

Public Process and Civil Rights

Almost two years ago, PSJRA board members Dannie Bolden and Carl White held a number of meetings in North Port St. Joe to determine the consensus of the community relative to being included in the CRA. In March, 2006, both reported to the agency that North Port St. Joe wished to be included in the existing CRA. With their recommendation, the PSJRA began the process of expanding the boundaries to include North Port St. Joe. Since that time, the agency has spent \$12,000 in the Finding of Necessity Study, \$24,000 to include NPSJ in the Redevelopment Plan Revision, \$50,000 for the Master Plan with WIM Associates (a team who went through a public interview and were selected by unanimous vote of the PSJRA, including Carl White), and conservatively \$20,000 in administrative costs. The total of roughly \$106,000 was invested to ensure NPSJ was represented in all studies, reports, documents and plans.

Over the last year or so, the PSJRA has held 14 workshops, attended by over 400 participants to ensure NPSJ had a voice. Over the last year, the PSJRA has held nine advisory committee meetings to ensure the community had ample opportunity to express their wishes and needs in a casual, small-group setting. We printed thousands of flyers and distributed them to individual homes and sent notices and information by direct mail to the residents. Several quarter-page and half-page advertisements were placed in the Star News.

Over the next 30 years, the community of North Port St. Joe stood to benefit from not only the transparency and accountability ethic of this redevelopment agency but also the infusion of literally millions of dollars that would be required to be spent as the community expressed through the redevelopment plan and implementation. The agency itself is a legal entity, separate and distinct from the City or County governments and is comprised of volunteer board members who directly represent the community. Currently, three directors are residents of North Port St. Joe: Troy White (also our new chair), Carl White and Annie Sue Fields. Dannie Bolden resigned from the board in April 2007, just over two years short of serving a full term.

If the settlement agreement is accepted, these benefits to the community are lost. The community will no longer have the entitlements approved by the City last September. Given the actions of these few, how likely is it that the City will want to repeat the effort on behalf of NPSJ? Given that the settlement is the City's only real choice at this time, why would they want to hazard repeating the process? Even if the City did repeat the process, due to the change in the statutes last October, approximately half the TIF funds now available would remain. The PSJRA Board of Directors will continue to press for the inclusion of NPSJ in the redevelopment area and plan to repeat the process should the settlement agreement be codified by the judge. Same process, same end; but with half of the revenue.

The very thing that would have brought certain and direct benefits to the community is being required to be abandoned by only a few within that same community. The argument is being made that the entire effort is a destructive and self-centered power play to wrest control of any redevelopment efforts in NPSJ. Can anyone explain to me how this group would find the same level of funding and support to their community over the next 30 years? What does any of this have to do with civil rights?