

## **Controversial city manager Don Cooper helped shape Port St. Lucie**

By Alexi Howk

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PORT ST. LUCIE — When longtime former City Manager Don Cooper took over running the city 20 years ago, he described it as "essentially a large subdivision."

Cooper helped change that. The sometimes controversial city manager was at the helm while Port St. Lucie transformed into a full-fledged city.

General Development Corp., the developer of Port St. Lucie, had declared bankruptcy in 1990 and left the legacy of a poorly planned and designed city.

"Don Cooper was the spark plug for driving the city to become a city," former Mayor Bob Minsky said. "One of the things he pressed upon people, and I never forgot it, was, 'You, as a city council have to decide what kind of city you want to be.' He said this at a council retreat before I got elected close to 1990. There wasn't an instant response. It was a way of trying to get them to think about what they wanted the city to be. At subsequent meetings and retreats that theme is what they used to start addressing the issues GDC left behind."

Some say without Cooper's leadership and 20-year tenure as city manager, Port St. Lucie wouldn't have emerged into what it is today: home to a burgeoning biotech industry, the New York Mets spring training complex, PGA Village and Hollywood movie production studio Digital Domain.

"He's a brilliant and fascinating man," said Sandpiper Bay resident Richard McAfoos, who's also chairman of the Port St. Lucie Historical Society.

"The city is so much better off for having had the opportunity of him being here in charge for these 20 plus or minus years."

One of Cooper's most notable efforts was putting together a \$145 million plan in the 1990s to extend water and sewer service throughout the city. At the time, it was the largest water and sewer expansion in the country, Cooper said in a January 2010 videotaped interview conducted by the Port St. Lucie Historical Society just before Cooper resigned from the city.

"That was a very controversial issue, at least initially," said Cooper in the historical society video. "Nobody wanted to pay the assessments. I think there's a lot of people who think you can provide government services, and it doesn't cost anybody anything. Unfortunately, that's not the case. Government is a business, and it runs on money like everything else."

Cooper, who did not return calls for this story, had planned the project to take 10 years. However, the city completed it in eight and \$35 million under budget.

With water and sewer, the city began to see an increase in the size of homes that were being built, and the assessed property values in the city began to climb, Cooper said in the video.

The city was platted for about 80 square miles and 80,000 home sites, Minsky said.

"That's about 300,000 people so we knew we had to start preparing to take care of that," he said.

The city didn't have a commercial base to provide jobs for the people living here.

"All GDC wanted to do was sell these lots and get the hell out of here, but they didn't do it fast enough so when the cards came crashing down they had to go bankrupt," Minsky said. "This area was totally a swamp, and that is not the best type of environment to build a city on. To put in an urbanized area on top of swamp creates all kinds of problems, and those are the problems we're still having.

"I think (Don Cooper) is the best thing that's ever happened to the city," Minsky said. "He's had the vision. He had the professional experience that this city needed. You might say he was a qualified engineer. He could understand engineering. He understood roads. He understood every facet of being a city manager. One of the most important parts is financing. He had a tremendous knowledge of financing."

But with Cooper came controversy.

In 2003, he was arrested on a domestic battery charge for hitting his wife, Linda, during an argument. Cooper pleaded no contest to the charge, which was later dismissed by a judge after Cooper completed a 26-hour domestic violence prevention program.

Cooper, a strong personality, was known to speak his mind and lead with an iron fist. He also wasn't considered a "people person."

"He was the iron fist in the velvet glove," said former City Councilwoman Shirley Conti, who served on the council from 1986-1990 when it first appointed Cooper as assistant city manager. "He wasn't here for a popularity contest. He was here to do what was right. He didn't have time for 'stupidity.' He knew what he had to do and sometimes with a lot of opposition."

Cooper was criticized by some for putting together large incentive deals for private companies that built here such as the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies and Digital Domain.

"I know he's gotten bad press like everybody, but that was his job," McAfoos said. "There was the decision to make this city a city as opposed to, 'Are we going to be a city and have services? Or, are we going to be just a fledgling bedroom community with no heart, no soul, no direction?' And that was his challenge."

When Cooper came to Port St. Lucie from Craig, Colo., where he also was a city manager, he said in the historical video he came with the idea he'd stay for three years and then return to Colorado.

But the problems and deficiencies GDC left behind and the city's rapid growth presented him with a long-term focus on completing various improvement projects.

"People that moved to Port St. Lucie because it was cheap or rural or for whatever reason, and it's changed on them," Cooper said in the video interview. "And, as a result, they want to blame somebody. At the same time you've had city councils that because of the increasing complexity of municipal government have relied more and more on the city manager to be a spokesman for those issues. And as a result, I've become the lightning rod in much of my career because we've had to deal with things like water and sewer and stormwater and city halls and civic centers and various things."

Cooper said what he's most proud of and what he would call his legacy is the development of the city's staff.

"When I came to work here one of the things that I was told was that the staff was not held in high regard, and it couldn't get things accomplished," Cooper said in the historical society video. "The staff now can. Many people put down Port St. Lucie, and I don't think it has any reason to be put down. Not at all.

"It's a city that's changing. It's evolving. It's going to continue and so is the organization. The only legacy I want to have is that I helped it along the way."

