESPONSE

“It took a while, but we can go forward now, which has been the County Commission’s intent all the time ... so that the Springs wouldn’t close,” County Commission Chairwoman Carolyn Mason told the *News Leader* June 27, referring to the North Port vote.

Regarding the pending closing of the resort, she added, “We all hope it will be as short as possible, so we don’t lose any momentum.”

“It’s a good start, and we need to put all the rest of the arguments behind us,” County Commissioner Nora Patterson said of the North Port Commission action.

“I’m very hopeful that we’ve turned a corner,” said County Commissioner Christine Robinson.

Robinson was optimistic that the 60-day and 30-day clauses in the new interlocal agreement — which she proposed inserting last week — “will keep the closure [of Warm Mineral Springs] to a minimum.”

Patterson added of the North Port commissioners, “I think they had to swallow hard to accept the county [agreement] as written. I think it’s a very positive sign that we should be able to work together.”

“It’s too bad it boiled down to ‘us versus them,’” Mason said. “It’s bad for the citizens.” Still, Mason added, “I think it’s all going to work out now.”

‘EVERYTHING MUST GO!’

As Warm Mineral Springs prepares to close, the current management firm, Cypress Lending, drew some raised eyebrows by announcing early this week that it was having an “Everything Must Go!” sale Saturday and Sunday, June 29 and 30, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.



*North Port City Manager Jonathan Lewis.
Photo courtesy City of North Port*

A copy of the flyer advertising the sale was forwarded to county officials on June 25. It says furnishings, wall décor, equipment and supplies will be offered to the public. “Own a piece of history!” the flyer proclaims.

In a June 25 email to County Administrator Reid, Carolyn Brown, the county’s Parks and Recreation Department director, indicated staff had verified that only items owned by Cypress Lending would be offered for sale. She added that Cypress Lending representatives had asked whether the county would be interested in purchasing anything. She planned to discuss that with North Port city officials, she noted.

Preisser, the county spokesman, told the *News Leader* on June 27 that county staff had obtained a detailed inventory list. “We have a pretty good handle on what is theirs and what is not,” he added. “We feel very confident that whatever they are offering for sale is their property.” 

WHERE DID THE MONEY GO?

“We’ve had five public-private partnerships, and that’s great. But where are the next five, and the five after that?”

Andy Dorr
Member
Downtown Community Redevelopment
Agency Extension Study Committee

”

A committee is debating whether a nearly 30-year-old funding stream for downtown Sarasota should continue. Photo by Norman Schimmel

MEMBERS OF A COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE CITY AND COUNTY COMMISSIONS BEGIN EXAMINING THE EXPENSES OF THE CITY'S COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

By Stan Zimmerman
City Editor

At first glance, it seems like the deal of the century. In 1986, the Sarasota City and County commissions agreed to create a community redevelopment agency (CRA) to fight “slum and blight” in downtown Sarasota. At that time, property in the geographically designated area was worth \$2 billion.

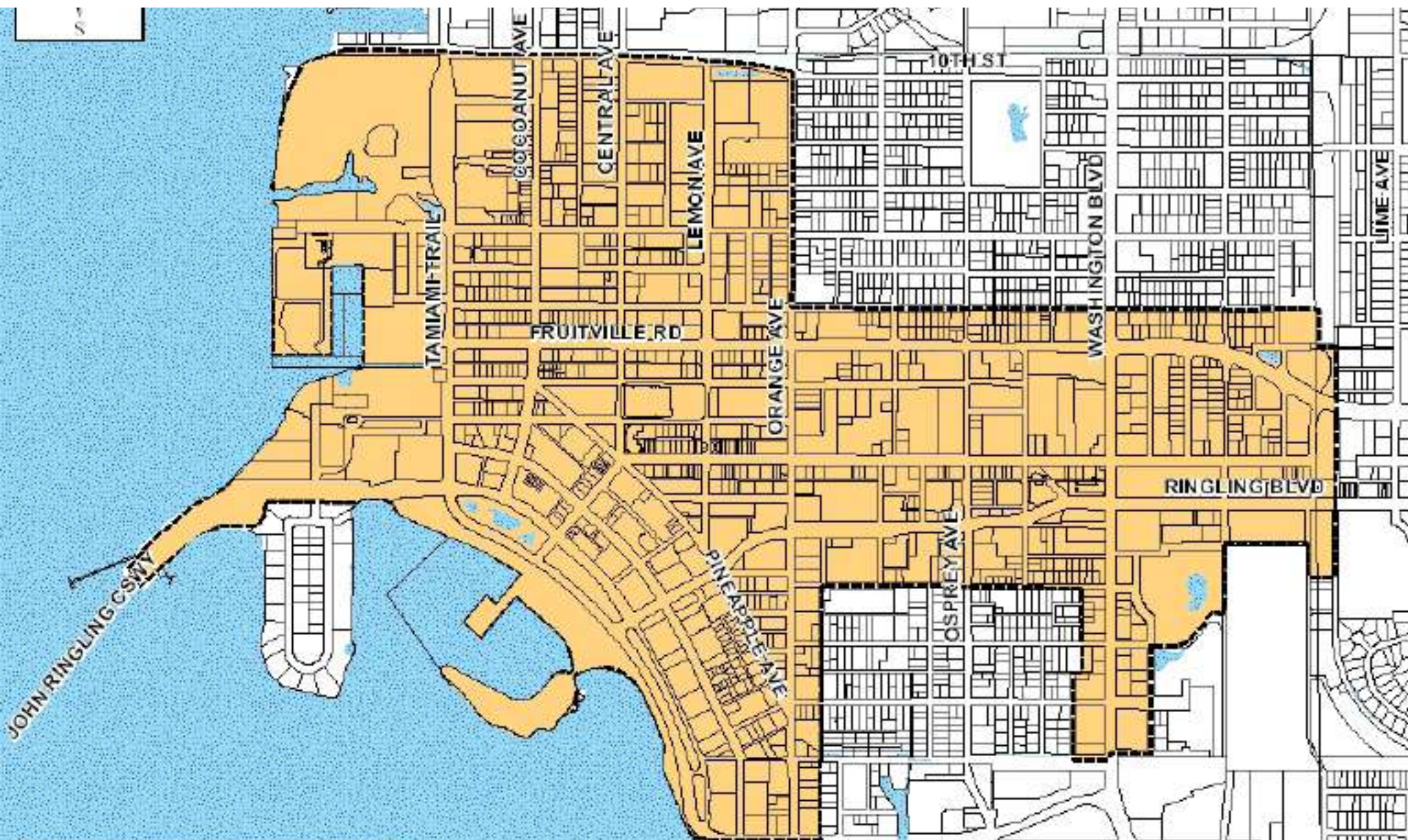
A quarter of a century later, after they spent \$76 million in CRA funds in the same area, the property was worth \$6.8 billion. The \$76 million represents about one-tenth of 1 percent of the \$6.8 billion current value; yet, CRA supporters believe that that one-tenth of 1 per-

cent investment was directly responsible for downtown values tripling.

While that explanation is much too simple, it may hold enough truth to keep the CRA alive downtown.

SHIFTING PRIORITIES

The CRA is scheduled to end in 2016 after a 30-year existence. Should it continue or be modified or even expanded? To examine those questions, the City and County commissions created a nine-member board called the Downtown Community Redevelopment Agen-



A map shows the location of the downtown community redevelopment agency district in Sarasota. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

cy Extension Study Committee. It held its second meeting on Wednesday evening, June 26.

Chairman David Merrill asked for a financial history lesson, a “how much and for what” lecture by staff. He received it in spades. The “professor” was Deputy City Manager Marlon Brown.

The CRA receives funding from city and county property taxes, and it can spend the money only within the defined boundaries. The funds come from “tax increment financing,” through which the property tax base value in the beginning year of 1986 is subtracted from the higher tax base total in subsequent years. The difference — the “increment” — grows as property tax revenue increases. For the cur-

rent year, the county’s contribution to the CRA is \$3.5 million and the city’s is \$3.1 million.

Brown took the committee through the steps of how the money is spent. One shift in the pattern appeared early in the presentation. In its first 15 years, the CRA focused tightly on “bricks and mortar,” spending between 85 and 95 percent of its money on capital improvements to the area. Therefore, it put very little into “operating transfers” — only 5 or 10 percent of the money was shifted to other uses. State laws allow a wide range for CRA expenditures.

However, in the past five years, the two categories have flip-flopped. Bricks and mortar still account for the majority of expenditures



Financial records show downtown Sarasota has benefited from the funding provided through the community redevelopment agency. Photo by Norman Schimmel

(55 percent), but operating transfers from CRA accounts to other city accounts grew to 39 percent of the total. This dynamic accelerated after 2004, when the city commissioners unilaterally decided that they could pay for police services and landscaping expenses out of CRA funds.

The shift caught the eye of Ernie Ritz, chairman of the Downtown Improvement District. He spoke during the committee's open-to-the-public section. "I've seen us start to use CRA funds as a general fund, money coming out of the CRA going for police and other things I don't think the CRA was created to do," he said.

Current "inter-fund transfers" include \$1 million for police services within the CRA area, \$540,000 for landscape maintenance, \$265,000 for street and highway maintenance, \$85,000 for the Robert L. Taylor Community Complex and \$725,000 to run two redevelopment offices (one for downtown; one for Newtown).

PARTNERSHIPS EXAMINED

Brown pointed to several locations where CRA investment in public-private partnerships produced great benefits. In 2003, the CRA provided almost \$5 million to bring a Whole Foods grocery to downtown Sarasota.

The year the deal was cut, the property was assessed for tax purposes at \$3.2 million. Today it is on the tax rolls for \$57.4 million. The project includes a parking garage with 300 public spaces and 95 condominiums. It has paid \$6.6 million in property taxes since it was developed.



Deputy City Manager Marlon Brown. Photo by Norman Schimmel

A 2005 agreement with The New York Times Co. paid for a variety of impact and building fees and construction of stormwater retention facilities for a new headquarters for the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (then owned by the NYT Co.). The CRA paid \$768,000 to keep the newspaper offices downtown, after the *Herald-Tribune* threatened to build a complex on Fruitville Road in the county.

Since that deal was inked, the building owners have paid \$1.7 million in property taxes. The assessment jumped from \$5.7 million in 2006 to nearly \$14 million in 2012.

The Courthouse Centre project directly west of the historic courthouse on Ringling Boulevard was awarded \$250,000 for underground utilities and streetscape improvements. The land was valued at \$1.8 million when the deal was made in 2003. Today it is worth \$19.1 million, and the property owner has paid \$2.8 million in taxes.

Committee member Michael Beaumier noted these projects also generated other economic benefits beyond property taxes. "There's sales tax generated, and jobs are created and other developments around them," he said.

Member Chris Gallagher piled on. "And [document stamp] fees, occupational licenses, building permits — even now when a condo gets remodeled," he pointed out.

Others were not convinced. Casey Colburn asked, "What kind of return is associated with these investments? I want to see where the money was spent and what happened in that area."


PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

The political, physical and logical boundaries of the CRA were the final elements of focus during the meeting. Member Katie Leonard noted the gap between 10th and 17th Streets separating the Newtown fraction of the CRA from the downtown fraction. "How do we support Newtown with a plan that is more coherent and seamless?" she asked.

Chairman Merrill suggested other sites might be included in an expanded CRA. "Perhaps some of the areas near Payne Park should be included. And the gap between Newtown and downtown, that's a logical place. Boundaries issues may be an area for discussion," he said.

Member Andy Dorr suggested a physical audit of the CRA to find more pockets of slum and blight to address. "There's some terrible building stock in the area," he noted. "How do we evolve the boundary lines? The city and county are now focused on the North [Tamiami] Trail. Should we extend the CRA to include the commercial district on both sides of the North Trail?"

Dorr asked when the next public-private partnerships would arise. "We've had five public-private partnerships, and that's great. But where are the next five, and the five after that?"

Merrill closed the discussion by noting the CRA is a supplementary fund. "If it went away, would we cut policing in downtown or Newtown?" he asked rhetorically. "Some say we've fulfilled our role and it should expire. Should it ever end? All these things will have to fit into our report." 

FOLLOWING HIGH POINT'S LEAD



Main Street in High Point, NC, is damp from a recent shower. Photo by Lindy676 via Wikimedia Commons

POLICE DETECTIVES ARE ROUNDING UP 'FIRST TIER' CRIMINALS AND WARNING THOSE IN THE 'SECOND TIER' TO SHAPE UP OR MEET THE SAME FATE

By Stan Zimmerman
City Editor

Sarasota police are quietly beginning to utilize the “High Point strategy” to take violent offenders off the streets with the help of community residents. Several sources have confirmed the action, named after a North Carolina city that used it to cut crime significantly.

City police officers are using parole violations, drug sales and other charges to move

offenders to prison, and local judges are setting high bails to keep them from returning to the streets. The strategy calls for the offenders to receive stiff sentences as an incentive to urge lower-tier criminals to go straight.

“*We’ve been recruiting community partners since last year.*”

David Grant
Detective
Sarasota Police Department

The anti-crime offensive began earlier this month. “They grabbed 20, and the bonds were amazing,” said one source knowledgeable about jail activity. “Nobody made bond.”

Police are now identifying “second-tier” offenders, who will be offered a second chance to become productive members of the community, or they will face the fate of those in the “first tier.” Through the Police Department’s use of “deferred prosecution,” home visits and “letters of intent,” the second-tier violators are being given the opportunity to change their ways at a distance from the criminal justice system.

Sarasota Police officers are calling the operation DMI — drug market intervention, and they are focusing on the Newtown area.

“After the case is made, those without a history of violence will be called in and be offered options,” said Sarasota Police Det. David Grant. “We’ve been recruiting community partners since last year.”

‘WE MAKE CASES’

Grant pointed out that the offensive is, at its heart, basic police work. “We do what we always do. We make cases,” said Grant. “In the past, we’ve turned people over to the court system, and most received minimum sentences.”

“The second tier is different. If you dry up the [drug] market, you don’t have street violence. That’s what we’re trying to do,” Grant added.

The DMI works on two levels, he said. “It is aggressive policing for those selling narcotics,” Grant noted. “Theoretically, we want to eliminate hand-to-hand drug sales, because that automatically eliminates the street violence that goes with it.”

The second prong is taking longer. The police are working to create support in the sur-



Sarasota Police Chief Bernadette DiPino prepares to address a meeting of the City Coalition of Neighborhood Associations shortly after beginning her tenure early this year. Photo by Stan Zimmerman



Vice Mayor Willie Shaw. Photo by Norman Schimmel

rounding community to help the second-tier offenders with mentoring and other assistance. “We’re putting in a strong foundation,” said Grant.


“The byproduct will be the trust of the community, to have the faith to call us,” he added. “We have to win over the confidence of the people. We’re not here just to arrest people.”

POLITICAL WILL

The High Point strategy was imposed from the top down. The City Commission, and especially Commissioner Willie Shaw, urged the city police to use it. When the city manager, under the guidance of the commission, selected a new police chief late last year, the High Point strategy was one of the make-or-break questions for applicants. All five finalists expressed support for the strategy.

When Bernadette DiPino was selected as the new chief, Grant said it was clear from the outset where she stood. “There was no doubt the chief was on board from day one,” he pointed out. “I recall a meeting on her first day about this.”

Grant says the State Attorney’s Office is backing the High Point strategy as well. “They’ve stood behind it from the beginning,” he said. State Attorney Ed Brodsky participated in the initial trip Sarasota officials took to North Carolina to examine first-hand how the strategy worked.

The strategy was put in a nutshell during a June 12 police promotion ceremony. James Rieser, who was promoted to detective lieutenant, told the crowd of well-wishers, “If you’re dealing drugs, you’d better stop, because here we come.” 

A photograph of the Marine Corps War Memorial in Washington, D.C. The bronze statue depicts five Marines in combat gear raising the American flag on a rocky shore. In the background, the Washington Monument and the U.S. Capitol dome are visible under a clear sky.

SCC PREVIEW

A Sarasota man wants the city's bayfront to become home to a copy of the Marine Corp Memorial depicting the flag raising on Iwo Jima. Image by dbking via Wikimedia Commons

THE JULY 1 CITY COMMISSION AGENDA WILL FOCUS ON A MEDICAL SPA PLANNED FOR THE NORTH TRAIL, A NEW LEASH LAW FOR PAYNE PARK, POLICE DEPARTMENT TASERS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING THE PUBLIC ART COMMITTEE

By Stan Zimmerman
City Editor

Tasers, leashes and the Public Art Committee are on the Monday, July 1, Sarasota City Commission agenda. But the hot item will be the conclusion of a public hearing on a medical spa on North Tamiami Trail.

UNDERLYING ISSUES

Fusion Healthcare wants to build a medical spa on about half an acre at 1174 Hampton Road, immediately west of the Tamiami Trail

in the Tahiti Park neighborhood. The facility would use in-patient techniques to address skin problems.

It would be the first commercial use ever allowed in the neighborhood. That became possible when the City Commission changed the land use of the property in 2008 without notifying the neighbors. The action was part of an omnibus change to the city's comprehensive

plan, allowing the rezoning of the property from Residential to Community Commercial.

Tahiti Park residents did not learn about the change until long after it had been made, and they feared commercial intrusion into their area. The zoning change sought by the applicant would allow a gas station, convenience store, bar or liquor store should Fusion sell the property at some point.

The Planning Board recommended denial of the petition. The City Commission took testimony on March 4 and June 3. Monday's public hearing will be the wrap-up session, with cross-examination and rebuttal before the commissioners decide what to do.

FAILING TASERS

Police Chief Bernadette DiPino will come forward Monday to tell the commissioners her department has applied for a \$35,406 grant from the Office of Justice Assistance to buy 26 Tasers as part of an effort to replace all the department's "stun guns."

Tasers are pistols that fire darts containing a high voltage that disables people, but they are designed to be non-lethal.

DiPino says the Tasers carried by her officers are first-generation equipment that has been in use for nine years, and they are out of warranty.

She is not requesting funding. The public hearing is a requirement of the grant.



A U.S. Military officer holds an M26 Taser. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Military via Wikimedia Commons

LEASH LAW

The city commissioners will also hold a public hearing to add Payne Park to the areas requiring leashes on dogs. The Parks, Recreation and Environmental Protection Board recommends the change.

The city already declared the new children's playground at Payne Park to be a pet-free zone.

If approved, leashes would be required on dogs at Bayfront and Island Park, Gillespie Park, Arlington Park and Payne Park. The city law also says a leash may be no longer than 26 feet.

SAVE OUR SAVE OUR SEABIRDS

The status of Save Our Seabirds (SOS) in Ken Thompson Park comes under review Mon-

day. At least one volunteer is alleging major violations of the organization's lease to use city property. The group recently ousted its founder, Lee Fox. (See the related story in this issue.)

Gregory Para swore out an affidavit making several allegations after he served as a volunteer at SOS from August 2012 until March 2013. He said the organization "does not have qualified or certified personnel on staff to make qualified medical decisions for 'sick or disabled waterfowl' since removing the founder."

Because the bird sanctuary sits on city property, the City Commission is the ultimate landlord. It is rare for a leasehold to be brought before the commission before the end of its lease. In the case of Save Our Seabirds, the lease does not end until 2018.



Leashes soon may be required on pets in Payne Park. Photo by Norman Schimmel

WHO IS ADVISING WHOM?

The final item on the agenda Monday reflects a rare role reversal. Normally, advisory boards provide advice to the City Commission. But Monday, the commission will be providing advice to its Public Art Committee.

The arts group has scheduled a special meeting on July 3 to consider the donation of a statue commemorating the capture by the U.S. Marines of Iwo Jima during World War II. It is an iconic statue, widely recognized. Other copies are at Arlington National Cemetery and the gates of the Marine Corps base at Quantico, VA.

Commissioner Susan Chapman asked that the item be placed on the City Commission agenda, because it appears to her the decision on the donation of the statue is being unduly accelerated.

In an email to staff, Chapman asked, “Why is a special meeting of the public art advisory committee being set on July 3, the day before a national holiday, just to consider the Iwo Jima statue? This is hardly fair to the general public which needs adequate notice and the opportunity to consider this at a time

when all can be present and appear. This type of fast-tracking of controversial items is a recipe for another public embarrassment.” **SNL**

“Why is a special meeting of the public art advisory committee being set on July 3, the day before a national holiday, just to consider the Iwo Jima statue?”

Susan Chapman
Commissioner
City of Sarasota



The City Commission sits in session on June 17. Photo by Norman Schimmel

RAISES OR NOT?

Sarasota County Top Employers Compensation Comparison

Sarasota Memorial Hospital (3rd largest employer in County)

- FY12 = 4% average increase (range from 0% to 4.5%)
- FY13 & FY14 = 3% average increase (range from 0% to 3.5%) each year

Publix (4th largest employer in County)

- FY13 = 3.5% average increase
- FY14 = 3.5% budgeted merit increase based on performance

PGT (6th largest employer in County)

- FY12 & FY13 = 2% across-the-board each year
- FY14 = Hoping to start merit increases

FCCI (9th largest employer in County)

- FY12 & FY13 = 3% budgeted each year; increases based on performance

A chart provides compensation comparisons for other employers in Sarasota County. Sarasota County Government is the second largest employer in the county. Image courtesy Sarasota County

WITH REQUESTS FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, THE COUNTY COMMISSION HOLDS OFF ON A VOTE REGARDING MERIT PAY INCREASES FOR NON-UNION COUNTY WORKERS

By Rachel Brown Hackney
Editor

It may be the last budget workshop of the summer — as it was last year — before the Sarasota County Commission decides whether to provide a pay boost to non-union county employees in the next fiscal year.

Commissioner Nora Patterson raised the issue at the end of more than seven hours of presentations and discus-

sions during a June 21 budget workshop, as the board considered requests from both county constitutional officers and its own department heads. There were no takers.

“If I were asked today, saying if I’ve got to fish or cut bait, I would probably support the salary increase ...

Nora Patterson
Commissioner
Sarasota County

“Mr. [Randall] Reid is asking for that now,” Patterson said of a decision on the county administrator’s proposal for a 3 percent merit pay increase.

“It seems to me that’s a major budget item and probably should be put on the table,” Patterson added.

Steve Botelho, the county’s chief financial planning officer, told *The Sarasota News Leader* on June 26 that, excluding constitutional officers’ employees and bargaining units, the total estimate of the pay raise in the FY 2014 budget is \$927,000 to the general fund and an additional \$973,000 to other funds (utilities, stormwater, water and solid waste, for example).

No one was certain on June 21 how much the county will have to dip into its reserves for FY 2014 because a number of other decisions on expenditures remained to be made. Nonetheless, Patterson said, “If I were asked today, saying if I’ve got to fish or cut bait, I would probably support the salary increase ...”

No other commissioner offered a comment.

“So silence, to me, indicates the board is probably not ready to make that decision,” Patterson noted.

“I’m not, at this time,” Chairwoman Carolyn Mason replied.

The commissioners then directed Reid to prepare two copies of the draft budget for their next workshop — on July 10 — so they can consider the options.

Reid earlier had pointed out that they would be asked on July 10 to adopt their do-not-exceed millage rate for FY 2014 — though he stressed the commissioners already had made the commitment not to raise taxes.

The board will hold its final budget workshop on Aug. 20. On that same date in 2012, on a 4-1 vote, the board approved a \$1,000 lump-sum payment to all non-union county employees. Commissioner Christine Robinson was in the minority that day, saying she did not feel she could approve the measure while the county still was spending reserve funds to balance the budget.

As requested during the commission’s June 12 budget workshop, Reid provided details on



Steven Botelho, the county’s chief financial planning officer, listens as County Administrator Randall Reid makes a point during the June 21 budget workshop. Photo by Rachel Hackney

June 21 about plans of some of the county's other employers regarding raises. Sarasota Memorial Hospital, for example, provided a 4 percent average wage hike in the 2012 fiscal year, with an average increase of 3 percent built into the FY 2013 and FY 2014 budgets, a chart showed.

PGT Industries, the county's sixth largest employer, offered 2 percent across-the-board increases in FY 2012 and FY 2013; company representatives said they were looking at implementing merit pay adjustments in the 2014 fiscal year.

Most manufacturing companies declined to offer salary information to the county, Reid explained, because of worries about competition for workers. However, he pointed out, he meets regularly with representatives of local firms each month. One manufacturer had indicated "there are raises being given" by manufacturing companies in the area, he added.

Nonetheless, Reid continued, many smaller businesses — including "mom-and-pop" operations — are having difficulty providing higher wages because the economy has not improved sufficiently since the recession began.

Reid also pointed out to the county commissioners that between 2011 and 2014, projected figures showed the cost of Sarasota County employees' health insurance plans will have risen by 20 percent. Employees will see the annual cost of one type of family plan go from \$5,470 in FY 2013 to a projected figure of \$6,194 in FY 2014, according to a county chart.

Reid noted that the healthcare expenses keep rising in spite of the fact the county has "pretty innovative efforts to try to contain costs," including the offer of screening for various health problems.




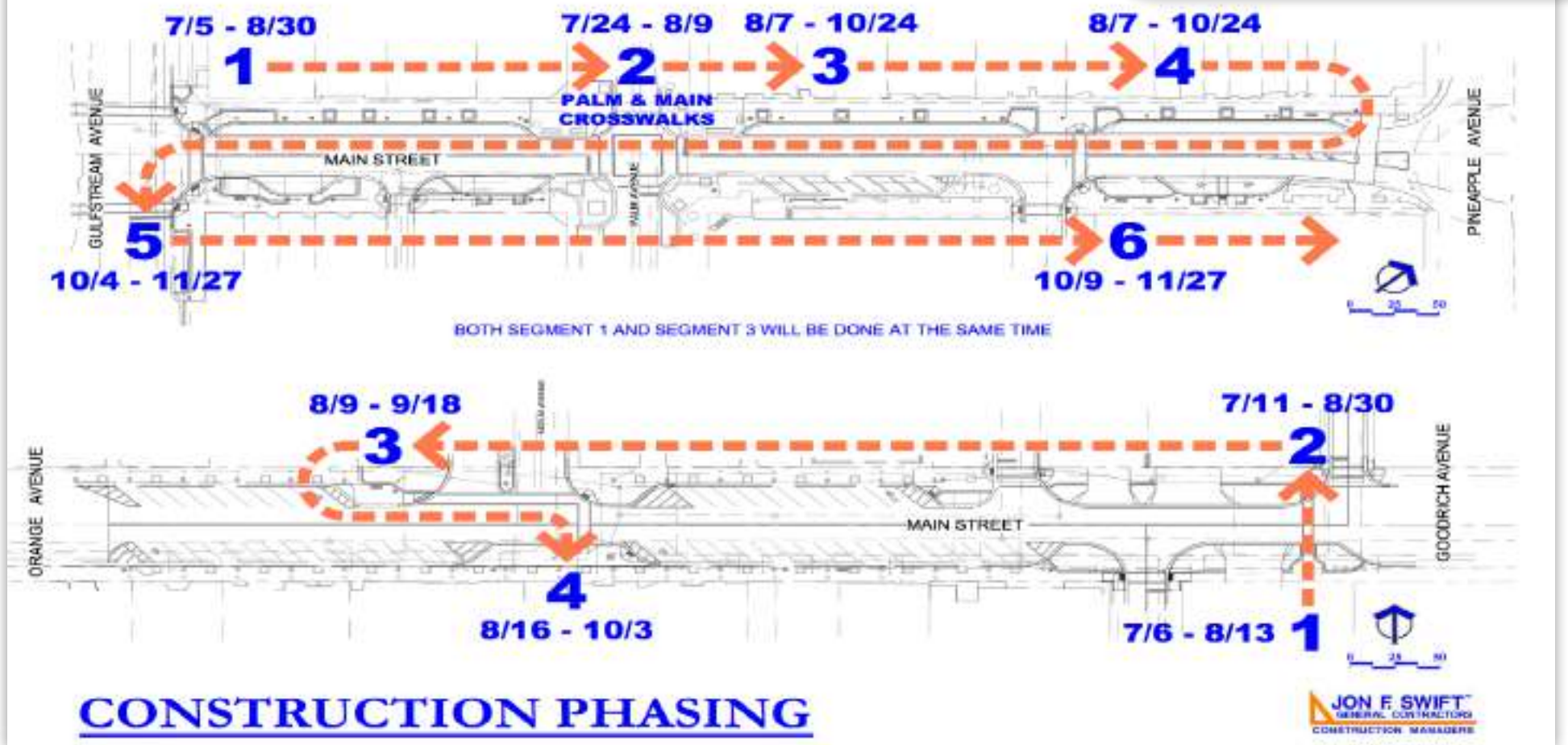
Commissioner Joe Barbetta considers a matter on June 21. Photo by Rachel Hackney

On June 12, Reid reminded the board that county employees began having to contribute 3 percent of their salaries to the Florida Retirement System (FRS) in FY 2011.

Commissioner Joe Barbetta requested data on healthcare costs for the employers on the chart Reid provided, while Robinson asked for details on how much the county pays for its employees' healthcare benefits.

Barbetta further pointed to a detail in Reid's PowerPoint presentation, showing the county had reduced its number of full-time equivalent employees by 13 percent over the past six years.

"I don't want to use that as a benchmark," Barbetta told Reid. "I want to start from today, because I think we were fat six years ago or seven years ago. We all have a different perspective on it, though. Those were good times, and we had a lot of employees." Barbetta added, "We sucked it up and trimmed it down, and things still went forward pretty well." 



These engineering drawings show the construction phasing for the upcoming work on Main Street. The contractor hopes everything will be wrapped up by Thanksgiving. Image courtesy of Jon Swift Inc. general contractors

THE MPO ENDORSES THE NORTH TAMiami TRAIL TRAFFIC PLAN; MCCURDY'S IS MOVING DOWNTOWN; MAIN STREET IMPROVEMENTS TO GET UNDER WAY

By Stan Zimmerman
City Editor

On Monday, June 24, the Sarasota-Manatee Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) unanimously approved a plan for north U.S. 41 from 14th Street to University Parkway, including four traffic roundabouts.

Do not look for construction to begin soon, however. The project goes to the bottom of a priority list, coming in at No. 29.

The MPO is composed of elected leaders of the two counties and their respective cities.

The estimated construction cost would be \$52 million from state and federal funds. However,

segments of the project — the roundabout at University Parkway, for example — could be accomplished as an intersection improvement through use of other funding sources.

The multi-modal plan for U.S. 41 includes not only roadway and intersection improvements but also pedestrian walkways, landscaping and bicycle lanes. The project could climb higher on the priority list next year, when MPO members create a new five-year plan.

LAUGHS MOVING DOWNTOWN

After a quarter-century run in an old movie theater on the North Tamiami Trail, McCurdy's Comedy Club will be moving downtown, practically next-door to another laughter-filled building, the historic Sarasota County Courthouse.

The iconic comedy venue will be moving into the Courthouse Square building near The Melting Pot fondue restaurant.

MEN AT WORK: DOWNTOWN

Construction will begin Monday, July 8, on aesthetic improvements to Main Street. New plantings, better pedestrian access, brick crosswalks and more are planned. The \$1.9 million project is funded by the Downtown



McCurdy's Comedy Club will be moving into a storefront by The Melting Pot in downtown Sarasota. Image from Google Maps



This banner, held up by Downtown Improvement District member Dr. Mark Kaufman (right) and DID Operations Manager John Moran, will let people know businesses are operating as usual while Main Street improvements are under way. Photo by Stan Zimmerman

Improvement District, through which downtown property owners tax themselves to make the area safer and prettier.

Work on the first and third segments will be done simultaneously. Section two will get under way next summer.

Cognizant of the traffic debacle caused by the construction of the 1350 Main Street condominium complex several years ago, the DID board has insisted traffic will be obstructed as little as possible.

IWO JIMA, HERE WE COME


The Sarasota City Public Art Committee's special meeting scheduled for July 3 will consider the donation of a 20-foot-high statue of the U.S. Marine Corp's flag raising on the Pacific island of Iwo Jima on Feb. 23, 1945. The iconic image graces the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia and the U.S. Marine Corps base in Quantico, VA.

Thomas Savage would like to install the sculpture on the Sarasota bayfront, facing U.S. 41 south of the *Unconditional Surrender* statue.

On July 3, Savage is expected to present his application to donate the artwork to the city. (See the *SCC preview* story in this issue.) The application says, "The popular *Unconditional Surrender*, the second greatest icon of WWII, will be joined by the number-one icon of WWII, Felix de Weldon's original Iwo Jima sculpture. These two historical treasures honor both [the] service and sacrifice of over 400,000 veterans in Sarasota and nearby counties. [A] plaque will honor [the] artist, donors and history of the sculpture."

Savage estimates the price will be \$1.2 million, plus \$50,000 for annual maintenance and insurance. The money would be raised through donations.

His plans include lighting, a fountain and a

flower garden midway between the two sculptures, along with protective barriers to prevent another motorist from crashing into the artwork. Last summer, *Unconditional Surrender* suffered extensive damage when a vehicle plowed into it. 



Taking credit where it is due, the Downtown Improvement District will plant this temporary sign in numerous places to make sure the public knows the improvements are not coming thanks to the city or the downtown redevelopment district. Photo by Stan Zimmerman



BUILDING ON THE BEST OF TIMES

*A Visit Sarasota County trip to Asheville, NC, prompted planning for a new tourism grant program.
Photo by Abe Ezekowitz via Wikimedia Commons*

THE COUNTY'S TOURISM ADVISORY BOARD OFFERS SUGGESTIONS FOR A NEW GRANT PROGRAM DESIGNED TO BRING EVEN MORE VISITORS TO THE AREA, ESPECIALLY IN THE OFF SEASON

By Rachel Brown Hackney
Editor

When Visit Sarasota County President Virginia Haley appeared before the members of the county's Tourist Development Council (TDC) last week, she talked of how the May tourism figures were the best ever — even exceeding the numbers for May 2012, which were record-breakers at that time.

Then Haley began making her case for a new grants program designed to bring even

more tourists to the community for overnight stays.

The TDC gave its consensus for the initiative to provide funding for new events as well as new and improved facilities, but with a recommendation that

the process be flexible in how the dollars are allocated. In other words, no set percentage should go to either capital projects or facilities each cycle.

“*I expect we will see a pretty darn good June, [too].*”

Virginia Haley
President
Visit Sarasota County



A VERY GOOD MAY

Regarding the May tourism numbers: “I actually was not looking forward to [them],” Haley said, “and they definitely surprised me.”

Comparing the figures to those from May 2012, the latest set showed the number of visitors to the county was up 8.6 percent; tourists’ spending was 14 percent higher; the occupancy rate for hotels/motels was up 6 percent; room rates were 5.5 percent higher; and the amount of revenue realized from available rooms rose 11.9 percent.

Furthermore, Haley noted, Visit Sarasota County had provided \$60,000 to enable internationally known aerialist Nik Wallenda to

train for two weeks at Nathan Benderson Park off University Parkway before Wallenda flew to Arizona for his Grand Canyon wire walk on June 23. As a result, Haley said, as of June 20, 83 million domestic media impressions mentioned Wallenda’s Sarasota connection. (A media impression is a single look at a news article or TV show, for example.)

That figure did not include his *Today Show* appearance that morning, she added.

Given the fact that the [Sarasota Music Festival](#) and the Pan-Am Masters Swimming Championships had brought thousands of visitors to the county this month, Haley said, “I expect we will see a pretty darn good June, [too].”

Then it was on to something new.



Funding aid from Sarasota County enabled the Sarasota YMCA to install shade shelters at its Selby Aquatic Center before the Pan-Am Masters competitions were held this month. Photo courtesy Sarasota County

THE PROPOSED GRANTS PROGRAM

On May 1, Haley pointed out, 12.5 percent of the revenue from one penny of the 5-cent Tourist Development Tax (TDT) had become available for use in new tourism promotion. That funding stream is expected to produce about \$350,000 to \$400,000 per year, she pointed out.

A couple of years ago, in anticipation of that revenue's availability, she continued, Visit Sarasota County (VSC) staff and its board began pondering how best to utilize the money. During a trip to Asheville, NC — VSC's first inter-city trip to pursue tourism-related ideas — VSC representatives learned how that city was able to boost its visitor revenue by developing new tourism capital projects. "And we really thought that was a missing link" for Sarasota County, Haley added.

Visit Sarasota County representatives discussed that concept further with the TDC members in April, Haley reminded them, and won their approval to move forward with it. Additional discussions with community residents revealed a desire that the program be broadened to include funding for new or expanded events as well as capital projects, Haley explained.

If the decision is made to include funding of new events in the program, she added, her staff and board recommend such events receive a maximum of \$50,000 per year for two years. In other words, the most a new event could get from the program would be \$100,000, she said, and the funds could cover no more than half the total budget for it.



Visit Sarasota County President Virginia Haley addresses the County Commission in May. Photo by Norman Schimmel

Moreover, Haley pointed out, the program guidelines would make it very clear that if a group won funding for an event that ultimately was cancelled, the money would have to be returned to VSC. Any group should be wise enough to buy event insurance, she noted.

One important factor in considering funding a new event would be its scheduling, Haley pointed out, with preference given to activities offered "when we really need a boost in tourism."

Additionally, applicants "would have to demonstrate that [the event] does not replicate something that is already in the county."

For example, she said, Longboat Key could not seek funding for a shark tooth festival, because Venice already hosts such an annual

event. One firm rule would be “you ... wouldn’t be hurting an existing event.”

“What if they’re at a totally different time,” asked Commissioner Nora Patterson, who chairs the TDC.

“Good point,” Haley responded.

Perhaps consideration should be given to an event similar to one already held during the year as long as the new event was scheduled at a different time, Haley said.

TDC member Cheryl Cook, a North Port city commissioner, noted that events held in south county that might be similar to those held in north county still could generate more tourist visits.

THE CAPITAL SIDE

Returning to the concept for capital projects, Haley pointed out that state regulations governing use of TDT revenue necessitate that only publicly owned and operated or not-for-profit owned and operated facilities could be considered for financial support.

The idea, she said, is to offer a grant application cycle every other year, with funds provided to projects costing a minimum of \$50,000; the money would have to be used over a period no longer than five years.

One basic tenet of that aspect of the program, Haley pointed out, also would be the restric-

TPDP Process

- Applicants must show new room nights generated.
- Present economic impact potential.
- Provide pro forma on future operations and maintenance of the project.
- Project benchmarks and timeline.
- Demonstrate the other funding and partnerships in the project.

A graphic shows proposed guidelines for applicants seeking funding through a new county tourism grant program. Image courtesy Visit Sarasota County

tion that the funds could never cover more than half the cost of the project.

While the focus initially was on new projects, Haley continued, later discussion had centered on whether the program should cover renovations or expansions of existing facilities. For example, Haley said, the county provided funds to improve the Selby Aquatic Center at the YMCA on Potter Park Drive, to enable it to host the Pan-Am competitions and bid for future events.

Asheville had one good example of how renovating a facility had enabled it to boost tourism, Haley said. The lobby of a popular club-type venue was remodeled to expand the facility's seating capacity by 20 percent.

"I would support the expansion of existing [facilities]," said TDC Vice Chairman John Ryan.

Before she takes the concept to the County Commission in September for its comments, Haley said, it appeared a number of refinements in the program guidelines would be necessary, including clear definitions of "new."

TDC member David Brenner, a Longboat Key town commissioner, suggested Haley and her


staff employ the words "innovative" or "creative" instead of "new" for events and facilities.

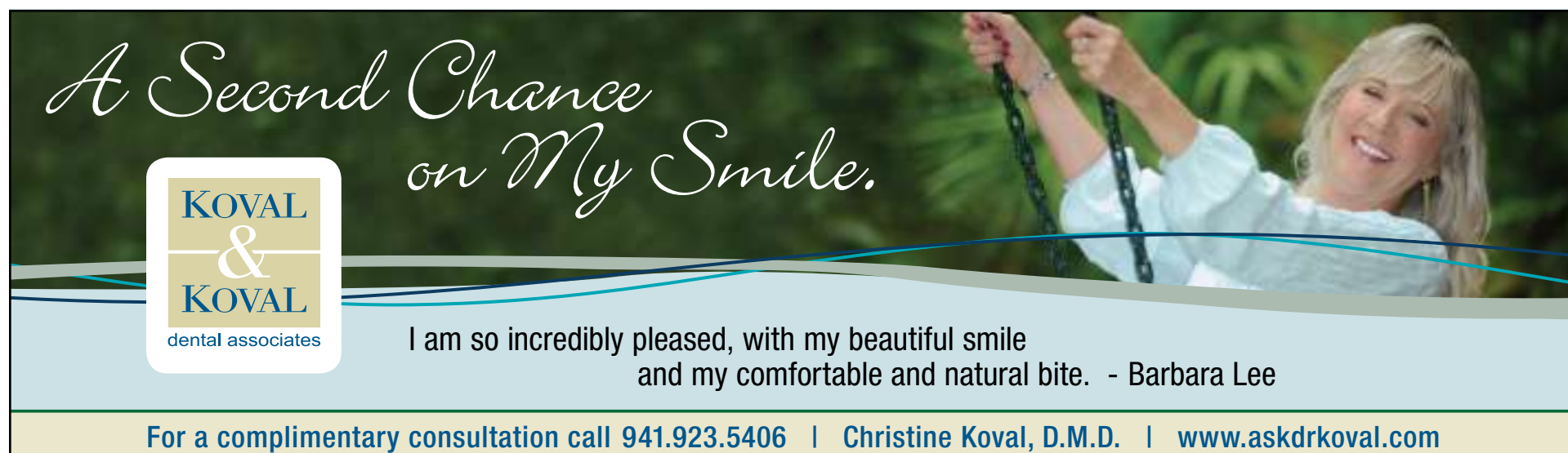
Patterson told Haley, "I guess I lean towards the capital projects rather than the events, just because the capital projects give you a permanent capacity. So I don't think we should box ourselves in."

After further discussion, the TDC members gave their consensus to Haley to include events in the planning for the program.

TDC member Norman Schimmel of Sarasota suggested the application process award more points to an activity that would occur, or facility that would be used, at times when the county had few tourism-related events taking place.

Haley told the TDC members that after the revised concept — with their suggestions — is presented to the County Commission in September, she would incorporate the latter board's ideas and bring the plan back to the TDC for further discussion.

The County Commission will be responsible for final approval of the program. 



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WIN-WIN



(From left) Sherri Reynolds of the Sarasota County Schools, state Rep. Doug Holder of Sarasota and Kathryn Shea, Florida Center president and CEO, were among the participants at last year's Legislative Breakfast. Photo courtesy Kathryn Shea

LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST A SUCCESS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

By Cooper Levey-Baker
Associate Editor

As the cliché goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. That's why little will change at this year's legislative summit and Legislative Breakfast of Champions, organized each year by the Community Alliance of Sarasota County to educate area lawmakers on the highest-priority community health issues facing the area.

Last November, Alliance representatives and other stakeholders met over breakfast with state Rep. Doug Holder of Sarasota and Sen. Mike Bennett of Bradenton and staffers from the offices of state Sen. Nancy Detert of Venice and Reps.

Greg Steube and Ray Pilon, both of Sarasota. One by one, the Alliance representatives outlined the most important budget and funding issues local nonprofits were facing, pushing the legislators to support them during the spring session in Tallahassee.

“*Our delegation was behind us 100 percent on our priority issues.*”

Kathryn Shea
President and CEO
The Florida Center for Early Childhood

And, well, it worked.

“Our delegation was behind us 100 percent on our priority issues,” says Kathryn Shea, the president and CEO of The Florida Center for

Early Childhood and the chairwoman of the Alliance's legislative advocacy committee. “We have done a really good job cultivating

our legislators and letting them know more about who we are.”

That means more than just asking for money. Shea credits Alliance members for stepping up as a resource for the delegation. When Detert had a question about how the proposed expansion of Medicaid would affect the state’s elderly population, the group provided answers, saving Detert valuable staff time. When state Rep. Jim Boyd of Bradenton had a question about funding for the Florida Center’s fetal alcohol clinic, Shea was there to help. “We are seen as problem solvers,” she says.


The Alliance based its strategy on one used by health and human services nonprofits on the Treasure Coast, but it’s still a rarity in Florida politics. “It does seem like a no-brainer, but there are actually very few communities in the state of Florida that are holding these legislative summits and breakfasts,” Shea points out.

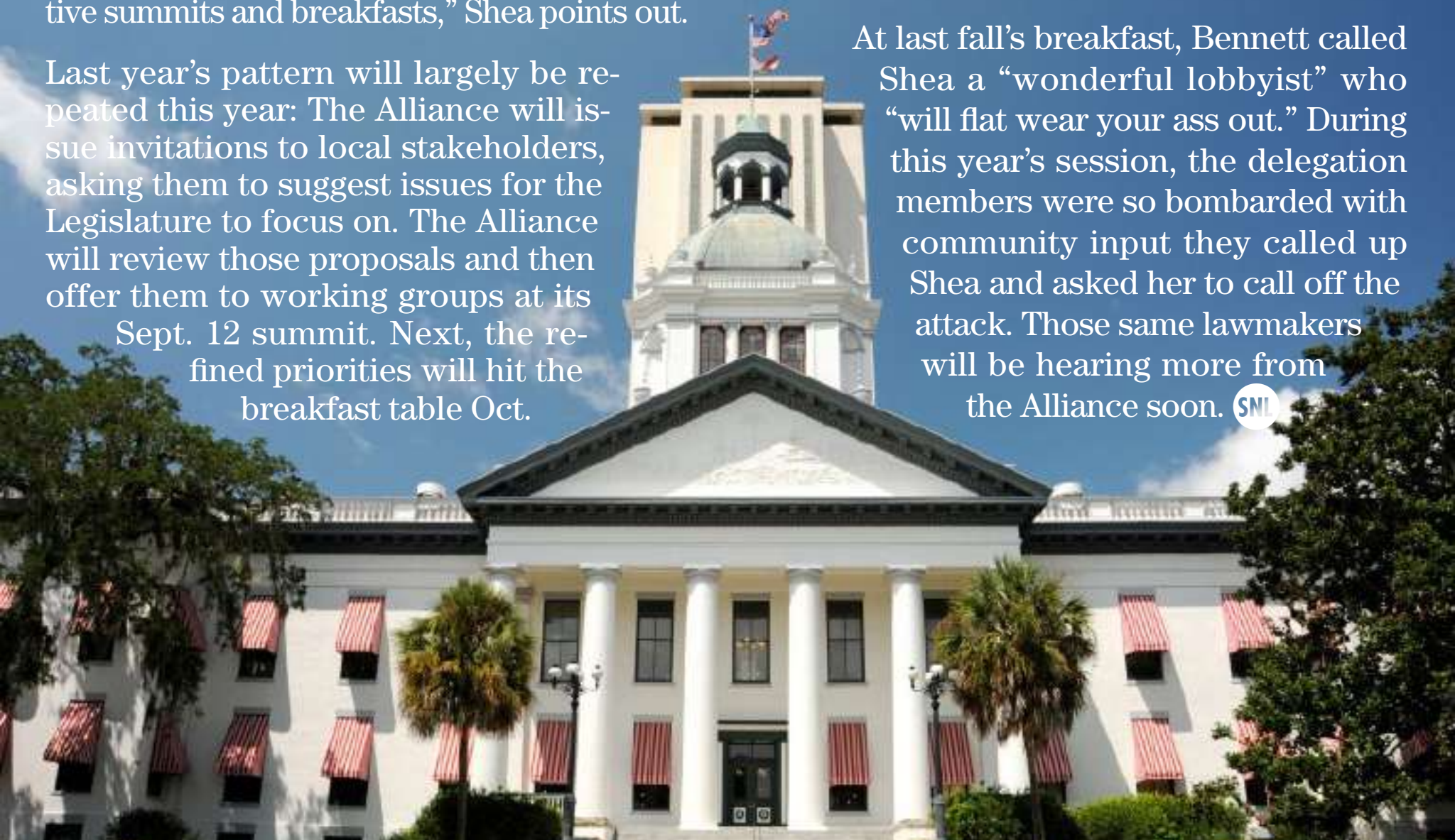
Last year’s pattern will largely be repeated this year: The Alliance will issue invitations to local stakeholders, asking them to suggest issues for the Legislature to focus on. The Alliance will review those proposals and then offer them to working groups at its Sept. 12 summit. Next, the refined priorities will hit the breakfast table Oct.

17. The biggest change to the process will be the addition of a legislative training session, intended to educate local nonprofits about the ins and outs of the bill and budget process.

Shea says the one source of disappointment during this year’s legislative session was the decision to reject federal money to expand Medicaid as part of ObamaCare, despite Gov. Rick Scott’s well-publicized about-face on the issue. Shea remains flabbergasted by the decision to “leave the federal dollars on the table.”

Not that the issue’s dead. Some lawmakers are still urging Scott to call a special session to deal with ObamaCare, and its implementation will certainly be debated in the spring of 2014, when the Legislature next meets. Alliance members and community advocates will surely have something to say about it.

At last fall’s breakfast, Bennett called Shea a “wonderful lobbyist” who “will flat wear your ass out.” During this year’s session, the delegation members were so bombarded with community input they called up Shea and asked her to call off the attack. Those same lawmakers will be hearing more from the Alliance soon. 



The modern Florida legislative building stands tall behind the Capitol in Tallahassee. Image from iStockphoto



QUESTIONS AND CONFUSION

The County Commission listens to budget requests on June 21. Photo by Norman Schimmel

AFTER WADING THROUGH ACCOUNTING CHANGES AND DEBATING SOME REQUESTS FOR FUNDING IN THE 2014 FISCAL YEAR, THE COUNTY COMMISSION AGREES TO A FEW NEW EXPENSES

By Rachel Brown Hackney
Editor

The Sarasota County commissioners last week approved several new expenditures for their 2014 fiscal year — including the hiring of two extra employees to root out unlicensed contractors.

However, Commissioner Christine Robinson appeared to be speaking for the entire board at one point when she said, “Today’s budget [presentation] was, unfortunately for me, confusing and somewhat disorganized.”

After spending almost three hours in the

morning and close to 3½ hours that afternoon listening to spending proposals from the county’s constitutional officers — including Sheriff Tom Knight (see the related story in this issue) and Clerk of Court Karen Rushing — as well as those of county department chiefs, Robinson told her colleagues she could not approve any of the requests that day.

A major change in how personnel are being reallocated to departments prompted numerous commission questions as the after-

“ *From what I see, [the reserve spending] went from seven figures to eight figures today ...* ”

Christine Robinson
Commissioner
Sarasota County

noon wore on. Because of board complaints over the past year about how accounting procedures have clouded actual spending on construction projects, County Administrator Randall Reid and his staff dismantled the Operations and Maintenance (O&M) Department. Instead, as Reid put it in his June 21 budget PowerPoint presentation, “Service responsibilities are aligned directly to the responsible departments.”

Starting with the 2014 fiscal year, if a Parks and Recreation Department employee spends time on a project such as the planning for improvements at Siesta Key Public Beach, for example, that expense will be reflected in the Parks and Recreation budget — not the O&M budget.

The other major change has been the creation of two new departments — General Services and Field Services, which oversee county

maintenance. That change is designed “to ensure optimal service delivery and responsibility,” Reid’s presentation pointed out.

However, those changes meant more than 5,000 line items had to be adjusted before the FY 2014 budget could be drafted, Reid said, and that work was not complete by June 21.

Those missing line items, Robinson told staff, made it impossible for her to comprehend the actual staffing changes being proposed for each department.

“It’s been very frustrating to me as well,” Reid said.

For example, the Natural Resources Department’s one-page slide in the PowerPoint presentation indicated the total number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees it has in the current fiscal year is 46, while 46.35 will be included in the FY 2014 budget.



Commissioners Charles Hines and Nora Patterson consider funding requests by Sarabeth Kalajian, the county's library system director. Photo by Norman Schimmel

Amy Meese, director of that department, told the commission her FTE count actually had decreased because of the O&M changes. However, she was requesting one new employee: a coastal project manager position “to assist with significant coastal project demands,” according to the Natural Resources PowerPoint slide.

A chart provided to the commissioners said the position would “assist with increased workload needed to offset workload of staff on RESTORE, PDRP and Siesta Key renourishment.”

RESTORE refers to the use of funds expected to come to the county as a result of the BP

settlement related to the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. PDRP is the Post Disaster Response Plan on which county staff has been working for the past couple of years. The renourishment project is planned for Turtle Beach, tentatively beginning in the 2015 fiscal year, according to a staff report written this spring.

Referring to the BP settlement, Patterson told Meese, “It may be *years* before you have that money,” prompting Patterson to question the need for the extra employee.

Meese responded that her staff was working at capacity and more attention had to be paid to the PDRP process.

Budget Issues with General Fund Impact - For Review							
Item #	Department	Fund	Issue Title	FTE's	2014	2015	Notes
51	Communications	001	Public Records Tracking System #8		\$ 20,000	\$ 9,000	Software for logging, assigning and tracking public records requests.
52	Extension	001	EXT - Landscape Maintenance		\$ 12,000	\$ 12,000	Contracted services to replace volunteer services.
53	Extension	001	EXT - Internal Space Improvements		\$ 10,000	\$ 65,000	Re-design existing space to meet need for more storage and work space for agents. Renovation costs would be requested in FY15.
54	Field Services	001	Field Services Right of Way Mowing Maintenance Equipment		\$ 492,340	\$ 103,340	Initial purchase of 2 slope mowers and 2 p/u trucks
55	Field Services	001	Field Services Right of Way Mowing Landscaped Median Rehab		\$ 100,000	\$ 100,000	Implement program for funding of materials/Mulch and replacement vegetation of landscaped medians
56	Field Services	001	Field Services Right of Way Mowing Privacy Wall Maintenance/Restoration		\$ 100,000	\$ 100,000	Implement on-going program for maintenance and rehab of existing county privacy walls
57	Libraries	001	Libraries - Collection		\$ 100,000	\$ 200,000	Original request reduced in anticipation of greater impact fee funding. One time funding request to conduct required update. Expedites process by allowing applicants to use County survey instead of paying for one.
58	Nat Resources	001	NR - Florida Scrub-jay Survey		\$ 31,500	\$ -	
59	Real Estate	001	PDS - Surveying/Land Development LIMS		\$ 27,360	\$ 27,360	Updating of Land Management System software
60	Parks and Rec	001	Parks - Master Plan/Comp Plan		\$ 100,000	\$ 100,000	Last master plan completed in 2006, need updated plan for use of Neighborhood Parkland funds, planning for athletic fields, etc.
61	Parks and Rec	001	Parks - Exotic Plant Removal Project		\$ 50,000	\$ 50,000	Currently no dedicated line-item for removal of exotic plants/trees. Intent is to increase funding over time.

County department chiefs asked for a number of new expenses in the 2014 fiscal year budget. Image courtesy Sarasota County

By mid-afternoon, Robinson voiced concern about whether the commissioners even could manage to hear all the department heads' presentations before the end of the day, given the number of questions the board members were asking.

Reid already had noted that only the items in green on the handouts the board members had for each department involved new spending. Therefore, Patterson proposed the department chiefs discuss just the green items.

"I agree with you exactly," Reid replied. "I don't know how many times I said that [to staff prior to their presentations]."

THE DECISIONS

After the last department requests — from Spencer Anderson, director of the Field Services Department [think mowing] — Patterson suggested the board members move down the list of expenses requested, except for new personnel.

"I am not going to support any of these right now," Robinson said.

"I'm willing certainly to award some of them," Patterson responded. "I'd like to go through these," she added, unless a majority of her fellow board members disagreed.

"I don't mind going through [the list]," Mason said.

Commissioner Joe Barbetta concurred.

The following decisions resulted from that process:

- By a 4-1 vote, with Robinson dissenting, the board agreed to hire the two new Code Enforcement officers. After county staff began



Commissioner Christine Robinson. File photo

tracking data in February 2012, it found 13 felony cases, 17 misdemeanor cases, 38 citations and 456 Notices to Obtain Permits had been recorded in regard to "unlicensed/unpermitted activity in the County," according to the PowerPoint presentation.

The estimated cost for FY 2014 is \$264,842; however, fees would cover about 80 percent of that, with the remainder coming out of the general fund, Assistant County Administrator Mark Cunningham explained.

Additionally, staff would be seeking board approval to amend the county zoning code to require that every contractor conspicuously post the county work permit on site, Cunningham said.

The Florida Building Code says only that the permit be *kept* on the site, he added.

Referring to the request for the two new employees, Vice Chairman Charles Hines said, "This is very, very important. ... [Contractors]

that are doing it wrong need to be put out of business.”

- By a 3-2 vote, with Robinson and Hines in the minority, the board approved an appropriation of \$100,000 for the Library System to enable it to purchase new materials for collections. Libraries Director Sarabeth Kalajian requested the funding, saying, “Our collection is pretty lean and very well-used.”

The county spent \$1.5 million on its collection in the 2007 fiscal year, Kalajian pointed out. The next year, that amount dropped to \$500,000 because of cutbacks necessitated by the recession.

“The collections are more important than the facilities,” Patterson said.

Barbetta seconded Patterson’s motion. “It’s a proven fact your library system probably is one of the best around,” he said. “Per capita, it’s very inexpensive.”

- By a 3-2 vote, with Robinson and Barbetta dissenting, the board approved about \$246,000 for specialized equipment — a “long-arm mower” — for what Field Services Director Anderson referred to as “vertical vegetation maintenance,” or tree-trimming, on the county’s rights of way, plus the cost of one pickup truck to transport the crew to the mower.

An initial motion by Patterson for one long-arm mower, plus \$100,000 for the rehabilitation of landscaped medians, failed on a 2-3 vote, with only Mason supporting Patterson.

“I still feel the most important thing that we need to do is to maintain the appearance of our community,” Patterson said.

“I agree with your reasoning,” Mason replied.

However, Barbetta pointed out that Anderson had told the board Anderson had not researched whether private firms that trim trees for utility companies could handle the vertical vegetation mowing at a lower cost. Moreover, Barbetta noted, referring to other comments Anderson had made, “We had all this equipment and we sold it ... and I’m still disturbed by that whole thing and what we’ve gone through in the past six years on mowing ...”


“It’s come back to bite us,” he added of county employees’ decision to sell mowing equipment during the recession to cut costs. “It’s a hard thing to forget,” he said, though he added he was not criticizing Anderson, who was not supervising mowing at that time.

After the first motion failed, Hines suggested the county buy one piece of equipment and one pickup truck.

THE RESERVES

By the time the discussions ended on June 21, Robinson pointed out that the board had just increased the amount of money it would be drawing from its reserve fund to plug the gap in the FY 2014 budget.

During the June 12 workshop, Steve Botelho, the county’s chief financial planning officer, had projected the amount at \$27.7 million, though he said the county used only \$9.2 million in FY 2012 and indicated it might not use much more than that in FY 2013 or FY 2014.

“From what I see,” Robinson told her colleagues, “[the reserve spending] went from seven figures to eight figures today ...” 



Culverhouse Nature Park includes a scenic pond. Photo courtesy Sarasota County

CULVERHOUSE NATURE PARK CELEBRATION SCHEDULED FOR SATURDAY

Sarasota County Parks and Recreation, Friends of Sarasota County Parks, Friends of The Legacy Trail, Friends of Palmer Ranch Parks, Friends of Culverhouse Community Garden, the Sarasota YMCA and the Palmer Ranch Master Association will host an open house celebration from 10 a.m. to noon Saturday, June 29, at the new Culverhouse Nature Park, 7301 McIntosh Road, Sarasota, the county has announced.

Culverhouse Nature Park is at the northern terminus of The Legacy Trail. Sarasota County acquired the 82-acre property in July 2010 through a donation from the Culverhouse family, a news release says. The new park is one of seven trailheads for The Legacy Trail. In addition to providing access to the trail, the

news release notes, the park offers opportunities for picnicking, hiking, bicycling and gardening.

The park hours will be from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. from April through October and from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. from November through March, the release notes.

Guided nature walks, community garden tours, surrey bicycle rides and refreshments will be available during the open house, along with park information and displays, the release adds.

For more information, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 861-5000 (TTY: 711) or visit the Sarasota County website at www.scgov.net.

CITY COMMUNITY COMPLEX GETS DONATION FOR CHILDREN'S PASSES

More than 100 eligible Sarasota children will be able to play and learn at the Robert L. Taylor Community Complex (RLTCC) at no cost for one year, thanks to a generous donation from a St. Petersburg-based philanthropic organization, the City of Sarasota has announced.

RLTCC accepted a \$7,000 donation from The Kaiserman Foundation, earmarked for RLTCC's youth pass sponsorship program for underprivileged children, a news release says. The donation will cover the costs for more than 100 children, ages 18 and under, to have full access to the recreational center, the release adds.

"We are truly grateful for the Kaiserman Foundation's generosity," said Jerry Fogle, RLTCC manager, in the release. "The Robert L. Taylor Community Complex team believes that in order to effect positive change in a community, a society must start by empowering its youth and instilling in them a sense of worth, pride and honor. The Kaiserman Foundation has as-

sisted the RLTCC team in our goal of making a difference in our community," he added in the release.

A standard annual youth pass, which costs \$166.92 (nonprofit group rates vary), gives children access to the many amenities at RLTCC, including the aquatic center, game room, gymnasium and a variety of summer youth programs, the release points out. "While the City of Sarasota has worked diligently to maintain economical prices for most budgets, some families cannot afford to purchase a youth pass," the release notes. "The youth pass sponsorship program was established to assist those families."

Although based in Pinellas County, The Kaiserman Foundation has ties to Sarasota, the release says. The nonprofit organization seeks out youth programs in the region in need of financial assistance to benefit the greater community, the release adds.

RLTCC is located at 1845 34th St. To learn more about the facility, visit www.RLTaylor.com.



The Robert L. Taylor Community Complex is located in north Sarasota. Photo courtesy City of Sarasota

GULF GATE LIBRARY DEMOLITION UNDER WAY IN SARASOTA

Demolition of the original Gulf Gate Library began at the 7112 Curtiss Avenue site in Sarasota on June 21.

The new library, which will be a two-story structure, will be erected on the same property.

In the interim, the library is operating in about 20,100 square feet of space in Westfield Sarasota Square Mall, located at 8201 S. Tamiami Trail.

The new Gulf Gate Library is scheduled to open in the autumn of 2014 with an increase in

space from 17,303 square feet to 26,000 square feet, according to an update provided to the County Commission on June 21.

When the County Commission gave final approval to the design of the facility, in late June 2012, the grand opening was planned for May 2014.

The cost of the new library is about \$10.1 million, according to the current fiscal year budget.

Staff Reports



A contractor begins to tear down the original Gulf Gate Library building on Curtiss Avenue on June 21. Photo by Norman Schimmel

CITY OF SARASOTA'S UTILITIES BOND RATING UPGRADED

The revenue bond rating for the City of Sarasota Utilities Department was upgraded last week to AA from AA-, the city has announced.

"The upgrade by Fitch Ratings signifies the Utilities Department is financially healthy and carries a very low risk of default into the foreseeable future," a city news release says. "It also represents potential future savings on interest rates," the release notes. "AA is FitchRatings third highest rating, just behind AAA and AA+," it adds.

"This is good news for the financial state of the City," said City Manager Tom Barwin in the release. "Our Utilities debt burden is declining and our liquidity has greatly improved with the sale of the Hi-Hat Ranch property," Barwin pointed out. "Meanwhile, we're executing a significant long-range capital improvement program to continue providing excellent sew-

er and water service to our customers without increasing our debt. Receiving this upgrade now truly speaks to the quality, professional job staff is doing to position the city to ensure its financial health."

Fitch Ratings cites several factors that create a stable financial outlook for the Utilities Department, including the following, according to the release:

- Scheduled declines in annual debt service this year and in 2016.
- Increased liquidity because of the sale of 2,500 acres of city-owned property in 2011.
- Systematic predictable rate increases.

Bond ratings range from AAA, the highest investment quality, to D, which indicates default.

CLARIFICATIONS

The seven Sarasota Police Department officers who will be losing their jobs at the end of this fiscal year — referenced in the June 21 article, [A Law enforcement quagmire](#) — were funded through a federal grant, City of Sarasota Public Information Officer Jan Thornburg told *The Sarasota News Leader*. "It has been known since the grant was accepted that the funding would no longer be available" after a certain point, she told the *News Leader*.

John Lege, the city's finance director, further clarified the information this week for the *News Leader*. He said the grant covered the first three years of the officers' employment, with the proviso that the city would pay for their fourth year of employment. That fourth year is ending on Sept. 30, which is the last day of the city's fiscal year. The average annu-

al cost for a city police officer is slightly more than \$100,000, according to budget records.



The June 21 article, [Tent city opens](#), incorrectly reported the source of a magazine article, *Million-Dollar Murray*. That article appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Additionally, Liz Nolan, manager of Selby Library, who was quoted in the article, asked the *News Leader* to allow her to clarify her comments.

She said she believes homelessness cannot be remedied by just spending more money on shelters. Instead, she believes the community should be putting money into proper case management services, which can help put the homeless on paths to better lives.

COMMISSIONER PATTERSON WINS PRESIDENTIAL ADVOCATE AWARD

Sarasota County District 4 Commissioner Nora Patterson has been named the recipient of the Florida Association of Counties (FAC) 2013 Presidential Advocate Award, the organization has announced.

The award was presented to Patterson on Wednesday, June 26, during FAC's Annual Conference and Educational Exposition, being held at Marriott Tampa Waterside Hotel in Tampa. "The Presidential Advocacy Award is given annually to those county commissioners from around the state who have shown exceptional leadership in partnering with FAC to advance the counties' legislative agenda," a news release says.

Patterson was honored for her leadership during the most recent legislative session in Tallahassee, the release notes. Working with the Sarasota County Legislative Delegation, she advocated on behalf of county home rule to allow smoking bans in public spaces and sought to keep the Legislature from passing a state law that would take precedence over county fertilizer ordinances designed to protect local water quality.

Patterson was elected to the Sarasota Board of County Commissioners in 1998 following two terms on the Sarasota City Commission. During her career in public service Patterson has served on numerous boards and commit-



Commissioner Nora Patterson. Photo by Rachel Hackney

tees including the Sarasota County Tourist Development Council — which she chairs — the Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Airport Advisory Board, the West Coast Inland Navigational District, the Peace River Authority and the Tampa Bay Regional Transportation Authority. In addition, she serves on the Florida Association of Counties Board of Directors.

A native of New York City, Patterson attended Duke University and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and a postgraduate degree in educational psychology from the University of Florida. She and her husband John moved to Sarasota in 1970.

The Sarasota News Leader

No-Nonsense Reporting

ZUCKER ELECTED VICE PRESIDENT OF SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

The Florida School Boards Association (FSBA) has elected Sarasota County School Board member Caroline Zucker as vice president, the organization has announced.

The action came on June 13 during the FSBA's general meeting in Tampa. Zucker, who was elected to the post by the organization's general membership, is serving a one-year term until mid-June 2014. Patty Hightower of Escambia County is the current president, a news release says.

The FSBA is a nonprofit organization representing the members of the 67 countywide school boards in the state. Its mission is "to increase student achievement through the development of effective school board leadership and advocacy for public education," the release adds.

Zucker said she is pleased to serve as vice president of FSBA because it is an opportunity to influence the direction of the organization and legislation related to public education, the news release notes.

"I want all children to have the educational advantages that will help them live up to their full potential," said Zucker in the release. "This position will allow me to participate in the decisions that will further that goal throughout Florida's public school districts."

She chairs the FSBA Bylaws and Procedures Committee and serves on the Advocacy Subcommittee of the Legislative Committee, the Long-Range Planning Committee, the Charter Schools Committee and the Task Force on Assessment and Accountability.

Zucker has served for 15 years as a Sarasota County School Board member (1992-2000



Caroline Zucker/Contributed photo

and 2006-2013). In 2012, she was appointed by Gov. Rick Scott to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention State Advisory Group. The group, which is mandated by federal law, advises the state about compliance, requirements and funding related to the federal Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act. It has 20 members, the news release adds.

She was one of the founders of the Sarasota County Juvenile Justice Council in the early 1990s and has served at various times as its chairwoman, vice chairwoman, secretary and treasurer, the release continues. The council was a forerunner of the Juvenile Justice Board. She also has served as chairwoman of the State Juvenile Justice Committee for the Florida School Boards Association, the release notes. Beginning in 2009, she served a two-year term as chairwoman of the Juvenile Justice Board for the 12th Judicial Circuit of Florida, which includes Sarasota, Manatee and DeSoto counties.

MOST COUNTY OFFICES TO CLOSE FOR INDEPENDENCE DAY, JULY 4

Most Sarasota County government offices, libraries, recreation centers and transit services will be closed Thursday, July 4, to observe the national Independence Day holiday, the county has announced.

However, the Payne Park Tennis Center will be open from 7:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and the Arlington Park Recreation Center will be open from noon to 5 p.m.

Sarasota County Area Transit (SCAT) will not operate on July 4.

Garbage, recycling and yard waste collection schedules for the July 4 holiday will be de-

layed one day, with collection happening on the day after the regularly scheduled day, a news release notes. Thursday's collection will be done on Friday, and Friday's collection will be done on Saturday.

The landfill administrative office and Chemical Collection Center at 4000 Knights Trail Road in Nokomis and the Chemical Collection Centers at 8750 Bee Ridge Road, Sarasota, and 250 S. Jackson Road, Venice, will be closed July 4.

For more information about July 4 holiday schedules, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 861-5000 (TTY 7-1-1).


CITY OFFICES TO BE CLOSED FOR INDEPENDENCE DAY

City of Sarasota administration offices will be closed Thursday, July 4, in observance of Independence Day.

Garbage, recycling, yard waste and bulk waste will not be picked up that day. The regularly scheduled collection will occur one day later, a city news release says.

The Friday collection will also occur one day later, on Saturday, July 6.

Other City of Sarasota holiday hours are as follows:

- Bobby Jones Golf Club: regular hours (6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.)
- Lido Pool: regular hours (10 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.)
- Robert L. Taylor Community Complex: The facility will be open from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m.; the pool will be closed.
- Steigerwaldt-Jockey Children's Fountain in Bayfront Park: closed 

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Caroline Catarzi/Contributed photo



Alyssa Conrad/Contributed photo



Samantha Smith/Contributed photo



Brandy Kinney/Contributed photo

MEMBERS OF FEMALE CRIME RING SENTENCED THIS WEEK

Members of the female crime ring who were arrested by the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office in November 2012 pleaded guilty this week and have been sentenced for a variety of charges stemming from their two-week crime spree, the office has announced.

Caroline Catarzi pleaded guilty to 14 burglary charges plus six counts of Dealing in Stolen Property and Providing False Information To a Pawn Broker, the report says. She received a 10-year prison sentence with one year of community control and four years of drug offender probation.

Alyssa Conrad pleaded guilty to charges related to 14 burglaries plus eight counts of Dealing in Stolen Property and Providing False Information To a Pawn Broker, the report

continues. She also received a 10-year prison sentence with one year of community control added and four years of drug offender probation.

Samantha Smith pleaded guilty to seven burglary charges plus four counts of Dealing in Stolen Property and Providing False Information To a Pawn Broker. She was sentenced to four years in prison and 10 years of probation, the report adds.

Brandy Kinney pleaded guilty to six burglary charges and was sentenced to just under a year in jail plus four years of probation.

This group was suspected of more than 30 burglaries that were investigated by both the Sheriff's Office and the Sarasota Police Department, the report notes.

ORGANIZED RETAIL CRIME RING MEMBERS ARRESTED

The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office has arrested six people in connection with an organized retail crime ring that reportedly stole nearly \$2,000 in merchandise from Burlington Coat Factory in Sarasota.

Throughout an investigation into thefts May 11, May 15 and June 10, detectives worked with store loss prevention officers to identify suspects and their roles in the operation, a Sheriff's Office report says.

The officers identified one suspect as Asia Rosier after seeing her mug shot in reports of her May 20 arrest for Child Neglect in the death of her 3-year-old daughter, the report adds.

That helped detectives identify the remaining co-conspirators, who were identified as Kendalla Goodman, 22, of 1572 31st St.; Clinecia Johnson, 20, Clashawn Johnson, 21, and Jauora Robinson, 22, all of 2133 Mango Ave.; and Kenisha Pittman, 22, of 3026 Gillsepie Ave, Sarasota.

Clinecia Johnson faces three counts of Grand Theft, the report says. Robinson was charged as an Accessory After the Fact to Grand Theft for allegedly driving the getaway vehicle in one case, the report notes.

The other women are charged with one count each of Grand Theft.



Kendalla Goodman/Contributed photo



Clashawn Johnson/Contributed photo



Jauora Robinson/Contributed photo



Clinecia Johnson/Contributed photo



Kenisha Pittman/Contributed photo



Asia Rosier/Contributed photo

WOMAN CHARGED WITH STEALING FROM DISABLED CLIENT

The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office has arrested Michele Whitehead, 59, of 1509 Overbrook Road, Englewood, for allegedly stealing thousands of dollars from a disabled client who hired Whitehead to prepare her taxes.

The 60-year-old victim lives in St. Petersburg and has chronic health problems that render her bedridden and cause her to be frequently hospitalized, the report says. The victim hired Whitehead in August 2011 to file two years of tax returns for her because she thought Whitehead was a CPA, the report adds.

The victim said she gave Whitehead a \$2,400 retainer, agreed to pay \$15 an hour for work exceeding that amount and gave Whitehead durable power of attorney, the report notes. However, detectives learned that Whitehead stopped bank statements from being delivered to the victim's home, and over a period of a year made seven wire transfers from the victim's account totaling more than \$7,200, the report says. Invoices for the tax preparation totaled just \$708.75.



Michele Whitehead/Contributed photo

Whitehead is charged with Exploitation of a Disabled Adult and Grand Theft for exploiting the trust and breaching the fiduciary duty of the power of attorney.

FINGERPRINTS ON SOFT DRINK CONTAINER LEAD TO SUSPECT'S ARREST

The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office has arrested James Hunter Santo, 27 — whose last known address was 8503 Alam Ave., North Port — for two crimes, thanks to fingerprints he left behind on a 7-Up can in the most recent case, the office has reported.

Early Tuesday morning, June 18, someone broke into the home of a 91-year-old wom-

an on Lord Street in Englewood, a Sheriff's Office report says. Deputies discovered the suspect left a soda can on the workbench in the victim's garage before he allegedly used a chisel to pry open the door to the home and steal items from the living room, kitchen and bedroom as the victim slept, according to the report.

The next day, latent print technicians identified two fingerprints as belonging to Santo, the report says. Detectives then found that Santo had pawned several pieces of the victim's stolen jewelry, including her wedding ring, which she had kept in a jewelry box on her dresser, the report continues.

Detectives arrested Santo on June 21 and charged him with Occupied Burglary, Dealing in Stolen Property and Providing False Information to a Pawn Broker.

They already had an arrest warrant for Santo for allegedly stealing checks from an 82-year-old man earlier this year, so he is also charged with two counts of Forgery and one count of Criminal Use of Personal Identification, the report notes.



James Santo/Contributed photo

SUSPECT SOUGHT IN ARMED ROBBERY ON COCOANUT AVENUE

Officers with the Sarasota Police Department are investigating an armed robbery that was reported in the 2100 block of North Cocoanut Avenue Tuesday night, June 25, the department has announced.

About 9:35 p.m., the male victim told officers, he arrived home and climbed out of his car in his driveway. Then he saw a man he did not know appear from behind a van also parked in the driveway.

The victim was carrying a briefcase — which contained personal documents, the report says. The suspect, who was wearing a dark hoodie, produced a handgun and held it to the back of the victim's head, the report notes. The suspect yelled at the victim not to look at him, then pressed the gun to the side of the victim's head, the report adds.

The suspect reportedly stole the briefcase as well as jewelry the victim was wearing — including a watch valued at \$100 — and fled westbound on foot, the report continues.

A perimeter was quickly established, the report says; however, a K-9 unit was unable to locate the suspect.

The suspect is described as being African-American, 6 feet 1 inch in height and weighing 180 pounds. He last was seen wearing a black hoodie of a silk-like material and black sweat pants, according to the report.

Anyone with information is encouraged to call the Sarasota Police Department Bureau of Criminal Investigations at 954-7070, leave an anonymous tip with Crime Stoppers by calling 366-TIPS (8477) or going online at <http://www.sarasotacrimestoppers.com/>

MAN ARRESTED FOR STEALING KEYS TO BURGLARIZE CARS

The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office has arrested a man who reportedly stole keys off a key rack at the Potter Park YMCA to unlock vehicles and steal the victim's belongings, the office has announced.

Detectives arrested Peter Strohming, 24, of 5518 Eastwind Drive, Sarasota, in connection with incidents that occurred on June 4 and June 6, the report says. Each time, Strohming checked in at the front desk, but instead of working out, he walked to the weight room key rack, took a set of keys and headed outside, the report adds. In the first instance, he allegedly broke into a car and stole several items out of the victim's purse. In the second instance, he reportedly took another set of keys and approached the vehicle but was caught by the victim and a supervisor from the YMCA.

Strohming is charged with two counts of Petit Theft, one count of Burglary and one count of Attempted Burglary. At the time of his arrest, Strohming was out of jail on bond following his arrest in February on five cases



Peter Strohming/Contributed photo

of Dealing in Stolen Property and Providing False Ownership Information To a Pawn Dealer. He has already been released on bond on the new charges, the report notes.

The Sheriff's Office "strongly recommends that patrons of all local gyms retain possession of their keys or properly secure them at all times," the report adds.

"If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."
— *Mark Twain*

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OPINION



LET US NOT GILD THE ALREADY GOLDEN CALF

EDITORIAL

It has a mouthful for a title and a multimillion-dollar public responsibility to both the City and County of Sarasota. It is the Downtown Community Redevelopment Agency Extension Study Committee, or DCRAESC.

This committee will be pivotal over the next seven months, because it will recommend a future for \$7 million in annual revenue now going to a tiny urban patch in downtown Sarasota.

Nearly 30 years ago, Sarasota's downtown was on the skids. The historic area looked anything but historic. It looked old, rundown and vacant, without

any great prospects for the future. But in 1986, the city and county crafted an historic pact called a community redevelopment agency (CRA) to fight "slum and blight" in the downtown area.

Today Sarasota's vibrant downtown is a testimony to what millions in public money can do for a private business district. Since 1986 more than \$85 million was lavished on down-

town, or an average of about \$3 million per year.

About \$20 million was used to provide more parking, \$11.4 million went to "infrastructure improvements" and \$7.3 million went for

“Eighty-five million dollars is a lot of property tax money. So before the county extends the downtown CRA, shuts it down or establishes a new one elsewhere, taxpayers deserve to know how wisely the money was spent.”

OPINION

property acquisition. On the other hand, \$6.1 million went to public-private partnerships, and \$20.7 million (about one-quarter of the total) went to “transfers.”

The agreement is good for 30 years. With 2016 fast approaching, the committee was empaneled to study the “post-CRA environment.” Continue the CRA, modify it or kill it seem to be the three options. At this point, we are convinced the best option is the last one. The CRA has finished its job of ending slum and blight, and now it is time for somebody else to benefit from the revenue stream.

A community redevelopment agency is not unique to Sarasota. CRAs were enabled by the Florida Legislature in 1969. Englewood has one; Bradenton has three of them; and other communities across the state have them, too. The CRAs all depend on a clever funding mechanism through which a portion of city and county taxes are diverted to pay for improvements in a specific area.

In the case of Sarasota, the agreement froze the city and county receipts for property tax revenue. Any increase in property values — and property taxes paid on them — would go to the CRA. In the beginning, the receipts were tiny, but over time the property values in the downtown core have soared.

About \$3.1 million in city property taxes annually are apportioned strictly to the CRA; for the county, the number is \$3.5 million. Part of the growth has come from inflation, and — for a bit of time — some of it was the result of property speculation. Through thick and thin, the difference between the 1986 base and current taxes grew and grew.

In hindsight, we know not all of the money was spent wisely. Certainly, the incentive to Whole Foods to build its grocery store downtown made the area more livable. But incentives to the New York Times to keep the headquarters of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* downtown seem a poor investment. Redistributing some of the funds to buttress the Sarasota Police Department budget appears even more improvident.

It is all water under the bridge: decisions made and the money gone.

The Sarasota County Commission entered into the CRA agreement because it realized a living, beating heart in the city was vital for the area’s biggest industry — tourism. If the downtown were to collapse — as it had in many other Florida cities — the damage would spread far beyond the city center. It would hurt tourism countywide.

Thanks to inflation, property speculation and real property value growth, downtown’s worth swelled beyond the 1986 imaginings of either the City or County commission. But it brought problems as well.

County commissioners saw a vibrant downtown “skimming” \$3.5 million every year in county revenues. In fact, the county’s budget projections for 2016, at the CRA’s end, show the county portion of revenue coming back into the general fund. And there are many voices in the community beyond those of county commissioners suggesting “slum and blight” in other areas deserve CRA-like attention.

The Laurel-Nokomis-Osprey area has begged for a library for more than a decade, to no

OPINION

avail. And as county revenues took a nose-dive in the still-lingering recession, the possibility for library expansion vanished. But the downtown Sarasota CRA continued to reap its share of county funds.

North Port has requested a CRA, as has Venice. But county commissioners, eyeing another 30-year draw on their taxes for a small and specific area, are reluctant to make another long-term commitment. And long-term it must be, because to be successful, it has to use the “compound interest” model of property value growth.

The time for the downtown Sarasota CRA is drawing to a close. Most of the funding still to come is already devoted to paying off bond issues, subsidizing the police and other commitments. Thus, we can expect little new from the downtown CRA.

By most measures, it has been a success. The CRA, coupled with a variety of downtown organizations that evolved over the past three decades, deserves a hearty round of congratulation. “Slum and blight” are a thing of the past.


The DCRAESC now should engage in a round of financial analysis to determine what worked and what did not. Whole Foods, the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* building, individual public-private partnerships, Police Department subsidies: Each of these could be explored to determine the enduring worth of the investments.

These types of analyses will be invaluable should the county want to extend the current downtown Sarasota CRA or establish another one. While the county has a habit of asking cit-

izen advisory boards for analysis and advice, it also has a habit of ignoring their good work.

Eighty-five million dollars is a lot of property tax money. So before the county extends the downtown CRA, shuts it down or establishes a new one elsewhere, taxpayers deserve to know how wisely the money was spent.

Allowing the current CRA to expire will free up both the city and county to spend their money more widely. For the city, for example, the money could fund operation of the Lido Beach pool. For the county, that long-awaited Laurel library potentially could become a reality.

If downtown cannot survive without the injection of \$7 million per year in public money, maybe it deserves to die. That is not to say the county should abandon any commitment to the city, because the city is more important to the county’s future than ever. But limiting the spending to downtown Sarasota seems shortsighted when so many other areas of the county need attention. 



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Sarasota News Leader welcomes letters to the editor from its readers. Letters should be no more than 300 words in length, and in-

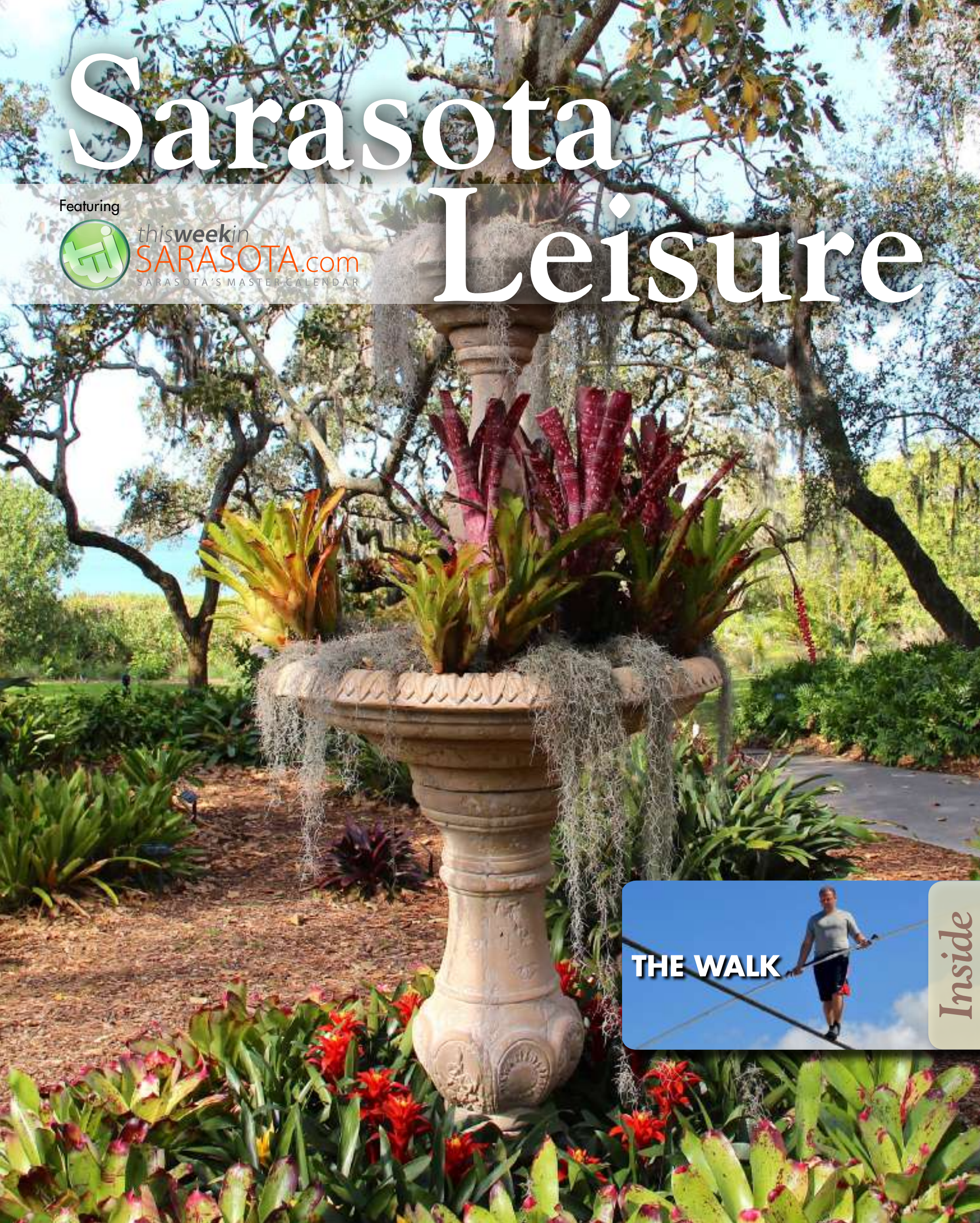
clude the name, street address and telephone number of the writer. Letters should be emailed to Letters@SarasotaNewsLeader.com, with “Letter to the Editor” in the subject line. Letters actually printed will be selected based on space available, subject matter and other factors. We reserve the right to edit any letters submitted for length, grammar, spelling, etc. All letters submitted become the property of *The Sarasota News Leader*.

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THE WALK

People begin gathering along Lemon Avenue, where they are greeted by representatives from Circus Sarasota — with which Nik Wallenda has performed — and Sailor Circus.

AS VIEWERS HOLD THEIR BREATH AROUND THE WORLD AND IN SARASOTA, NIK WALLEDA COMPLETES ANOTHER STUNNING PERFORMANCE

By Harriet Cuthbert
Contributing Writer

Editor's note: Staff Photographer Norman Schimmel was in downtown Sarasota on the evening of June 23 to join the crowd in watching Nik Wallenda. Included among Schimmel's photos are a number featuring Sailor Circus student performers entertaining the audience before the walk began. The festivities were hosted by Circus Sarasota and Mattison's City Grille on Lemon Avenue.

The TV has just warmed up; the magnificent Grand Canyon is in front of me on the screen. And after only five seconds of viewing its scope and depth, I am already dizzy and my stomach is doing flip-flops.

I am among about 1 billion people worldwide who are collectively one very anxious ball of nerves as we await Nik Wallenda's 1,500-foot wire walk across and through Hell Hole Bend, AZ.

Jim Cantore, nationally known meteorologist (call him a "weather expert") is describing some variables that can happen and change within an instant. In another area nearby, Nik is focusing on his upcoming walk.

Jim's lectures are very informative and fascinating. The show is scheduled for more than two hours on TV, and the two co-hosts from NBC, Natalie Morales and Willie Geist, are try-

ing their hardest to keep us interested while we wait anxiously (and safely) to see “The Walk.” Seemingly, everyone who knows Nik is being interviewed. Even Joel Osteen, the celebrity pastor, is there, along with Nik’s wife and extended family.

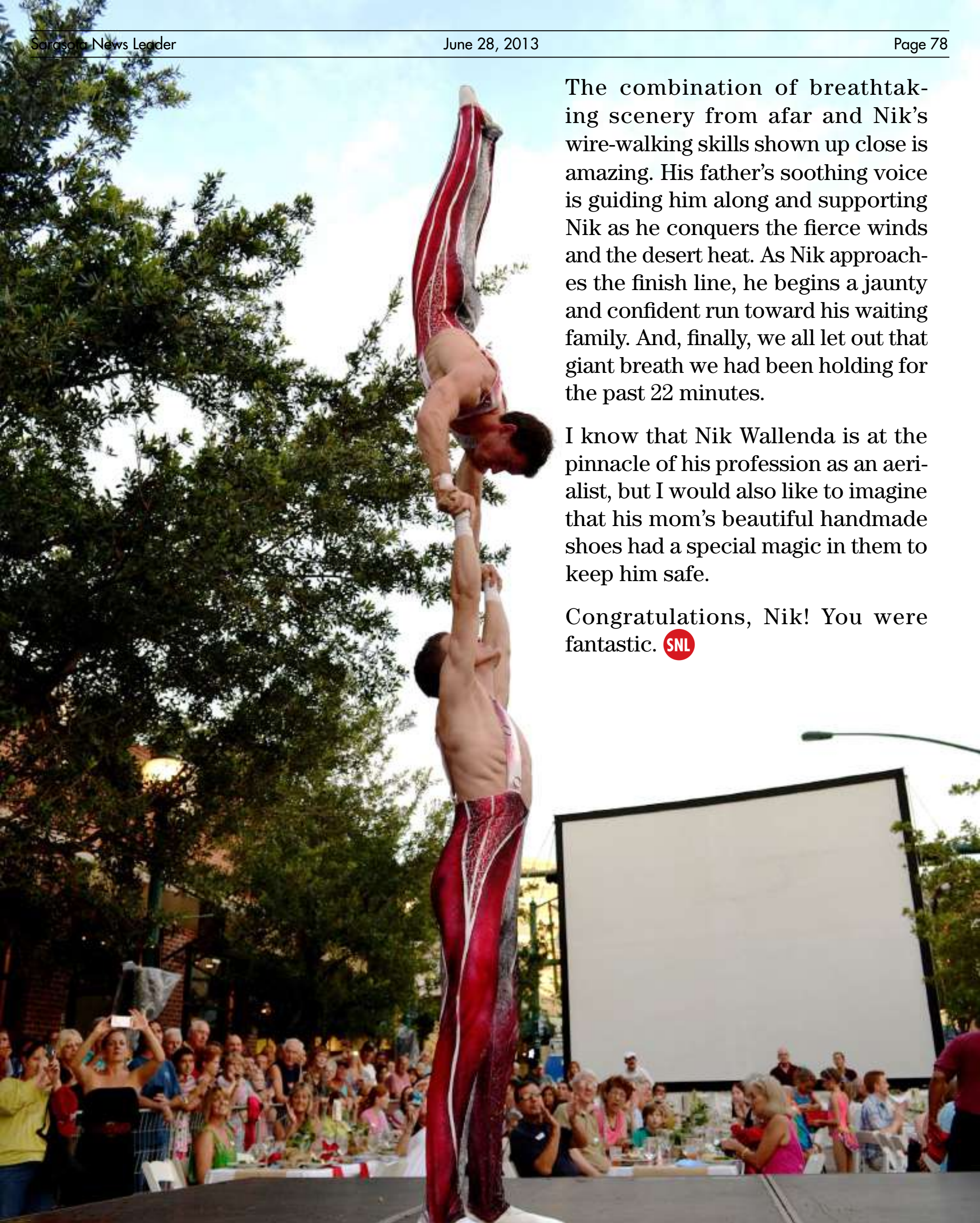
The stunning aerial photos of the Grand Canyon capture my attention because I know I can only see this sector through the lens of a photographer who is shooting from the inside of a helicopter. This area that Nik has chosen to cross is not the site that has been open and available to visitors. Hell Hole Bend is deso-

late — devoid of people and somewhat otherworldly. It appears to be timeless. Nature has formed its beauty, which is part of the reason Nik has chosen it for his latest challenge.

As I was being lulled into another narrative by the co-hosts, suddenly the camera panned to a different location. Nik was finally beginning his walk — and I was holding my breath. Even though I have known the basic facts of his walk (2½-inch-thick cable; 1,400 feet high), it is only when I watch him navigate and continuously use prayer to inspire himself that I feel the full impact of this journey.




Acrobats with Sailor Circus demonstrate their skills during the pre-walk festivities.



The combination of breathtaking scenery from afar and Nik's wire-walking skills shown up close is amazing. His father's soothing voice is guiding him along and supporting Nik as he conquers the fierce winds and the desert heat. As Nik approaches the finish line, he begins a jaunty and confident run toward his waiting family. And, finally, we all let out that giant breath we had been holding for the past 22 minutes.

I know that Nik Wallenda is at the pinnacle of his profession as an aerialist, but I would also like to imagine that his mom's beautiful handmade shoes had a special magic in them to keep him safe.

Congratulations, Nik! You were fantastic. 









I like to take my time.

Sure, it's a temptation to rush. Each issue of *The Sarasota News Leader* is brimfull of in-depth coverage of all the news and goings-on in Sarasota County. And it has delightful and informative feature stories. Thanks to its partnership with *This Week In Sarasota*, I always know what the most exciting happenings are each week. Plus, it is simply so beautiful, with photography that takes my breath away.

There is so much there, I don't know where to begin. So it is hard to resist the urge to read it all at once. But I know better. Take your time and indulge in all that it has to offer.

You have a whole week.

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COUNTY CODE ENFORCEMENT STAFF ADDRESSES TRASHY PROBLEMS; WORK CONTINUES ON AN EFFORT TO CHANGE THE COUNTY CODE GOVERNING OUTDOOR DISPLAYS OF MERCHANDISE



By Rachel Brown Hackney
Editor

It all started on Friday, June 21, with an email from Prudie Varro, the resort manager at Sunsets by the Key, located at 5203 Avenida Navarra, which is parallel to Ocean Boulevard.

After apologizing for her long email to come, Varro went on to describe in great detail what can be summed up simply as “a smelly mess.”

As convenient as the inn’s location is for her guests, she explained in her missive to county staff and commissioners, that also poses problems, not the least of which is the noise emanating from the bars and restaurants. With this particular email, however, Varro zeroed in on a source of irritation that had reached “critical mass.”



Garbage is piled up adjacent to the dumpsters near Sunsets on the Key. Photo courtesy of Sunsets on the Key

Siesta Seen

Varro wrote, "In 2006, Sunsets on the Key, and surrounding businesses, were told that it had become mandatory to conceal trash containers: trash containers were no longer allowed to be seen from the street." At an expense of nearly \$3,000, she added, she made sure the inn's "relatively small trash receptacles" were enclosed. "All of our neighbors up and down Avenida Navarra" did the same, she continued.

"During the last many, many months, in fact for almost a year now, the large dumpsters at the corner of [Avenida] Navarra and [Avenida] Messina are not only out in the open ... 24/7 ... usually and literally partially in the street. They are filled and overfilled with trash strewn about on the ground, the majority being food refuse from the 3 restaurant vendors at Key Corners. It is a disgusting sight and smell."

Varro added, "Even more outrageous, the lids are never closed," which had been "creating a haven for maggots, rodents, [crows] and disease."

The dumpsters, she pointed out, "are **never** out-of-sight; always create an eyesore; are a pedestrian and vehicular hazard ... not to mention the STENCH!! It permeates the entire area."

Regardless of whether someone is just walking down the street while trying to get to the Village businesses or lying out at the Sunsets by the Key pool, which is about 175 feet away from the dumpsters," she noted, "**the smell is horrendous.**"

Varro reported that Key Corners had enclosed areas where the dumpsters used to be kept, but those spaces are "just filled with junk and debris." The 5-foot by 6-foot gates to those enclosures are left wide open, she pointed out, obstructing the sidewalk and leaving pedestrians no choice but to walk in the street to get to the Village, "all the while having to dodge the traffic in the street at this busy, congested area."

Varro continued, "Another offender is The Arches property, whose dumpsters sit directly next to our pool area ... literally 10 feet from our guests trying to enjoy our pool and hot tub. ... The lids of the dumpster at the back of the property alongside our pool are never closed, nor are *they* ever washed out."

She even included an email from a recent guest, who had written, "I want to say again how much we enjoyed our time in Siesta Key, and particularly how much we enjoyed staying at your property. ... As we discussed, there is one main issue that is preventing us from booking a trip for Spring Break and Summer of 2014, and that's the smell from the next door garbage dumpster that really interrupts a nice relaxing time at the pool. The smell is so off-putting, that we couldn't spend much time in that area at all, and that's a deal breaker for all of us. Sadly, that means that not only is your business with us jeopardized, but the surrounding businesses in Siesta Key (restaurants, shops, etc.) might not have the benefit of the money that our group of 10 spends while we're there."

Siesta Seen

The writer added, “We really hope that your efforts to resolve this issue are successful so we can rebook asap!”

Varro also included an email from a resident complaining about the dumpsters adjacent to Sunsets on the Key.

Moreover, Varro provided photos of the situation. Although she was pretty descriptive in her prose, the photos put icing on the cake, so to speak.

Finally, Varro wrote, “I encourage you to take a walk down our street if you dare, and see and smell this ‘Jewel of Sarasota.’ You’ll immediately understand my complaint since it

has now progressed to both borders of our property. I await your immediate response, as this situation is no longer tolerable.”

As a follow-up to Varro’s email, Michael Shay, vice president of the Siesta Key Association, investigated Varro’s complaints then sent his own email to Sandra Jones, operational manager in the county’s Code Enforcement Office, and John Lally, the key’s Code Enforcement officer.

He also took photos.

“I am aware that there has been a lot of attention recently to warning/citing business owners for ignoring the [Siesta Key Overlay



The tops of the dumpsters on the Key Corners property, near the Broken Egg, are not closed and the dumpsters themselves are in the street on June 22. Photo courtesy of Michael Shay

Siesta Seen

District] ordinances,” Shay wrote. “I trust that these infractions will be resolved quickly. Thanks much for your attention to this.”

On June 23, Commissioner Nora Patterson, who lives on Siesta Key, responded to Shay and made certain county staff was aware of the situation with the dumpsters. She wrote, “This kind of thing is bad for the tourism industry on Siesta Key which is a huge economic driver and seems simple to correct with some more enforcement of the codes and little cost to the businesses.”

On June 24, Tom Polk, director of the county’s Planning and Development Services office, responded to Patterson that “Code Enforcement

Officer John Lally investigated the complaints today and the following actions were taken”:

- “A Notice of Violation was issued to the Broken Egg for their dumpsters being left out and for the debris around the dumpsters.” He added that Code Enforcement Officer Kevin Burns would make a follow-up inspection on Friday afternoon, June 28, after the dumpsters had been emptied to see whether employees put the dumpsters behind the enclosed fence. “If not, then further code enforcement action will occur (Special Magistrate process),” he added.



This is a dumpster at The Arches property off Avenida Navarro on June 22. Photo courtesy of Michael Shay

Siesta Seen

- “A Notice of Violation was also issued to the owner of the Arches Plaza to replace the doors (10 day deadline) of the enclosure and to make certain the lids are closed on the dumpsters.”
- “A Courtesy Notice was given to Tropical Breeze for leaving [its] dumpster out after it was emptied.”
- Polk noted, “Code Enforcement staff will continue to monitor this situation on Siesta Key.”

Then on June 25, Shay sent out another email, thanking the Code Enforcement staff but pointing out he had been in the Village that night and had observed the following situations:

- “The Broken Egg dumpsters were ‘shoved’ into the enclosure: that’s a ‘good thing’ but the enclosure doors couldn’t close because of all the junk in the enclosure.”
- The recycling bins “were ... on the street but maybe that is because they are going to be emptied tomorrow?”
- “[T]he dumpster in the Archers had its lid closed,” but a bar lock had been installed on it so no one but authorized individuals could open it to dump items into it. That lock, he noted, prevents the top from closing completely and needs to be fixed.

Shay further wrote that neither the dumpster in the municipal parking lot between Avenida Madera and Avenida de Mayo nor the

dumpster diagonally across the street from the municipal lot (behind the shops where Beach Bites is located on Avenida Madera) is enclosed. The owner of the latter property “says that he won’t comply until the Village dumpster is in compliance!” Shay added. “I guess violations can be contagious!”

Mark Smith of Smith Architects, who heads up the Siesta Key Village Maintenance Corp., has told Siesta Key Village Association members in past meetings that he has been working to get the dumpster enclosed in the municipal lot. Regular readers of this column know that county wheels turn slowly sometimes when the Maintenance Corp. asks about getting things done — occasionally because of a need to figure out how to apply the county ordinance governing the Village upkeep.

Shay added in his June 24 email, “It’s just too bad that these violations were not handled ‘proactively’ and had to be brought to everyone’s attention by an unhappy business owner.”

Patterson wrote back to Shay the same day, thanking him for his efforts and pointing out that, while it is not a good excuse, the fact of the matter is that the county has not had sufficient Code Enforcement staff in the past few years.

Nonetheless, the only new Code Enforcement employees the County Commission has authorized so far for the 2014 year will be looking to shut down the operations of unlicensed contractors. (See the related story in this issue.)

Siesta Seen

UPDATE ON PROPOSED SKOD CHANGES

In her June 25 email to Shay, Patterson also provided an update on the efforts of a group of Village merchants who [want to change the Siesta Key Overlay District ordinance](#) (SKOD) to allow them more latitude in displaying merchandise outside their shops.

After complaints were aired at length during the June 4 SKVA meeting, some of the merchants created a subcommittee — at the suggestion of SKVA officers — to delve into the issue. They had visited Patterson, she wrote Shay, to discuss their frustrations.

Patterson added that their initiative is a topic all the original SKOD stakeholders might want to address. She had given the subcommittee members the contact information for the SKA, she noted, so it would have a chance to discuss the proposal.

FIREWORKS!

It is not too late to purchase VIP tickets for the July Fourth picnic and fireworks show on Siesta Public Beach.

The Siesta Key Chamber of Commerce is selling the tickets for the 23rd annual July Fourth Fireworks Extravaganza.



Martha Smith, owner of Le Grand Bisou Caribbean Boutique on Ocean Boulevard is among the merchants working to amend the code governing Village businesses. File photo



The VIP party, held at the picnic shelter, costs \$150 per couple. It raises a significant portion of the approximately \$35,000 expense of the fireworks. The package includes the following:

- Convenient, reserved on-site parking at Siesta Beach.
- On-site catered picnic dinner for two people.
- Beer, wine and soft drinks.
- Live musical entertainment.
- Preferred viewing area for the 25-minute firework display.
- Acknowledgment in event advertising and on-site signage.

To access the traditional VIP package order form, [click here](#).

For questions, contact Chastanna at 349-3800 or email chastanna@siestakeychamber.com. 



*Mary Testa stars in *My Brilliant Divorce*. Contributed photo by Barbara Banks*

TESTA BRINGS ONE-WOMAN SHOW TO THE ASOLO REP

Is laughter really the best medicine? The popular adage is put to the test in a “hysterically funny, one-woman *tour de force* about picking up the pieces of a broken heart and beginning life again, *My Brilliant Divorce*,” now at the Asolo Repertory Theatre in Sarasota, a news release says.

In only the second major American regional production of the play, Asolo Rep’s producing artistic director, Michael Donald Edwards, directs Broadway star Mary Testa as Angela, “the 40-something housewife blindsided by her philandering husband’s desertion,” the release notes .

My Brilliant Divorce is Geraldine Aron’s “engaging, mid-life crisis comedy,” the release adds.

Mary Testa, a two-time Tony Award nominee, “is such a wonderfully gifted actress,” Edwards says in the release. “I could think of no one better to play the part of Angela. Mary is witty, charming, feisty — hilariously so — and at the same time, vulnerable and engaging. Audiences in Sarasota will identify with her and they will love her,” added Edwards. “We’ve all experienced heartbreak at some point in our lives, so we naturally embrace those rare artists who can inform our own existence and at the same time, make us laugh until our sides ache.”

My Brilliant Divorce is a very popular play throughout the world, although it is not as well known in the United States, the release notes. It premiered in 2001 at the Druid The-

atre in Galway, Ireland (where Aron was born) and was later transferred to the West End of London, where it was nominated for the 2004 Olivier Award for Best Entertainment. At present, it has been produced or is awaiting production in 33 countries, the release points out.

Edwards first became aware of the play through a colleague who worked on the American premiere. After Edwards read it, he was inspired to approach Aron with the idea of tailoring an Asolo Rep production to showcase the comedic strengths of Testa, the release continues. Edwards knew Testa through her long and storied career “and had lured her to Sarasota for last season’s production of *Love, Loss and What I Wore*,” it adds.

The play focuses on Angela Kennedy-Lipsky, “the middle-aged American wife of Max, a Brit who has run off with his lover and left Ange-

la high and dry in London,” the release continues. “Once a professional window dresser, Angela gave up her career to be a wife and mother and now finds herself adrift in a sea of shifty solicitors, Christmas on her own, and her confidence at an all-time low,” it says. “Should she fight to keep her husband? Or should she sign the divorce papers and move on?”

My Brilliant Divorce runs through July 14, 2013 in Asolo Rep’s Mertz Theatre, located in The FSU Center for the Performing Arts, 5555 N. Tamiami Trail.

Ticket prices for all performances range from \$20 to \$72. Tickets may be purchased at the Asolo Repertory Theatre box office in person or by calling 351-8000. They also may be purchased online at www.asolorep.org.

KERWIN’S ART TO BE ON DISPLAY AT UNITARIAN CHURCH

An exhibit titled, *Females and Felines: Paintings by Valerie Kerwin*, will open on Sunday, July 7, at the Unitarian Universalist Church Gallery, located at 3975 Fruitville Road, Sarasota, with a reception to be held from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., the church has announced.

Admission is free.

The *Females and Felines* exhibit “reveals the influence of artist Valerie Kerwin’s work as a fashion illustrator” after she graduated from college with a graphic design/fashion illustration degree, a news release says. As a painter, her subject matter has evolved to focus almost exclusively on women, girls and cats, the release adds.



Plush Persians by Valerie Kerwin. Contributed photo

In addition to running a batik business in the past, she has taught children's art at the Sarasota YMCA after-school program, the release notes.

Kerwin is a member of Women Contemporary Artists and exhibits locally with that organization.

The church gallery is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Sundays.

The exhibit will be on display through Aug. 28.



Flower Crowning by Valerie Kerwin. Contributed photo

GOLDEN GATES TO PRESENT RUSSIAN CHILD PERFORMERS

First United Methodist Church at 104 S. Pineapple Ave. in downtown Sarasota invites members of the community to a concert at 7 p.m. on Friday, July 12, featuring *Golden Gates*, Russian children and youth group performing traditional songs and dances from Russia and Ukraine.

The program participants thrill everyone "with their skillful virtuosity, colorful costumes, syncopation of footwork and gymnastic leaping," a news release says.

The show also features humor and audience participation, the release continues. "All ages will enjoy this highly energetic and entertaining evening," it notes.

No ticket is required, but a freewill offering will benefit United Methodist Volunteers in Mission in its support of Russian orphanages, the release adds.

For additional information, contact the church office at 955-0935.

FST TO HOST FIFTH ANNUAL SARASOTA IMPROV FESTIVAL

The fifth annual Sarasota Improv Festival returns on July 12 and 13 "for two nights of non-stop comedy with 16 of the hottest groups on the national improv scene," Florida Studio Theatre has announced.

Acts from Chicago, Boston, Austin, Miami, Atlanta "and everywhere in between will perform on the Cabaret stage," a news release notes.

In one-hour slots, groups will perform different types of improv shows: traditional improv games, long-form comedy, short sketches and musical improve, the release says. Returning to the fest after sold-out appearances on FST's stage are Available Cupholders (Austin, TX), Dad's Garage (Atlanta), SAK Comedy (Orlando), Jester Theater (Orlando), ImprovBoston (Boston), Stacked: All-female Musical Improv

(Chicago), The Third Thought (Tampa), Hawk & Wayne (St. Petersburg), Lazy Fairy (Sarasota) and the “home team” troupes — FST Improv and Vintage Whine. Sure to be audience favorites are “new kids on the block” Smith & I (Chicago), Sick Puppies Comedy (Boca Raton) and Mad Cowford (Jacksonville), the release adds.

Rebecca Hopkins, Sarasota Improv festival director and FST managing director, said in the release, “It is hard to believe it is already the fifth anniversary for the festival. The first year we did it, we thought it might be a one-time event, but Sarasota loves to laugh and has embraced it fully.”


This year a brand new group has been added for a special event on the Gompertz Stage, the release points out. The Improvised Shakespeare Company is based on one audience suggestion: a title for a play that has yet to be written. From that suggestion, the troupe creates a fully improvised Elizabethan-style show, to provide the audience one and a half hours of “off-the-cuff” comedy, the release continues. This hit group hails from Chicago where it has been called, “Smart, sophisticated, downright hilarious” and “Staggeringly brilliant” by *TimeOut Chicago*. *The New York Times* agreed stating, the troupe is filled with “on-the-spot soliloquies and perfect pentameter.”



The Improvised Shakespeare Co. performs Rubber Crazy. YouTube link courtesy of The Improvised Shakespeare Co.

Single tickets for this special event will sell for \$25 and it will be included in night and weekend passes, the release notes.

Along with the performances, workshops will take place on Saturday, July 13, featuring the following Improv groups: Available Cupholders, Dad's Garage, Hawk & Wayne, Improv-Boston, Jester Theater and Stacked: All-female Musical Improv.

Tickets are available by calling 366-9000, going online at FloridaStudioTheatre.org or by visiting the box office at 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Ticket prices vary, with weekend passes available at \$59, nightly passes at \$49 and per individual show at \$10 each. 



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RELIGION BRIEFS

Rabbi Matthew Dreffin with his parents, Scott and Lori, and his nephew, Asher. Contributed photo

SARASOTA MAN ORDAINED A RABBI IN LOS ANGELES

Matthew Dreffin, son of Lori and Scott Dreffin of Sarasota, was ordained a rabbi at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Los Angeles in May.

Dreffin also earned a Master of Arts degree in Hebrew letters from HUC-JIR in 2010 and a Master of Arts degree in Jewish education in 2011. He was awarded the L.H. Rubin Memorial Prize for his outstanding art capstone project, a news release says.

The Dreffins have long been associated with Sarasota reform congregations — first at Temple Emanu-El and then as founders of Temple Sinai, the release adds. Matthew Dreffin grew

up spending his summers at URJ Camp Coleman in Georgia and had his Bar Mitzvah and was confirmed at Temple Sinai, the release continues. He went on to graduate from Tulane University with a degree in studio arts. He also won an award at Tulane for most outstanding glass art student.

Dreffin will join the staff of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, based in Jackson, MI, where he will be on the staff of the Education and Rabbinic Services Department, the release notes. He will coordinate the work of nine Education Fellows, who travel each weekend to some of the more than 70 participating congregations.

Among his student activities, he served as a summer chaplain at Princeton Baptist Medical Center in Birmingham, AL, and as an educator at the URJ Mitzvah Corps in New Orleans. He also interned and served as religious school associate director at Temple Judea in Tarzana, CA, the release points out. “His focus has long been on education, formal and

informal,” the release continues; that set him on a career path that led him to the position at the institute.

“The Sarasota Jewish community is proud of inspiring Matthew Dreffin to become a rabbi,” the release adds, “and we wish him and his wife, Erica, a hearty *Mazel Tov*.”

JAZZ MUSICIANS TO BE FEATURED DURING SERVICE

Area musicians Don Bryn, Bob Lunergan and John Paul Coley “will jazz up the Sunday service at the Unitarian Universalist Church on June 30 at 10:30 a.m., the church has announced. The public is invited.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota is a welcoming congregation serving Sarasota and Manatee counties, the release adds. It is located at 3975 Fruitville Road in Sarasota. For more information, visit www.uusarasota.org or call 941-371-4974. 



Don Bryn/Contributed



Bob Lunergan/Contributed



John Paul Coley/Contributed



COMMUNITY CALENDAR

THE BEST OF UPCOMING EVENTS

28+
JUNE

Florida Studio Theatre presents *The Underpants*

Through July 28 (times vary), Keating Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave. Tickets: \$18 to \$42. Information: 366-9000 or FloridaStudioTheatre.org.

28+
JUNE

FST Summer Improv

Through Aug. 24, 8:30 p.m., John C. Court Cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave. Tickets: \$12. Information: 366-9000 or FloridaStudioTheatre.org.

04
JULY

Gloria Musicae Celebrates America

(Stay for dinner downtown and fireworks on the waterfront)

July 4, 4 p.m., First United Methodist Church, 104 S. Pineapple Ave. Admission: \$35. Tickets: 360-7399 or GloriaMusicae.org.

05
JULY

Suncoast Super Boat Grand Prix Festival Parade of Boats

July 5, 7 p.m., Main Street (from U.S. 301 to Gulfstream Avenue)

Admission: Free. Information: SuncoastOffshore.org.

12
JULY

Golden Gates: Traditional Song and Dance of Russia and Ukraine

July 12, 7 p.m., First United Methodist Church, 104 S. Pineapple Ave. Admission: Donation. Information: 955-0935 or firstsrq.com.

19
JULY

Friday Fest at the Van Wezel, featuring Kettle of Fish

July 19, 5 p.m., Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, 777 N. Tamiami Trail. Admission: Free. Information: 953-3368 or VanWezel.org.

To get all the details on these and other great activities — food, nightlife, music, art, theater, children's events, learning opportunities and more — go to Sarasota's No. 1 source for local events, hot spots, fun activities and hidden gems:



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SARASOTA.com
SARASOTA'S MASTER CALENDAR



SCHIMMEL SIGHTINGS

'SUPERMOON' AT DAWN

Each week, Staff Photographer Norman Schimmel searches Sarasota County for iconic shots that underscore why the community is a favorite with residents and tourists alike.