

## SPB Makes Peace, Paves Way for Progress



**By Betsy Judge** - Mayor Maria Lowe's tenure will be a few months shorter than normal with her impending move to France, but the accomplishments of the city under her leadership belie that. While much of what has been accomplished is not glamorous, it sets the city on what could be a path for a more productive future.

Lowe came into office with a vision for St. Pete Beach; that it be a healthy and safe environment for the residents and also a quintessential destination for visitors.

"That vision statement means a lot to me," she says, "because health and safety for the residents means that you make sure that the sewers are up-to-date, the water (system) is up-to-date; that the roads are safe, and if you're on the beach it is protected, because that's part of our treasure. And if it's healthy and safe for residents, that means if we are inviting people here, it's healthy and safe for them."

Healing relationships was an important first step to a healthy city, and she points to changes in city leadership during her first year as a big accomplishment. "It allowed us to have a fresh perspective and to work toward putting 12 years of litigation behind us.

"Gaining trust has been the biggest hill to hike up, because our city was so fractured and there was so much mistrust." She says the tension and antagonism has dissipated. "People who have not been on speaking terms have now had respectful dialogue. We have come a very long way reconnecting with the community... You'll never make everyone happy, but I think we've gotten a lot better at least at listening, acknowledging people's concerns, and if we can address them, we do."

With a new city manager and attorney, they focused on taking steps necessary to move forward.

"During that first year several things occurred that allowed us to do that, the biggest of which was a 2014 decision by the Second District Court of Appeals," she says.

That ruling voided a 2011 comprehensive development plan ordinance that would encourage hotel development because the city failed to comply with public notice requirements. They could have appealed, but accepted the verdict so they could get a mediated settlement for a second Department of Administrative Hearing (DOHA) case regarding the comprehensive plan adopted in 2013.

The settlement required changes to the comprehensive plan including a reduction in the maximum building height in the large resort district along Gulf Boulevard from the earlier 146 to 118 feet, and adjustments to the setbacks in the north end of the district and near residential property.

It also required the city to complete a number of studies related to capacity prior to issuing any development orders for buildings taller than 80 feet; however, the city is not required to make any repairs or changes based on the studies. "We couldn't obligate future commissions within that settlement, because those things come with a price tag and that would be a budget decision; but it comes with a gentleman's agreement that we will make those changes."

A previously conducted FDOT study and their approved hurricane evacuation plan met two requirements. They are nearing completion of an inflow and infiltration (I&I) study of their sewer pipes. It required every pipe in the system be cleaned and documented by camera to determine their status. Another study was a review of density allocation across the city.

In the process of doing another mandated study on impact fees for new development, they discovered they were no such fees, but since most building is re-development and not subject to impact fees, they turned their focus on permit fees. "It was huge policy undertaking and a tremendous amount of research because the fees were not in one place. If you want to know what it costs to do something in the city, you would have to find that section of the ordinance and there would be a fee embedded in it. It was ridiculously cumbersome, and we were missing fees that we should have been charging because nobody knew where they were." They reset the fee structure and moved all fees into a single appendix.

They established a technical review committee to streamline the development plan review process. "We review everything at one time and talk to each other along with the applicants to work through all the problems. You may get a list three pages long, but as long as you comply with all those things, then you should be able to move onto the next step. Some projects require multiple reviews, so that is tremendously more seamless for applicants and far less cumbersome for them." In the spirit of transparency, there is also a new requirement for noticed community meetings for proposed projects.

In addition to the settlement studies, they completed a road study to itemize every street in the city and prioritized them in terms of repair work.

Another situation that greeted the mayor as she took office was potential fines from the Florida Department of Environment Protection (DEP) for previous wastewater spills. They agreed to be placed under a DEP consent order.

"At that time we had at least seven lift stations and all three pump stations that had to be reconfigured or reconstructed, and we had to figure out how to pay for that," she says. That led to a review of the city's debt-to-income ratio led by Elaine Edmonds to get a credit rating. "With that finance rating, we were able to go into bonds and that was a really big deal for the sewers. We've made huge strides with it."

Despite the work they have done, many of the pipes are cracked which allows ground water to enter the system. With torrential rains the additional water overwhelms the system, rises out of the manhole covers relieving the pressure. "The I&I study identified which pipes are in the worst state of disrepair so that we can now prioritize replacement," says Lowe. "We know for certain that the trunk line along Gulf Blvd is in a very degraded state and must be a priority for replacement. It was one of the worst contributing factors for ground water accumulation contributing to over capacity which led to the discharge during the last storm."

"The City Commission has not wavered in the last three years to its commitment to rectify the sanitary sewer system. It takes money and time, but we are working to resolve the issues to ensure the health and safety of our community."

Lowe anticipates all the settlement requirements for the DOHA case will be met later this summer. She says the test of this comprehensive plan and its longevity will be the adherence future commissions make to honor the plan and not give variances or workarounds. They are also working to ensure all their development regulations and codes support the comprehensive plan.

"The city has an unfortunate pattern of working around our policy instead of within it. Fixing policy takes time and it takes a lot of dedication, because every time you adopt something new it requires two full readings and there's a lot of bureaucratic steps that have to be taken."

The next big project will be a complete buildout of Blind Pass Road that will include sidewalks, bike lanes, traffic calming techniques and additional landscaping.

"I think for future development there are two terms we will try to implement through policy and that is form-based design to make sure that the vision of what the community wants is honored and complete streets to ensure that all of the modes of travel are considered to the maximum."

She encourages residents to get involved with the city. "A community is only as good as its members. It has been demonstrated to me time and time again, that the health of our community and the sustainment is the people that live here; they are the torchbearers for what we stand for. Without their involvement and without their participation then it is very easy to get misguided."

She is not dropping her pack despite the impending move at the end of this year. Her focus before she leaves office is to make sure that the budgets close out well and that things are solidified for the year-long 60th birthday celebration in 2017.



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