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Sarasota discusses change, needs

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OSPREY - The fast-changing face of Sarasota has residents concerned for the future of their community.

A luncheon held Saturday gave citizens as well as government leaders and political hopefuls a chance to discuss possible options to make sure the county stays the place they love.

A University of South Florida study showed a decline in quality of life for the first time, leaving Sarasota residents wondering how they can keep those numbers from sliding.

"We need to step back and take a deep breath and realize what we choose to do now drastically affects the future quality of life," said Joe Barbetta.

A former planning commissioner, Barbetta is running for county commission.

He addressed the county's need for mass transit and how the city keeps expanding east instead of working on urban renewal or infill projects.

"We can't just keep paving over our county," Barbetta said.

County Commissioner Jon Thaxton is a fourth-generation Sarasotan. He opened his talk at the luncheon by recalling fond memories of the very hotel where the meeting was held.

Thaxton used to bus tables at the hotel, which is now a Ramada but at the time was a Holiday Inn. He remembers the time before the surrounding residential areas were built.

Now, as more plans for new residential communities come before the board every week, Thaxton is concerned with making sure infrastructure keeps up with the growth.

He said many often blame deficiencies on the fact that the infrastructure was not planned, but he believes that is only a half-truth.

"The reason we got behind was because we didn't plan the infrastructure and we kept approving growth," Thaxton said.

While the county, like many of its neighbors including Manatee, is now playing catch-up, he still believes the community knows what's best for itself.

Proposed Senate Bill 360 wants to make it so the infrastructure, including schools and roads, have to be in place before a community is expanded.

"The one thing Senate Bill 360 doesn't say is who is going to pay and that scares me," Thaxton said.

One way counties pay for infrastructure is impact fees. Sarasota County's road impact fee is a little more than \$2,000, Thaxton said.

"Our impact fees are grossly inadequate in dealing with the new growth coming in," Thaxton said.

He said state and federal government is pulling out of infrastructure funding.

"All we're trying to do is pay the bills," Thaxton said.

Control Growth Now also honored their Citizen of the Year, interior designer Gayle Reynolds.

Reynolds is active in the Sierra Club and often works on wildlife and habitat issues, including trying to save the Crosley uplands where University of South Florida is building a student center. Losing a battle inspires Reynolds to find a new one, rather than quit, she said.

"Even though the power and the big bucks are against us, we fight hard," Reynolds said.

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