



Port St. Lucie's first 50 years had city leaders riding rapid growth | Photo Galleries

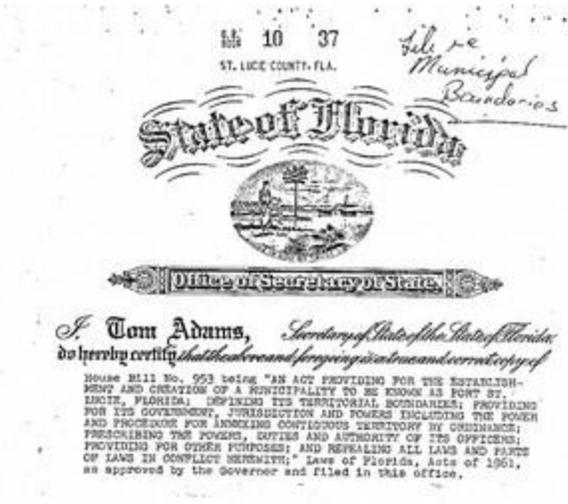
By Tyler Treadway

Originally published 03:02 p.m., April 13, 2011
Updated 05:30 a.m., April 20, 2011

PORT ST. LUCIE — Rome wasn't built in a day. It's taken millenniums to become "the Eternal City."

Port St. Lucie is on a faster track.

Incorporated on April 21, 1961, as little more than a name on a piece of paper, in just 50 years Port St. Lucie has become the ninth-largest city in Florida with a population of nearly 165,000.



"When you look at Port St. Lucie today, you just can't imagine that we really didn't have anything," said 80-year-old Beth Gessner, who moved with her husband, Dave Gessner, and their four children to Port St. Lucie about the time the city was formed. "It never occurred to me the city would get so big. We're not a metropolis, and I treasure that; but in 50 years it may be."

In 1958, General Development Corp. bought the small River Park subdivision between U.S. 1 and the North Fork of the St. Lucie River from the Cowles Family for \$5 million and announced plans to build 5,000 homes as the firm began acquiring 40,000 acres.

Florida law at the time allowed developers to incorporate "paper cities" in areas where there were not yet residents; and officials with General Development Corp. did just that to form Port St. Lucie as one of its several "Port"-named retirement communities in the state. GDC officials excluded River Park itself since that area had residents.



H.B. 953

A BILL

TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT PROVIDING FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT AND CREATION OF A MUNICIPALITY TO BE KNOWN AS PORT ST. LUCIE, FLORIDA; DEFINING ITS TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES; PROVIDING FOR ITS GOVERNMENT, JURISDICTION AND POWERS INCLUDING THE POWER AND PROCEDURE FOR ANNEXING CONTIGUOUS TERRITORY BY ORDINANCE; PRESCRIBING THE POWERS, DUTIES AND AUTHORITY OF ITS OFFICERS; PROVIDING FOR OTHER PURPOSES; AND REPEALING ALL LAWS AND PARTS OF LAWS IN CONFLICT HEREWITH.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA:

ARTICLE I

CORPORATE NAME

The municipality hereby established shall be known as "PORT ST. LUCIE, FLORIDA."

ARTICLE II

TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES

"Section 1. The territorial limits of such municipality are hereby defined and shall be as follows:

Township 36 South, Range 40 East

- Section 31 - All East of Sunshine State Parkway
- Section 32 - All
- Section 33 - All
- Section 34 - All
- Section 35 - The following described lands as shown on plat of St. Lucie Gardens, recorded in Plat Book 1, Page 35, Public Records of St. Lucie County:
 - Block 1 - Lots 2 through 5 inclusive, Lot 8, and Lots 13 through 16 inclusive
 - Block 2 - Lots 5 through 9 inclusive, all of Lot 10 lying East and South of the St. Lucie River, and Lots 11 through 16 inclusive
 - Block 3 - Lots 1 through 3 inclusive; all of Lots 4, 5 and 6 lying East of the St. Lucie River; and Lots 7 through 16 inclusive.

With GDC's aggressive marketing campaign in northern cities and its now-legendary practice of selling lots for \$10 down and \$10 a month for 10 years, the city grew steadily in the 1960s and '70s.

The 1970 census recorded a year-round population of just 330; in 1980, it was 14,000.

Even residents who arrived in the 1980s recall Port St. Lucie as a low-cost retirement and bedroom community with a small-town atmosphere.

"The city had a reputation of being for 'the newly wed and nearly dead,'" said Mary Dodge, 71, a former journalist with the

Palm Beach Times and The Stuart News who has lived in Port St. Lucie since 1980.

Richard McAfoos, a resident of the Sandpiper Bay neighborhood of Port St. Lucie and chairman of the Port St. Lucie Historical Society, recalled how Port St. Lucie Boulevard was completely lined with houses, not a business in sight, when he moved to the city in 1982.

"It shows how the town evolved from its infancy," McAfoos said, "with its original intent to be a retirement community for people to golf and just enjoy life in their sunset years. (Eventually, Port St. Lucie) turned out to be the normal mix for Florida with young and working people and families and retirees. So the tales of this being just a retirement community are just flat not true, but the myth survived."

Burgeoned by the mixture of retirees and young families, growth picked up some serious speed in the mid-1980s. The decade also saw Hospital Corp. of America open HCA Medical Center, now St. Lucie Medical Center, in 1983 and the New York Mets bring their spring training facility to the St. Lucie West area in 1988.

"The development of St. Lucie West in the mid-1980s really helped push the city," said Robert "Bob" Minsky, Port St. Lucie mayor from 1992 to 1998 and 2000 to 2006. "It put Port St. Lucie on the map."

COMING TO GRIPS WITH GROWTH

Port St. Lucie might really have become a city in the 1990s. With about 62,800 residents, it became the Treasure Coast's most-populous municipality in 1993; and the rapid growth caused problems city officials had to come to grips with.

First, General Development Corp., which had guided Port St. Lucie's development but basically had designed an overgrown subdivision instead of a city, declared bankruptcy in 1990.

"All GDC wanted to do was sell these lots and get the hell out of here," Minsky said. "But they didn't do it fast enough. So when the cards came crashing down they had to go bankrupt."

Minsky called the GDC officials "a bunch of crooks" who left Port St. Lucie in terrible shape. In 1990, four former GDC executives were convicted of conspiring to defraud more than 10,000 home buyers in Port St. Lucie. In 1996, the convictions were overturned by the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, and the four were freed from prison.

"(GDC) left the city with 209 miles of road to complete, and the roads that were here were falling apart," Minsky said. "And the drainage system they left us with was a complete farce. ... 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."

One such problem proved to be a turning point for the city: Most residences were using wells for drinking water and septic systems for waste; so in 1994, the city embarked on a controversial \$145 million municipal water and sewer project.

Many residents didn't want to pay the fees that went along with getting water and sewer, and they let city officials know it loud and clear.

Don Cooper, who had recently begun his 20-year tenure as city manager at the time, said in a videotaped interview with the Port St. Lucie Historical Society he saw the project as a turning point, noting that with water and sewer service, larger homes began being built in the city, resulting in higher assessed property values.

"When the water and sewer lines went in," Minsky said, "that's when the population really started to increase."

Spiraled is more like it.

House construction was booming, and construction begat more construction.

"The main industry in the city at the time was construction," Minsky said. "GDC's original plan called for a retiree community of 300,000, with 85 percent of construction residential and 15 percent everything else. That plan ignored the fact that young people would be building the homes, and that the city would need housing for them and schools and other services for their families. For a healthy community you really need a 70-30 (percent) split or, better yet, 65-35."

Minsky said he began preaching that the construction boom couldn't last forever, and that "when the economy hit a bump in the road, it was going to hurt."

2004 ANNEXATION

A major boost to diversification came in 2004 when the city annexed 15 square miles west of Interstate 95, including the Tradition development and the commercial corridor along Interstate 95. The move coincided with a report by the Washington-based Urban Land Institute that emphasized the need to create more jobs and attract major companies to the southwest part of the city to help boost Port St. Lucie's tax base.

"City leaders back in 2003-2004 determined that things needed to change in order for Port St. Lucie to be sustainable," said Michelle Berger, a Port St. Lucie councilwoman since 2004. "It couldn't continue to be a mainly residential community with very little commerce."

The 2004 annexation, she said, "created a new opportunity for diversified economic development, a mixture of retail, light industrial and institutional development, all of which added to the tax base. I mean, bringing in Home Depots and other big-box stores may not sound like a big deal, but it added much-needed sales tax revenues for the city."

In part because of the annexation, Port St. Lucie's population grew by 85.4 percent between 2000 and 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2005, the bureau named Port St. Lucie the fastest-growing city in the country.

Besides retail businesses, the annexed area attracted the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies to the city in 2008 and the Digital Domain Holding Corp. (now Digital Domain Media Group) animation studios and the Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute in 2009. According to their economic incentive programs with the city, the three institutions are to create about 900 jobs with average annual salaries of about \$60,000. The median household income in 2009 was \$51,361, according to the American Community Survey. And in 2010, Martin Memorial Health Systems received permission to build an 80-bed facility in Tradition.

Berger said a by-product of bringing such institutions to the city has been the expansion of programs at Indian River State College and Florida Atlantic University.

The city still is something of a bedroom community, as evidenced by the fact in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey that Port St. Lucie workers traveled an average of 30.4 minutes to work each day — although some residents might argue it takes that long to get across town.

Construction remained a significant part of the city's economy; that is, until the housing market collapse in 2009 and the subsequent rash of foreclosures. According to the 2010 census, Port St. Lucie had 70,877 "housing units" that year and 9,975, or 14.1 percent, of them vacant. St. Lucie County's unemployment rate hovered around the 15 percent mark throughout 2010, one of the highest rates in the state.

"It's sad to me that it grew at such a pace that there are so many empty houses now and people had to leave their homes because there was no employment," said Arlene Brown, who moved to Port St. Lucie about 30 years ago and attends many Port St. Lucie City Council meetings, where she is known for her loud recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. "I think we probably grew faster than we planned for."

Mayor JoAnn Faiella said the terrible economy "not only hurts individuals who have lost their jobs, such as those in our large construction industry, but it hurts the city's income as well. Less tax dollars coming in to the city means difficult choices have to be made about the delivery of city services."

No one wants to lose parks, police officers, street sweepers or other programs and employees, Faiella said, "but not all of them can be paid for when the city's budget has been cut in half."

DIVERSIFICATION IS KEY

The hit Port St. Lucie took when the housing market tanked was bad but could have been worse, Minsky said.

"If we hadn't started to diversify the economy when we did, the city would have been killed when the construction business went bust," he said. "Once the economy picks up, and I have to believe that it

will at some point, I think development, particularly in the southwest part of the city is really going to open up."

Berger agreed, predicting that a mall will soon join the other retail businesses in the southwest part of the city.

The future of City Center, a retail and entertainment complex on 21 acres at U.S. 1 and Walton Road touted as becoming Port St. Lucie's downtown, is less certain. The city opened a \$30 million, 100,000 square-foot Civic Center and parking garage on the site in 2008; but a plan by a private developer to build shops, restaurants and residences, has not materialized because of the poor economic climate.

"Our vision to create a downtown for Port St. Lucie has been in the plans for a long time," Faiella said, "and once the economy gets where it needs to be, it will become a reality."

Minsky said City Center might never become Port St. Lucie's "downtown" but, because of the city's unique configuration, could be a shopping, entertainment and commercial center for the east part of town much like Tradition for the southwest and St. Lucie West for the northwest.

"Traditionally, the middle of a city is where all the retail businesses and attractions are," Minsky said, "and houses are built up around the city center so that you have people going from the outskirts to the center of town for services or to work. In Port St. Lucie, you have the opposite: People live in the center of the city and travel to the outskirts for shopping or to go to work."

Complicating the city's unique setup, Minsky said, is the fact that the city is broken into four north-south "ribbons" by U.S. 1, the North Fork of the St. Lucie River, Florida's Turnpike and Interstate 95.

"So east-west traffic is essential," he said. "That's why early on we widened Port St. Lucie Boulevard and Prima Vista Boulevard, at least the part in the city. And that's why the Crosstown Parkway (begun in 2006 as the West Virginia Corridor) and getting another bridge across the river is so essential to the city's future."

Faiella said in the next five to 10 years she hopes "to see the Crosstown Parkway extension over the St. Lucie River built and operating, and I am very confident we will see that happen.

"I also hope to see a major turnaround in our unemployment problem, so that anyone who wants to live and work in Port St. Lucie can find a good job here. This is especially true for our younger people and with the growth of our high-tech industries continuing, I look forward to that becoming a reality."

Brown said she misses the small-town feel of old Port St. Lucie but is proud of the city's growth.

"You just kind of grow with it," Brown said. "Before, when (Port St. Lucie) was tiny, people wanted to come here because it was affordable and a slow and nice easy kind of life. Now it's bigger, but it's still a nice life. I love this town. I will love it until they carry me out in a box."

PORT ST. LUCIE TIMELINE

PRE-CITY MILESTONES

1953: Gardener Cowles, founder of Look Magazine, purchases land for River Park, a Florida retirement center on the North Fork of the St. Lucie River.

1958: Mackle Brothers' General Development Corporation purchases River Park for \$5 million. Announce start of a major community with 5,000 homes.

1961: Port St. Lucie Country Club with two golf courses and resort villas formally opened.

1961: Ground broken on Prima Vista Boulevard for the Port St. Lucie Methodist Church, first church in Port St. Lucie.

CITY MILESTONES

1961: On April 21, GDC files to incorporate Port St. Lucie as a city without people. River Park was excluded from the city so there would not have to be an election. The first government consisted of GDC officials.

1965: Eugene Kavanaugh and Eigil Petersen are the first residents elected to the Port St. Lucie City Council.

1970: Census results indicate city's year-round population is 330. The city had only one doctor until 1980.

1977: William McChesney becomes the first elected mayor of Port St. Lucie.

1980: The city's population jumps to 14,000. Officials say people are moving to the area faster than they can be counted.

1983: Population estimates reach 24,500.

1983: Hospital Corporation of America opens HCA Medical Center, now St. Lucie Medical Center.

1986: Club Med purchases the country club and golf course and expands the resort.

1988: St. Lucie West developers bring New York Mets spring training facility to the city.

1990: General Development Corp. declares bankruptcy.

1994: The city embarks on a citywide water-sewer project despite criticism about cost.

1999: Early census numbers indicate the city exceeds West Palm Beach by more than 3,000 people.

1999: QVC chooses Port St. Lucie for a 50,000-square-foot call center.

2000: Census numbers report 89,000 residents.

2001: \$20 million in state funds earmarked for the Walton Road Bridge is moved to fund the West Virginia Corridor.

2002: The city annexes nearly 10,000 acres, including the North Pointe residential and commercial developments.

2003: The population tops 100,000.

2004: Fifteen square miles west of Interstate 95 are annexed. The area includes a large job corridor along I-95.

2005: Census names Port St. Lucie the fastest-growing large city in the country.

2006: The city breaks ground on the West Virginia Corridor, renamed the Crosstown Parkway. Celebrating its 45th birthday, the city's population nears 150,000.

2008: Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies opens in Tradition.

2009: Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute opens on the third floor of Torrey Pines in Tradition.

2010: Martin Memorial Health Systems receives permission to build an 80-bed facility in Tradition.

2011: City designated ninth-largest municipality in Florida based on Census returns.

SOURCES: Files of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers; The Early Years of Port St. Lucie Florida by Strelsa Schrieber, 1998; A Portrait of St. Lucie County, Florida, by Lucille Reiley Rights, with addition by Cynthia Putnam Crankshaw, 1994.

Staff writers Alexi Howk and Christin Erazo contributed to this report.



