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Civic group's impact felt over 25 years

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BY ROBERT SILK Free Press Staff

rsilk@keysnews.com

ISLAMORADA -- In April 1986, a group of Lower Matecumbe Key residents concerned about a proposed development on the north side of the island and worried about a land-use plan being considered by Monroe County decided they needed to act collectively.

The resulting Lower Matecumbe Key Association was born with the mission of preserving the island's open spaces and residential character.

"By sharing ideas and creating a method of keeping our residents and property owners better informed and more conscious of the unique nature of the key, we can protect the quality of the island," reads a goal statement included in the LMKA's first newsletter.

Now, as the LMKA reaches its 25th anniversary on Friday, April 22, it boasts more than 250 member families and a reputation as Islamorada's most organized civic group.

"Based on my experience, I'd say they are the most effective," said Councilman Don Achenberg, himself a Lower Matecumbe resident, who has sat on the Village Council since 2007.

In those early days of the late 1980s and early '90s, when Lower Matecumbe was still a part of unincorporated Monroe County, the LMKA focused on three main issues, said Mike Bier, one of its early presidents, and Sue Miller, who has been active in the association since the beginning and now writes the LMKA newsletter.

The catalyst was the county's comprehensive land-use plan, as well as talk of a single-family neighborhood along undeveloped canals just south of Robbie's Marina. The islands dotting those canals are now part of the Florida State Park system and the area is a popular kayaking destination, especially for tourists setting out from Robbie's.

Other major issues in the late '80s included a trash-covered beach on the southern oceanside edge of Lower Matecumbe and the spotty, overgrown bike path that ran along the bayside of the island.

The beach back then was filled with rusted out RVs and mounds of rubbish. Some used the area to camp, even though there were no bathroom facilities. Crime too was a problem.

"It was just horrible. It was deplorable," Bier said.

Led by Anne Eaton, widow of Cleveland industrialist Cyrus Eaton, the LMKA conducted a fundraising and clean-up effort at the beach and eventually convinced Monroe County to maintain it as a park -- today known as Anne's Beach.

Bier said LMKA's good relations with the county government were also instrumental in its successful effort to convince officials to pave the Lower Matecumbe bike path from one side of the island to the other.

Lower Matecumbe became a portion of the newly incorporated village of Islamorada in 1998. Since then the LMKA has pushed the council for continued improvement along the bike path. It fought successfully against a zoning change that would have allowed for condo construction on properties that are now used for lobster trap storage. And it has worked with the Florida Department of Transportation on road and landscaping projects along the Overseas Highway, President Gordon Hadley said.

Perhaps the biggest legislative achievement of the LMKA during village times was its successful push for a Lower Matecumbe fire station, which was completed in 2009.

Chris Sante, who served on the Village Council between 2002 and 2008, said the village's southernmost key has benefited from being the only one of Islamorada's four islands to have a civic organization advocating for its collective interests.

"When you have an organized effort from a homeowner's organization you tend to listen, whereas when you get a bunch of individuals with a similar problem, they may have different perspectives," Sante said. "So while they're complaining about the same thing, it doesn't come across as clear and concise."

Bumps in the road

Despite its successes however, the LMKA has faced some bumps in the road.

For the most part, the association has tried to keep its advocacy focused upon issues which most every Lower Matecumbe resident can agree. But over the course of a 25-year run, political fissures are bound to open.

One of those moments came in the late '90s, as the fight over Islamorada's incorporation heated up. Miller, who was a strong incorporation backer, says the LMKA never took an official position on the matter.

Even so, Bier, who was an incorporation opponent, said he felt the information put out by the association at that time was biased. Biased enough, he said, that he quit LMKA, and others did as well.

"It seemed like they were guiding the voice of Lower Matecumbe," he said. "I don't think the other side of the issue was very clearly presented."

More recently, the LMKA was weak enough in 2005 that a letter was sent to members asking if they wanted to keep the group going.

The problem then, Hadley said, was more a lack of organization and interest, than political squabbles. There weren't any hot-button issues to deal with -- the wastewater fight that now dominates village affairs hadn't heated up. Meanwhile, the association's leadership was disorganized. The newsletter wasn't being produced, and nobody had gotten around to sending out the bills for the \$20 membership fees.

Hadley said a group of Lower Matecumbe residents, including current Mayor Michael Reckwerdt, took up the push to keep the LMKA alive.

"Everybody said, 'Hey, this is too valuable to let go,'" he said.

Revitalized

Since then, the association has come back strong. Its election forum, held during each local campaign season, is a key stop along the Village Council campaign trail. Its annual bike path walk also draws village officials, who see firsthand what's on the mind of Lower Matecumbe residents.

The LMKA isn't only about political advocacy, though. The association's newsletter, edited and produced by Miller several times a year, does contain items related to village and county governments. But it also includes feature stories, as well as pieces on local history, ecology and other subjects.

In addition, association meetings, which Hadley says are held six to eight times per year, feature guest speakers from the governmental, scientific and historic communities.

Hadley said that these days the LMKA walks something of a complicated line. On the one hand, Lower Matecumbe residents don't want too much attention from the village. They don't want to be Plantation Key with a Founders Park, for example.

On the other hand, they still feel like their remote location and relatively small population has led the village to not give them a fair return on their tax dollars.

"We will always be a donor and we don't mind being a donor, but we do want a fair shake," he said.

Miller says the LMKA will be as vital going forward as it was when it was founded a quarter century ago.

"I just hope the organization stays active," she said. "Because whatever the issues are at any given time, our association can always have a voice in making things better."

rsilk@keysnews.com

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