

RESTORING FORT LAUDERDALE'S SHINE IN THE 1980s

By Robert Dressler July 2013

Fort Lauderdale's Centennial in 2011 also marked the 25th anniversary of the City's long-range planning ("visioning") process, started in 1982, and the bond issue passed in 1986 (the City's 75th Birthday), which planned and funded many of the things that make Fort Lauderdale special today.

Try to imagine Fort Lauderdale without the world-famous Wave Wall and the first-class hotels on the Beach, replacing the seediness of the Spring Break bars; the Riverwalk and all its events and amenities; the numerous improvements in the neighborhoods and parks throughout the City; the restored Himmarshee Village area and Esplanade Park by the Performing Arts Center; and sports and cultural facilities like the Swimming Hall of Fame and the Museum of Discovery and Science.

Not only is this history worth recognizing, but the concept of a City-wide, citizen-oriented visioning process still has relevance today.

Fort Lauderdale in the 1980's

Newer residents might find it difficult to recognize Fort Lauderdale around 1980. The severe recession in the mid-1970's and a failed redevelopment plan left the Downtown literally empty, except for temporary tennis courts where the library now stands; wild Spring Breaks and local party crowds still ruled the beach: prostitutes lined US 1; neighborhoods were in serious decline from crime and traffic; and cultural facilities were minimal (War Memorial Auditorium was the cultural hub of the City, and the site of the current Performing Arts Center was a high-crime area.).

By 1982, the economy was improving, and the elections brought in a new Mayor (Rob Dressler) and a new Commissioner (John Rodstrom), joining three long-serving incumbents (Bob Cox, Virginia Young, and Dick Mills).

A Vision Emerges

At our first meeting in March 1982, I asked the Commission to have a special "planning session" to discuss goals for our three-year term of office and beyond. It turned out that the Commissioners' goals were generally similar, but details, priorities and costs were lacking.

At that point, our young new City Manager, Connie Hoffman, said "Let me ask our staff to review your goals and see what we can come up with".

By the Fall of 1983, a ten-year mission statement "Fort Lauderdale 1994", a description for the way the City could look in 10 years, had been prepared and approved by the Commission. It would be hard for newer residents to realize how much of what was described was literally a dream at that time.

Implementing The Vision

By early 1984, the process was moving from dreams to an implementation plan. By April, the staff, working with the

City advisory boards, and had developed a detailed thirty-page list of projects by category, which was approved in concept by the Commission.

Also, in early 1984, the Commission had adopted a goal statement, "To become the best city of our size in the Nation" and a contest among employees developed a slogan "Best Under the Sun". By 1986, a citizen-volunteer program, "Make it Shine", was organized, and the thousands of volunteer workers polished the City's appearance for the 75th birthday celebration on New River.

The Blue Ribbon Citizens Committee and The "Shine On" Bond Issue

It was becoming obvious that significant improvements called for in the Mission Statement could not be made from the general revenues, so a bond issue was considered. However, before taking such a step, the Commission wanted the citizens to review the proposals and recommend which projects should be approved for funding, and how much. (Proposed bond issues for the past many years had been routinely rejected by the voters.)

The Commission asked Clay Shaw (former Mayor and then Congressman), to chair a 15-member "Blue Ribbon Committee" to discuss and prioritize the various potential projects. The makeup of the Committee was relatively diverse, but included some of our most fiscally-conservative citizens.

The Committee first met in June 1986 and organized into subcommittees for various subject areas. As projects were discussed, cost estimates obtained and opportunities for matching funds (private, county and state) were reviewed, and the projects were prioritized within each category, along with estimated costs. The proposals of the various subcommittees were periodically reviewed and harmonized by the full Committee.

In late August, the Blue Ribbon Committee recommended a total bond issue of \$44.7 million (big money in those days!), allocated by project area: Parks and Recreation, \$7.3 million; Riverwalk, \$5 million; Neighborhood Revitalization, \$6.9 million; Beach Revitalization, \$13.8 million; Discovery Center (Museum of Discovery and Science), \$8.1 million; International Swimming Hall of Fame Museum, \$1.2 million. The annual cost per average household was estimated at \$41.

On September 3, 1986, the recommendations were presented to the Commission. The amount was far beyond what the Commission would have proposed, but, given the strong community support, the Commission unanimously agreed to proceed and put the proposal on the general election ballot for November 1986.

Although approved by the City Commission, City funds could not be used to promote the bond issue, so a committee, "Citizens For a Greater Fort Lauderdale" was formed by citizens and business leaders to raise funds, provide information, and organize a speakers bureau to support the bond issues. (The City Attorney ruled that each category of improvements had to be a separate ballot issue, so there was some concern that different areas/groups would vote for "their" projects and not others.)

Not to worry: In the November 1986 elections, the strength of enthusiasm and common purpose in the community was so strong that all six parts of the bond issue passed with 2/3 of the vote.

Construction and Beyond

After passage of the bond issue, the Commission appointed a Citizens GOB Committee, again chaired by Clay Shaw, to over see the implementation of the projects to insure that the funds were properly expended and that the projects were kept on schedule. Approximately 40 citizens were involved in the project subcommittees for the six bond categories.

The total of other funds generated through matching donations from private sources and local and state government funds vastly exceeded the amount of the bond issue. The increase in property values from the city-wide improvements, along with the resulting private development, is incalculable.

In 1988, Fort Lauderdale was named a Finalist in the All-American City Awards presented by the National Civic League, and in 1994, then-Mayor Jim Naugle declared “mission accomplished” and hosted a city-wide “Best City” celebration.

Today’s Relevance

For over 25 years, the City has thrived on results of the community-driven revitalization of the 1980’s, and there has been nothing like it since.

However, I believe that the relevance for today of the community’s actions 25 years ago is the fact (which seems to get lost in current pessimism) that government, citizens and businesses, working together, can make dramatic changes in their community.



Robert A. Dressler Mayor of Fort Lauderdale March 1982 - November 1986