Bradenton Beach takes charge

Officials examine local land-use laws and how to control growth

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BRADENTON BEACH -- The one thing everyone in Bradenton Beach agrees on is that they want this seaside town to hold on to its sense of community.

Squabbles start over how to make that happen. But at least there's conversation.

Most residents here are middle-class retirees who moved from Midwest states decades ago, their families following soon after. They moved for the warm weather, beautiful vistas and small-town feeling.

But several years ago an attempt to clean up some of the town's decay brought in developers who built resort-style condos and began to squeeze out those same families.

Bradenton Beach multi-unit construction since 2000

Rosa del Mar, 2500 block of Gulf Drive North, 14 units, $1.7 million-$2.3 million each

Unnamed multi-unit, Avenue C and 22nd Street, 4 units

Bradenton Beach Club, Gulf Drive North at 17th Street, 40 units, $575,000-$1.69 million each

Bridgewalk resort, 100 Bridge St, 28-unit vacation rentals

Sandcastle, Gulf Drive South at Bridge Street, 6 units, $1.39 million-$1.93 million each

Old Bridge Village, Bay Drive South between 3rd and 4th streets, 11 residential units and 2 offices, $750,000-$1.15 million each

The Hibiscus buildings, 5th and 7th streets, 8 units total, $750,000- $1.2 million each

Property values in Bradenton Beach went from a total of $119 million in 1994 to $343 million in 2003.

Year-over-year percentage increase

'95	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03
7.5%	8.5%	6.7%	6.1%	7.2%	13.9%	19.1%	19.4%	25.8%

SOURCE: Property developers   STAFF GRAPHIC / JENNIFER F. A. BORRESEN

Local folks didn't know what to make of the boom. For a while, they just watched it happen.

Finally, a plan seemed to solidify last November, when voters picked three new commissioners, all of whom promised to restore the city's residential nature.

The commission charted a new course and took swift action: hiring, firing, appointing a committee to examine local land-use laws.

In March, it hired environmental and land-use lawyer Ralf Brookes as city counsel, to help create laws to control growth.

"Developers do what we as a city allow them to do," resident Rick Bisio says.

A peaceful place

Berneitta Kays' coral house is a few blocks from the city pier, in the heart of Bradenton Beach. Palma Sola Bay is to the east; the blue-and-white marina is north.
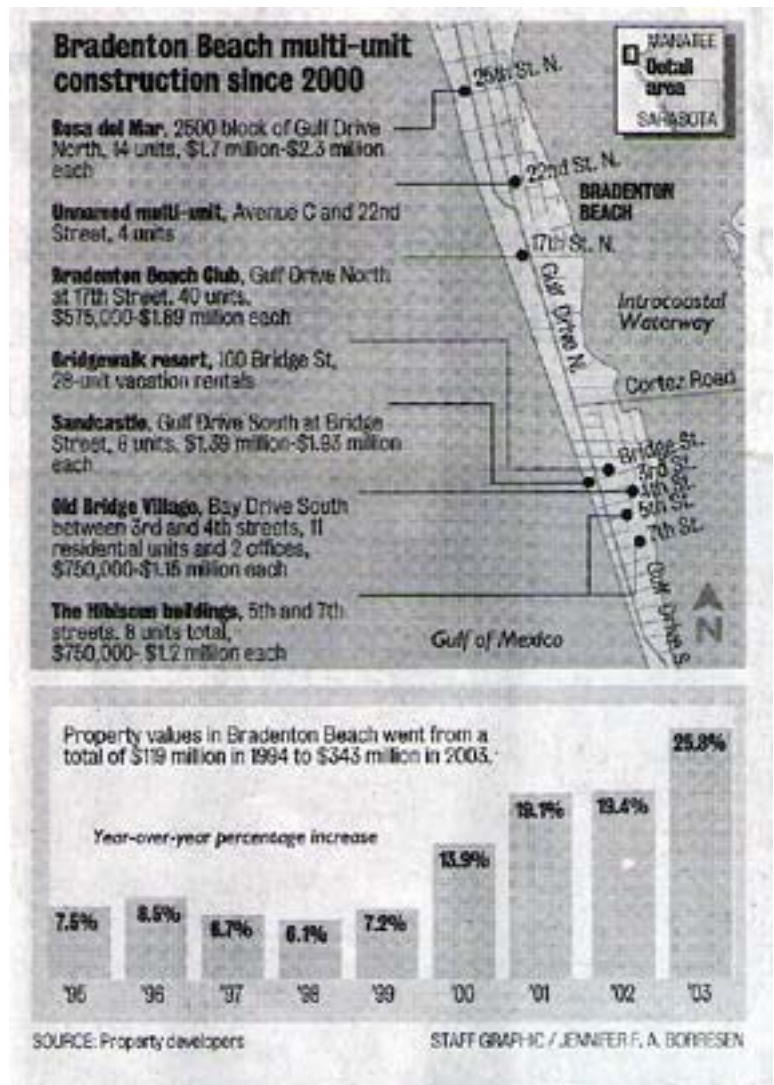
Her house, like most in this city of about 1,500, is on a 50-by-100-foot lot, squeezed close to the one next door.

There's not much room in Bradenton Beach, a thin, three-mile strip between the bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Among the bungalows and beach-style houses on narrow, dead-end roads, new condominium complexes have gone up. Some span entire blocks.

Vacationers and part-time residents tote beach bags from the resort condominiums that line Gulf Drive, stopping in at the new spa and creperie along Bridge Street, the downtown center.

Kays, who is 82, used to fish on the city pier, chatting with tourists from England, Germany and France while she waited for a bite.

She moved to Bradenton Beach 20 years ago with her husband, who died in 1988.

"If anyone is lonely here, it's their own fault," she says. She doesn't drive, never has. She rides the island's free trolley to buy groceries at the Publix supermarket. Before the trolley started, friends picked her up for errands.

Despite the constant fellowship, the city has had problems, mainly downtown. The first bridge from the mainland across the bay ended on Bridge Street, bringing with it commercialization.

Many say new construction saved Bradenton Beach from sliding to the pits. The antidote, it turns out, spawned the city's current challenge.

Bridge Street, now alluring with its boutiques and bayside restaurants, was not a pretty place in 1984. Seedy bars lined the downtown drag leading to the city pier.

"It was a slum," says resident Mollie Sandberg, who moved here in 1988.

Sunday morning walks sent her stepping over empty beer and whiskey bottles, the dirty aftermath of Saturday night revelry along Bridge Street. "People were sleeping in cars on the side of the road," she recalls.

When Katie Pierola became mayor in 1989, she went after grants to clean up the short road and pier.

"I got tired of hearing about the jokes and the bums and the people urinating on the street," Pierola says. "I really wasn't thinking way ahead or anything."

She wanted to rid her city of its sullied reputation. But she wound up getting more than she

bargained for.

Her administration won more than $2 million to fix up Bridge Street and the pier. The city laid red-brick crosswalks and installed white wood benches. Novelty stores moved in.

Outsiders noticed the shift. Beach renourishment, which Pierola also spearheaded, caught people's attention too: Bradenton Beach suddenly looked like a proper tourist destination.

"It changed the whole atmosphere," says former mayor Gail Cole, who has lived in Bradenton Beach for more than 25 years. New businesses moved in, knocking down neglected buildings. Investors saw a diamond in the rough.

Like a struggling artist who finally finds fame, city officials had trouble seeing a downside to developers' sudden interest.

But development took off too fast, too strong, leaving residents and local leaders feeling out of control. By 2000, million-dollar condos were on their way.

"Those that were in office kind of went along with it," says Cole, whose administration approved the controversial Old Bridge Village.

Permanent population drops

Small cottages used to cover the corner of downtown Third and Bay streets, where Old Bridge Village now commands half the block, dwarfing nearby bungalows like a bully in a school yard of skinny kids.

"It's so big," says Commissioner Anna O'Brien, resistance to the project landed her in a lawsuit with the developer. "That just changed the flavor of the whole neighborhood."

Farther north, GSR Development knocked down four small houses on Gulf Drive to build a condominium complex. None of the homeowners had planned to sell. GSR approached one, and word spread. A year ago, the company paid a total of $7.6 million for the four houses.

Partner Steven Noriega says he can charge $1,000 a square foot, the same as in Longboat Key. He estimates that waterside property values climb 40 to 45 percent a year.

"It's tremendous value," Noriega says. "That's the reason we're there."

The flourishing market drew investors offering big money to small homeowners. City laws let them buy adjacent properties, lump them together and build across the land.

For developers, this made sense: They could earn more money from a multifamily complex than from two or three homes.

"Property values are so high that they are tearing down and building bigger because the income from what's there isn't enough to warrant the property taxes," says Mary Ann Brockman, executive director for the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce.

In 1990, property values totaled $107 million. After a trend of single-digit appreciation, they climbed 14 percent in 2000. They jumped 19 percent in both 2001 and 2002. Last year, they skyrocketed nearly 26 percent to $343 million.

The 2000 U.S. Census shows the median family income at $46,583.

The stakes are high for the community. As developers wave millions in front of middle-class families, the year-round population shrinks.

More vacationers and part-timers, wealthy enough to buy a condo as a winter home, are moving in.

"We've almost evaporated as a community," says Ken Lohn, who chairs the Board of Adjustment. "I moved here so I could wave hi to my neighbors."

Lohn followed his elderly mother to Bradenton Beach 20 years ago.

It was a quiet place, "made up of ordinary people," he says. Retired teachers and policemen lived nearby. Some still do, qualifying for Amendment 10, which caps the amount they have to pay in property taxes.

Residents speak out

From 1990 to 2000, the city's population dropped 11 percent, according to the census, from 1,657 to 1,482 people. For decades before, the population had been increasing.

The city has 899 registered voters today, a 28 percent drop from 1,254 in 1990. r>
"We lose our voice in the county," Lohn said. "They don't pay attention to people who have only 800 voices. And we have no one to man our boards."

"The real terror for us is that we have so few single-family homes," Commissioner Anna O'Brien says.

Lohn worries that the county or neighboring Holmes Beach, which has shown steady population increases, will absorb Bradenton Beach if the city's permanent population continues to dwindle.

He would like the city to enact a law that says only single-family homes can replace single-family homes. The island's most residential city, Anna Maria, imposes restrictions on condominium construction.

"Bradenton Beach has always kind of been the red-headed stepchild of the other island cities," said Commissioner Lisa Marie Phillips, one of the three elected in November. "But we don't want to be a Longboat Key, where you drive down and see buildings and not the water."

The way to improve Bradenton Beach, Phillips says, is to manage growth.

"You look around and say, 'Is the size and scale of this development worthy of this neighborhood?'," she said. "We'd like to see people stay and raise families here, like I did. We want to make sure people aren't chased out by rising prices."

That vision sealed Phillips' victory on Election Day. Two other like-minded candidates, John Shaughnessy and Peter Barreda, easily won too. Barreda resigned in May because of health concerns and time constraints. But his replacement, Rob Nachtigal, appears to be in step with the commission.

The leaders had tapped into residents' wants: In a nonbinding referendum at polls the same day, voters said they wanted to eliminate multifamily housing.

A local visioning group, formed the year before, had proposed the same thing. "Revitalize," the group said. "Stop big buildings."

A few weeks after the election, the commission fired the city's lawyer and its planner, who they believed encouraged development. They criticized building official Bob Welch for what they called his "loose" interpretation of city codes. He quit, followed by the city's code enforcement officer.

Some condemned the commissioners for their strong-arm approach. Still, the board plugged on.

The city has extended a moratorium on rezoning and land-use changes, until a committee has finished redrafting the comprehensive plan and land-development codes.

Kays' and Brookes' opinions embody the struggle adenton Beach faces in creating those development laws and codes.

Kays, like some other locals, doesn't mind the part-time residents.

"They have a right to be here," she says. "If I can afford two places, I should be able to leave."

Plus, the new construction is attractive, Kays says. She was on the commission that approved Old Bridge Village. "It's much better than what was there before: five little termite-eaten shacks."

Brookes points to a "For sale" sign in front of a white wooden house at 2nd Street and Highland

Avenue, a "cracker cottage," one of the originals. He's worried that a buyer will tear down the 1931 building.

It symbolizes what persuaded him to represent Bradenton Beach.

"The challenge is to make someone see what a beautiful house this is," Brookes says. "It's just easier to say, 'Let everyone build the maximum they want to build.'"

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