

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

TOWN HALL MEETING

JULY 11, 2007

A Town Hall Meeting was held at the Murdock Administration Complex in Room 119, Port Charlotte, Florida. The following members were present: Chairman Loftus, Commissioner Duffy, Commissioner Moore, and Commissioner D'Aprile.

Also in attendance were County Administrator Bruce Loucks, School Board Member Barbara Rendell (District 5), School Board Member Sue Sifrit (District 4), and Deputy Clerk Manley. The meeting was called to order at **6:00 PM**.

Chairman Loftus introduced the attendees and turned the meeting over to **Commissioner Duffy**. **Commissioner Duffy** acknowledged all in attendance and gave special thanks to the Curmudgeon Club members and the newspapers as advocates of the Town Hall Meetings.

President of the Curmudgeon Club Joe Dixon commented on the purpose of the Curmudgeon Club.

John Hitzel expressed concern on MSBU and tax increases, and the half-cent sales tax increase that the School Board is requesting, which he opined would go on forever and never end, and stated that the School Board should find another way to receive money for new school buildings.

Commissioner Moore stated that the Greater Port Charlotte Street and Drainage (GPC) is a lot of dollars, but is not so large an amount compared to similar projects in the past; agreed that taxes need to be lowered; indicated that overall the MSBU's work rather well; and pointed out that the roads are breaking down and that we must find a way to make the roads usable.

Commissioner D'Aprile explained why MSBU's were initially established; indicated that they worked then because there were not that many, but that now the communities are merging together; stated that not everyone pays the MSBU fees, but that many who do not pay the fees also use the roads; advised that he

is not in favor of MSBU's when it comes to road and drainage, and opined that road and drainage is the responsibility of the county as a total entity; that he continues to propose incorporating the county as a whole and have everyone pay a fair share in order to lower that portion of the MSBU or eliminate it, but that he is in favor of MSBU's for a district or small community that wants to put in a sidewalk or lights, or beautify its streets. **Commissioner D'Aprile** stated that the county is in deficit of about \$160 million for roads and that it does not have the money to do them. **Commissioner D'Aprile** commented on the current 3% cap on homestead property, opined that if the super exemption passes taxes will increase such as we have never before seen, and indicated that he hopes voters get the proper information needed to make a good judgment decision. **Commissioner D'Aprile** commented on difficulties in getting a road built, and advised that the Board is working on a solution about the roads, which would be addressed in the future.

Ms. Sifrit advised that the September 18th referendum for the half-cent sales tax states that it would end in 20 years; and indicated that in the coming months there will be a specific list of the building needs that the School District has, and that the community will decide if it supports the projects.

Ms. Rendell explained that hurricane Charley destroyed 6 schools and damaged almost all the others; that the schools must be rebuilt and construction costs have more than doubled; that FEMA and insurance paid for much of the reconstruction cost; that the schools are not being rebuilt to the same size, but are being increased in size, and that the School District must pay for the size increase; and indicated that in 2002 the voters of Florida voted in the class size amendment, which means we need more buildings to house the same number of students. Ms. Rendell reported that the School District decided that the half-cent sales tax was the proper way to go rather than increasing taxes because everyone, including visitors and part-time residents, would contribute.

Commissioner Duffy explained that she lives in the Greater Port Charlotte district and received a trim notice; that for many years the district has paid \$54.00 per year for road repair, and that since being a Commissioner she has learned that it is not enough to repair the roads; that there had not been a committee

for this MSBU until May 2007, and that the committee itself made the recommendation to increase this MSBU charge to \$174.00. **Commissioner Duffy** stated that \$174.00 is what is proposed; that it cannot go higher than that amount, but that it can be lower; and pointed out that it must be increased by some amount to pay for road repair.

Chairman Loftus stated that perhaps there will be a countywide fee, or possibly 3 separate MSBU's, West, Mid and South Counties; indicated that road cost has tripled in the last 3 years, but that there have been no increases in the MSBU fees; and advised that in the coming year the proposal is to resurface in El Jobean, the Three Lakes area, and the CRA.

Public Works Director Thomas O'Kane explained that the areas proposed for reconstruction or repaving, whichever is necessary to bring the roads to acceptable county standards, are El Jobean, the Three Lakes areas, and the CRA. Mr. O'Kane stated that the assessment includes about 15 miles of roadway work and drainage within this MSBU, and commented on previous costs versus current costs. Mr. O'Kane pointed out that GPC is the largest district in the County; that the committee first met in May 2007, and again this morning to discuss other items that need to be done in the district; and stated that it helps for staff to hear from those who live in the district on things heard and seen in order to prepare a work program.

Commissioner Moore stated that the Board is trying to reach out to the communities, and asked those present to encourage their neighbors to attend all the meetings.

Mr. Loucks pointed out that MSBU public hearings for the Greater Port Charlotte District is scheduled for Monday, July 17, 2007, at 5:01 PM at the Murdock Administration Complex, Room 119, and for West County at Lemon Bay High School Tuesday, July 18, 2007, at 5:01 PM.

Gene Leapley questioned the tremendous expense for rebuilding schools. Ms. Rendell explained that it is because the schools are being built larger. Mr. Leapley stated that upgrading is good, but that it does not seem proper to increase the school budget at such a tough budget time. Mr. Leapley indicated he does not understand why the MSBU system is not working and

expressed concern with the County's financing; inquired why the Commission cannot do better than tread water on the budget, and stated that cutting \$11.8 million from the 2007/2008 budget is not so drastic because it only goes back to last year; and agreed with Governor Crist that it should start at the 2000/2001 budget. Mr. Leapley stated that he does not see how just a rollback kind of operation is satisfactory, indicated that there should not have been this peak in values, and opined that perhaps a better system is to average out over a 5-year period and use that assessment.

Property Appraiser Frank Desguin reported that he made that suggestion to the Senate and Tax Committee, but that they had different ideas.

Commissioner Duffy reported that she has been very vocal on the need to reduce spending and taxes; commented on a rollback-type system; indicated that she believes there are ways to cut the budget further, but pointed out that all expenses have gone up tremendously.

Ms. Rendell reported that not only are larger schools being built, but that they are being built more energy efficient, which should save about \$100,000 per year in electricity and water; explained that the schools are more hurricane hardened, and helps avoid the need to build more new schools; and pointed out that it is more economically feasible to build a larger school rather than build two or three smaller schools.

Mr. Dixon stated that he has lived in Charlotte County for 20 years; that his road was paved the second year he arrived and has not been touched since; and that there is talk about cutting taxes at one point and raising them at another. Mr. Dixon inquired if any Board member consults an attorney before making decisions. **Commissioners Moore and Duffy** replied affirmatively. Mr. Dixon questioned the advise being given and decisions made by the Board; agreed that taxing is necessary, but that taxing should be across the board; and expressed concern with so many citizens leaving the area because they cannot afford to live here any longer. Mr. Dixon stated that he has always been in favor of helping the schools, but opined that once educated, the students move away from the area. Mr. Dixon commented on remarks made by **Chairman Loftus** prior to being elected to the Commission

about the numerous delays in county projects and the need not to delay the projects any longer because of the increase in expenses, and asked **Chairman Loftus** how he thought they were doing so far. **Chairman Loftus** opined that they were doing very well, and were moving projects along as quickly as possible. Mr. Dixon disagreed.

Dale Watson inquired if there had never been an advisory committee for the GPC area. **Chairman Loftus** reported that there has not been an advisory committee for the GPC area for several years, but that there had been at one time. Mr. Watson indicated that a Public Works representative stated that the GPC area advisory committee went defunct because of lack of interest of the advisory panel; stated that that information is incorrect and indicated that Public Works was the reason the advisory committee left; that the meetings went from quarterly to annually, and that eventually the committee was told not to come any longer because there was nothing to talk about. Mr. Watson stated that many projects are backlogged, that there had been no fee increases, and that now the work required is desperate and requires a major increase; opined that Public Works should have been more up front with the Commissioners on the needs; that something is not working right within the offices of the county; and that someone needs to take a better hand in managing the process and how it is working.

Commissioner D'Aprile stated that the MSBU was suggested by Public Works; that it must come to the Board; and that he is against it, but it is up to two more Commissioners to knock it down.

Gerald Weikoff commented on Omni Waste and the conflict created with the Commissioners and the County; asked what the future plans are for recycling; and if there is anything presently in place that would allow the County to address the problem of waste. Mr. Weikoff spoke in favor of Omni Waste from a financial standpoint, and indicated that landfills and manners in which to take care of waste are necessary. Mr. Weikoff stated that the United States has never come to grips with recycling and ranks about 37th among the nations in recycling waste; that there is no extension in Charlotte County for any imposition of recycling; and opined that the County should consider establishing rules for waste and implementing a plan for recycling.

Commissioner D'Aprile advised that at the last Commission meeting there was discussion on the recycling efforts being done in the community and the waste area in south Punta Gorda; that recycling bins are handed out to the homeowners; that he would like to see more people voluntarily participate in recycling; indicated that we are doing our best in that area, but that he doesn't know how another building could be put up right now for that purpose.

Commissioner Duffy stated that we are looking at better ways to do things in waste management, and indicated that at yesterday's budget meeting the Landfill Director suggested allowing waste to come in to the Zimel Road landfill from other counties on a small-scale basis, which would result in about \$1 million revenue per year. **Commissioner Duffy** advised that she has been obtaining information about producing ethanol; commented on a new type disposal system sponsored by a Japanese company, and explained how it works; and indicated that staff is currently looking at these areas.

Larry O'Grady stated that he lives on Bryans Way in District 1; that Sams Way and Bryans Way are dead end streets near Palm Shores Drive, with about 10 houses on each street; that the community residents have been unable to determine how roads and drainage works in the area; that the residents have patched holes in the streets, but drainage is a problem, and the swales have never been touched. Mr. O'Grady said that the community does not know if these are private streets, who is responsible, or how they go about getting the swales dug out to avoid the streets flooding when it rains. (**Mr. O'Grady handed Commissioner D'Aprile his business card.**) **Commissioner D'Aprile** said he would have his assistant determine if the roads are private and would get in touch with Mr. O'Grady to discuss it with him. Mr. O'Grady inquired how they go about making the roads "un-private." **Commissioner D'Aprile** explained that the community would have to establish an MSBU, and that to pave a road could be very expensive, but stated that it may be less expensive for the community to handle its own drainage problems and repave its own roads; that if the roads are private the responsibility lies with the community, and if it is county road, the county must be notified of the drainage problem and that they would come out

and take care of it, but indicated that there should still be some type of MSBU for the particular roads.

Commissioner Duffy pointed out that the Commission hears from both sides, those who do not want their MSBU taxes increased at all, and those who have a terrible drainage problem and want it fixed.

Nancy Parker advised that she has lived in Charlotte County for over 56 years, has been a taxpayer since age 18, has properties in multiple MSBU's, and is disappointed in the tax reforms. Ms. Parker stated that she was Chairman of the MSBU committee in Town Estates when it first began, and recently became involved with it again; indicated that Town Estates went through years of expensive paving projects; that drainage was needed before the roads were paved; that after 25 years the roads have washed away; and that now they are being told that it will be more expensive than ever. Ms. Parker stated that she spoke to **Commissioner D'Aprile** and believes he has a good plan that should be listened to. Ms. Parker reported that the greater majority of counties and districts in Florida do not have MSBU's or MSTU's, that they take ad valorem tax, look at what needs to be done, and make a good plan at using the ad valorem taxes to work on roads and give people services they need in an equitable manner. Ms. Parker advised that she does not have a good feeling about cooperation from the advisory committee; commented on the increase of mowing going up 800%; suggested that the Board, as managers, advise that if any service to any MSBU/MSTU goes up more than 10% it must be reviewed by the Board. Ms. Parker opined that the MSBU's/MSTU's are not favorable and that it should be handled through ad valorem taxes; opined that people should not be fired; suggested that out-of-county travel be cut immediately, except for that which is essential; that Commission meetings be streaming video; and commented on recycling of oil.

Marv Edelstein stated that he moved here in 2003; that where he came from MSBU's are called Homeowner Associations; and agreed that taxes alone will not do what needs to be done here. Mr. Edelstein indicated that the county is a business and should be treated as a business; that businesses are revenue-oriented; that he wants to address the county's economic engine, what will support the revenues called taxes in order to give the people what they want when they want it, and sees nothing happening

relative to that problem. Mr. Edelstein agreed that **Commissioner D'Aprile** has an exceptional suggestion about bonding for roads in the future; and opined that the economic engine he sees in the county needs a major overhaul; stated that he hears little about The Groves, which he understands is a 3,000 acre development dedicated to training governmental agencies against anti-terrorism, and would like to know who on the Board is in favor of this; stated that he would like to see Murdock Village become a corporate cultural research and development educational complex with some residential commercial development, and indicated that Florida Gulf Coast University is a potential flagship university for that area; opined that Tampa Bay Devil Rays will generate visitors and growth; inquired if the Commission was actively pursuing ideas such as he mentioned; and suggested having Commission meetings in the evening.

Chairman Loftus reported that all 4 areas are being promoted; that Murdock Village has been settled and Mr. Kitson is working with the university, but that there are areas yet to be worked out. **Chairman Loftus** stated that many times at night meetings he was the only one there, and pointed out that the School Board meetings are at night and only a handful show up. **Chairman Loftus** pointed out that most all Board meetings are televised and that citizens are able to see meetings from that venue.

Commissioner D'Aprile explained that economic development was his platform and that before then there was not an Economic Director or organization of it, but that is important to the county. **Commissioner D'Aprile** stated that Publix recently signed on at the airport site, which will employ several hundred people, and that the county is looking at economic development at the Airport Overlay District; advised that the college would like to go in at Murdock Village, but if it does not go in at that site, it is still interested in locating in Charlotte County; commented on the ball team and all that is being done to the stadium, which is being paid for mostly by the ball team; indicated that a lot is going on that the public is not aware of; and stated that those who pay the most taxes in this area are the business people.

Commissioner Duffy advised that The Grove Tactical Training Center will become reality; that it is an anti-terrorism training center for law enforcement people from all over the

country, and is private; that we are waiting for them to file their permits and go through the Development Review Committee (DRC) process, and that they have committed to locating in Charlotte County. **Commissioner Duffy** stated that Mr. Kitson is working closely with Florida Gulf Coast University, but that if it does not work out we would find another location in the county for the university, and that the space that would go to the university at Murdock Village would go to another form of economic engine. **Commissioner Duffy** commented on holding meetings at night, and reported that by the next day meetings can be viewed live on TV.

Dave Hackett agreed with **Commissioner D'Aprile** on the bonding issue he has suggested. **Commissioner D'Aprile** stated that it is being worked on and requested assistance from Mr. Hackett and other members of the Curmudgeon Club to have it presented to the Board. Mr. Loucks stated that the transition plan is anticipated to be brought back in October 2007. Mr. Hackett reported that tax receipts from the General Fund in 6 years increased \$54 million, and that all of it has been spent; that the Capital Improvement Budget is worse; that the list is endless; and that every time a dollar showed up it was spent. Mr. Hackett opined that the county should go backward and zero-base the budget for each department; commented on the cricket fields having been approved and the hours of operation of pools; stated that the fire department should also be bound by reasonable increases; and commented on assessment increases versus population and inflation.

Chairman Loftus commented on the fire assessment. Mr. Loucks explained that many stations had to be rebuilt due to hurricane damage, and that several new stations were required because as population expands there must be a proper response time. **Chairman Loftus** stated that the Board is currently reviewing the last 5 years of the budget. Mr. Loucks stated that comments from Tallahassee is that reductions in Fire/EMS and Sheriff Budgets would not be tolerated; that it is not mandated, but rhetoric is that Tallahassee will look very closely at those activities.

Commissioner D'Aprile agreed with Mr. Hackett about the zero-base budget; explained that the Board just finished a review of every department; that budget cuts were made; and that more will be made.

David Jeffries stated that the county has advised of its expenses and increases; that the costs and expenses of the constituents have also increased, but that the income to the citizens did not go up 300% - 400%, such as some expenses did; and indicated that the county is not 400% better. Mr. Jeffries opined that taxes and insurance have gone up too high and that there should be a way to fix it; and that the county should take the lead and put into public forum possibilities to help the situation, despite what Tallahassee is sending down.

Commissioner D'Aprile asked Mr. Loucks to explain where the land tax increases came from, and indicated that it is the law.

Mr. Loucks explained that for non-homestead property there is no 3% cap; that non-homestead property, vacant lots and businesses are subsidizing the tax bill for homeowners who have the 3% cap; provided a breakdown of distribution of taxes collected; commented on reductions with tax reform; and stated that those reductions will come completely from county operations. Mr. Loucks advised that the legislative proposals made this summer are for a program which caps revenues to governments from property taxes for the next 5 years; and that none of the proposals on the January 29, 2008 election ballot would help non-homestead property. Mr. Loucks pointed out that Florida is one of 2 or 3 states that do not have an income tax; that the bulk of government operations in those states that have an income tax are fee supported; and opined that government will need to re-think how it does business over the next 5 years because as the revenue caps take effect all governments will dramatically look at how business is done. Mr. Loucks stated that some things that were funded in the past will not get funded; that it is a tough place for local government and elected officials to find the balance between what citizens want and what is affordable; and that everyone needs to understand that there will be some tough decisions to be made in the next 5 years by local governments across the State of Florida.

Ms. Rendell pointed out that the School Board has decreased its millage rate by 29% over the last 2 years, which translates to about a \$280.00 decrease on a home valued at \$180,000 with a \$25,000 homestead exemption; and explained that the millage rate is set by the State Legislature.

Jeffery Youst commented on the hiring practice of Charlotte County Utilities (CCU.)

Grover Mudd advised that he was appointed to his MSBU committee, attended the first meeting and was told they had to get busy; that there was no paperwork or information; and that he has been unable to get the proper paperwork in order to do his job. Mr. Mudd stated that he understands something must be done on the roads; indicated there was a lack of drainage in his neighborhood, even though the county shot it twice and said it was okay; that the neighbors got together with wheelbarrows, dug the areas out, and that they now drain properly; and expressed concern that the neighborhood residents were able to fix the problem and that the county could not.

Kathleen Smith asked why so much money is being spent in interest at Murdock Village with nothing being done, and when it became law that only 32 could be in a classroom. Ms. Rendell advised that in 2002 the voters voted the classroom size of 32, and indicated that it is not 32 for all classes, that some classes are 18. Ms. Smith asked why sidewalks are being built along Veterans Boulevard and U.S. #41, when they are not being used. Ms. Smith stated that she thinks the Commissioners should be able to answer questions at the time they are asked at meetings, and inquired if there was a way to have a meeting with just her district. **Commissioner D'Aprile** said that he understands there must be a procedure, but that he tries to answer all questions when possible; and indicated that Ms. Smith could contact any of the Commissioners at any time. **Commissioner Duffy** stated that Ms. Smith's district is hers; that there was a meeting for District 5 at the Port Charlotte Beach Complex on May 29, 2007; and indicated she would be happy to meet with Ms. Smith and any others of the district, and would even go to her home.

Daniel Fletcher said that he attends the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Citizen's Advisory Committee meetings and is

concerned that there is no transparent plan for transportation within the county. Mr. Fletcher stated that he has previously suggested four centralized bus stops, and indicated that buses are needed for the workers as well as the shoppers or those going to doctors. Mr. Fletcher requested that the Board members and School Board members approach the paper stating that they want to write one article per month and present answers in the articles so people can read what they have to say about questions that are brought to them. Mr. Fletcher advised that Mr. Kunik with the City of Punta Gorda does this and that it has opened communication between citizens and the City. Mr. Fletcher said that there is a Comprehensive Plan coming up in 2008, and opined that it is important to include in that Comprehensive Plan a structured definition of what the county wants in terms of businesses on the water.

Chairman Loftus thanked all who attended. **Commissioner D'Aprile** stated that he is honored to have attended the meeting to address the issues and questions, and hopes some of the answers were given that were needed.

ADJOURNED 8:15 PM

Signature on file in Commission Minutes
Chairman

ATTEST:

**BARBARA T. SCOTT, CLERK
OF THE CIRCUIT COURT AND
EX-OFFICIO TO THE BOARD
OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

**By: Signature on file in Commission Minutes
Deputy Clerk**

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