

## Port St. Lucie's growth brought diversity, more voices to changing political climate

By Alexi Howk

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Rapid growth over the past 50 years has transformed the city's government from a tiny group of individuals to a massive multi-department organization, and changed the political atmosphere from once friendlier times to downright nasty, some say.

A more diverse, vocal and educated population has given way to more controversy and less community involvement.

Local politics in Port St. Lucie today is "quite cruel," said Shirley Conti, who served on the council from 1986-1990.

"It was kinder and gentler back then," she said. "There's more controversy than there ever was. I think it's because of freedom of speech, the voices have grown louder and people are belligerent."

In the beginning, Port St. Lucie was a company town run by its developer, General Development Corp. The first council was comprised of five people appointed and employed by GDC. None of the council members lived in the city. Three lived in Miami and two lived in River Park in unincorporated St. Lucie County.

Port St. Lucie didn't see its first municipal elections until 1965, which drew only 40 votes from the few residents who lived here.

The city started with just one employee and within a few years had three workers. Today, there are 943 city employees. The city's first budget was \$7,000. The city's 2010-2011 budget is \$421 million.

City Councilman Jack Kelly, elected in 2000, said 1992 was probably the first year that General Development Corp. didn't have any real influence on the council because the company went bankrupt in 1990. He also said early 2000 was the beginning of cooperative relationships between the city and neighboring counties Martin and St. Lucie. You'd be lucky, Kelly said, if county commissioners from those communities returned your phone call or knew your name.

"Before 2000 you couldn't get a county commissioner to talk to you," Kelly said. "We didn't want to know what the county was doing. We didn't want to meddle in their affairs, and they didn't want to meddle in our affairs."

The government bodies began to work together on regional projects, including the Walmart Distribution Center and the development of a biotech hub in Tradition.

"That's the best thing that's happened as far as politics and changes in the county," Kelly said. "Before that, they just didn't cooperate. They just always felt threatened by other governmental agencies."

In Port St. Lucie's early years, the Port St. Lucie Civic League and the Port St. Lucie and Sandpiper Bay homeowners associations played influential roles in political decisions.

Yet, there are few effective organizations in Port St. Lucie today, said former City Manager Don Cooper in a January 2010 videotaped interview with the Port St. Lucie Historical Society.

"In Port St. Lucie there are no elites," he said. "There is no business elite or social elite. The city government is the most effective organization."

GDC laid out the city on quarter-acre lots and sold homes individually, so there weren't many homeowners associations in the city. That might be why there's no civic unity today.

Bob Minsky, the city's third elected mayor in 1992, said he's seen a change over the years in not only people's interest in politics in the city, but also in the personalities on the council.

"I think one of the big problems is the people in Port St. Lucie don't take politics seriously, and they should because so much depends on it," he said. "I just really think they don't invest enough of themselves into the elections and who they elect."

Port St. Lucie resident Victoria Huggins who ran unsuccessfully for Kelly's seat in 2008 and mayor last year has lived in the city since 1999. However, before moving here, she used to visit relatives who lived in the city.

Huggins, a founding member of Treasure Coast Voices, an Internet message board discussing local issues, recalled when citizens would organize pancake breakfasts at the River Park yacht club and talk about politics and city issues.

"The mayor would stop by on occasion for breakfast and would listen to what the people at the yacht club had to say," Huggins said. "We don't have anything like that today."

Huggins said the political landscape in Port St. Lucie has "gotten a lot nastier."

"I think it's because as the city grew there were more and more expenses and more and more of a burden was put on the taxpayers of the city," she said.

Huggins said when the city took on the \$145 million water and sewer project in the early 1990s is when residents began to get more involved in government. Residents didn't want to pay the assessments that came along with having water and sewer. A meeting held on the front lawn of City Hall drew about 1,000 people and lasted into the morning hours, Huggins said.

"To me, that was the catalyst to the changing governmental landscape in the city of Port St. Lucie," she said. "That is when the citizens of the city finally woke up and realized we need to pay more attention."

