

Anthony Westbury: From rust stains to research, PSL's all grown up

By Anthony Westbury

Saturday, April 23, 2011

When I first moved to Port St. Lucie in 1986, vacant lots were \$5,000 east of Florida's Turnpike and \$3,000 out in the wild, wild west.

When I left the city 15 years later, lots were selling for half as much. I barely covered the Realtor's costs when we sold our little frame house.

So, true to form, I completely missed the Port St. Lucie property boom. At least I missed the bust, too.

We'd moved from Stuart to PSL for one reason: It was affordable. We weren't alone. Cities and counties all over the Treasure Coast included PSL as the required affordable housing component of their comprehensive plans — even ritzy Jupiter Island.

Two- and three-bedroom homes in those days were going from the mid-40s to the low 60s, and they'd been that way for years. Everyone was on a quarter-acre lot with a well and septic tank. I quickly learned never to wear white clothes. The iron in the water — no matter how much softener salt I used — quickly turned everything a nasty, rusty shade of beige.

I still do not own any white clothes; PSL left its mark on me.

We lived in the city for 15 years and watched it grow up around us. Originally, ours was one of only two houses on the street. We had more red foxes, sandhill cranes and snakes of every hue than human neighbors.

The solitude didn't last.

The relentless exodus of New Yorkers intensified over the years. Then came the wave from Miami and Fort Lauderdale. The size of homes expanded like the waistlines of obese adults until they barely fit the lots. Soon there wasn't any room to park second, third or fourth cars, not to mention all the boats, Jet Skis and other adult toys that spilled into swales.

If you can remember swales, you've lived here a long time.

Once the city's water and sewer project reached our neighborhood in 2000, we decided to move. It wasn't that we were opposed to such modern amenities in principle — witness the beige clothes and rust stains on the siding — our problem was the \$3,500 assessment the city was charging.

Apparently, plenty of other people felt the same. Grandparents who'd bought up handfuls of cheap lots over the years began to unload them in a hurry. One lot across the street went on sale for \$2,100 and eventually sold for \$1,800. Never once did I consider buying it — why would I do that with 48,000 similar examples of unsalable acreage out there?

Of course, within months the price of lots went through the roof, eventually topping \$70,000 or more.

Another fine financial decision, Westbury.

Looking back, the water and sewer project turned out to be the single best thing that ever happened to PSL.

City officials had assured residents it'd transform the place; it'd bring in industry and investment. Yet there were plenty of nonbelievers. In fact, they had to put up a big tent to house all the complainers at one all-night City Council meeting.

But those city officials were right. Whatever you might think about what it cost to bring the Torrey Pines and VGTIs here, they wouldn't have even given a place with leaky septic tanks a second look.

Even back when Port St. Lucie Boulevard was just a two-lane road, it was clear to the thinking commuter that the city badly needed another bridge over the river, another east-west major highway.

Of course, if they'd bitten the bullet in the 1980s, the Crosstown Parkway project would have cost a whole lot less.

Thinking cheap, though, was the order of the day. Successive City Councils seemed paralyzed with fear about actually investing in city infrastructure.

"People just won't come here if we raise taxes," the council wailed in unison.

I guess the city had fewer than 25,000 inhabitants when we first arrived, but the boom was just beginning. In 1980 the Census recorded 14,960 people; in 1990, there were a whopping 55,866.

Back in 1986, there was one grocery store in our neck of the woods and one fast-food place, McDonald's.

Traffic backed up on Port St. Lucie Boulevard west all the way to the Turnpike during rush hour until one morning the red light outside the Golden Arches blew a fuse and, magically, the congestion melted away.

Now when I go back to PSL, I'm struck by the city's manicured parks, its tree-lined boulevards and the wide variety of restaurants. Back in my day, you could go out to eat for anything you wanted — as long as it was Italian.

Congratulations to the city on reaching its half century. You've certainly come a long way, baby. Beige may still be a popular color choice, but at least the rust has disappeared.

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