

OPINION / OUR VIEW

Does a black box fit?

It was not a surprise to hear that fundraising for the town cultural center is not what supporters hoped. Jim Brown says that raises a fundamental question: Do Longboaters want an ACE with a black box?

The Bay: \$100 million to \$200 million.
A new Van Wezel: \$200 million to \$350 million.
Mote Marine Aquarium: \$130 million.

Selby Gardens: \$92 million.
These are just a few of the major capital requirements and campaigns for new facilities in the region for not-for-profit and public institutions.

Let's not forget the Sarasota Orchestra or Sarasota Ballet. They want new permanent homes, too.

That's close to \$1 billion.

Add in, too, the annual fundraising that occurs regionwide for all of the not-for-profit, human-services organizations that subsist on millions of dollars that come from the region's generous philanthropists — many of whom happen to be residents of Longboat Key.

Now throw in the \$18 million to \$20 million in private fundraising sought for the Longboat Key Arts, Culture and Education Center.

That looks like chump change compared to the other projects. But consider this: The Longboat Key Historical Society is struggling to raise \$400,000 to purchase the land on which its two historically preserved cabins sit in Longbeach Village. That makes that \$18 million a big number.

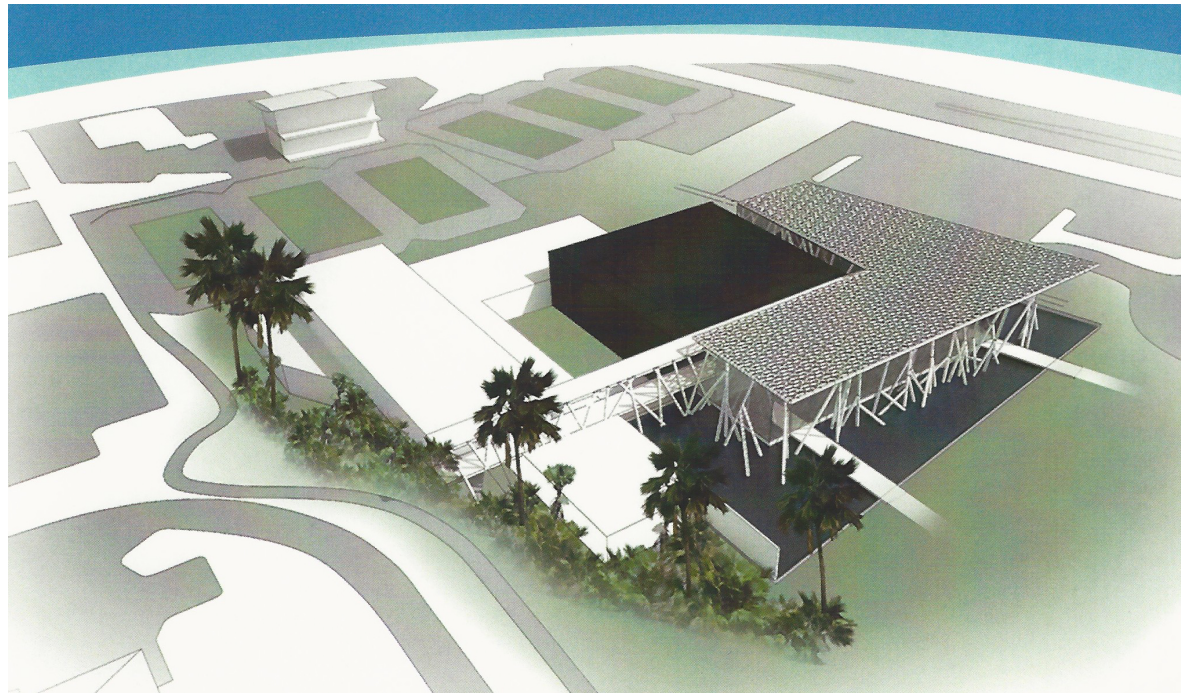
And although there are many philanthropic Longboat Key residents, there is only so much money to go around.

So, frankly, it came as little surprise last week when Ringling College of Art and Design President Larry Thompson told the Longboat Key Town Commission that fundraising for the Arts, Culture and Education Center — complete with a black box theater — wasn't going as hoped.

Ringling College took on the fundraising by way of its partnership with the town to bring the Arts, Culture and Education Center to fruition. That partnership came about in 2017 after Ringling sold the property in the Village that housed Ringling's Longboat Center for the Arts. With that sale, Thompson, town commissioners and a few board members of the Longboat Key Foundation envisioned developing the cultural-education center on the site of the former Armore restaurant as part of a larger vision to create a full-fledged town center development near the Publix Super Market. Still wanting to maintain a connection to Longboat Key, Thompson committed Ringling to managing the center when completed.

It's a terrific vision. Unfortunately, it's fraught with challenges that make that \$18 million a higher hill than it looks. For one, there's that eternal Longboat bugaboo — the exaggerated seasonality of Longboat Key. That's why a few of Longboat's blue-chip restaurants still close for an entire month in August or September.

Facing the slow pace of fund-



Courtesy rendering

raising, Thompson recommended last week perhaps changing the strategy to a phased project — develop the arts and education structure first and the black box theater in phase two.

At first thought, the phasing approach has merit. But it has its risks, too. Would it ever be built? And if not, would the site always look like one of those unfinished condos that mar Florida skylines? Judging from the reaction of commissioners, their sentiment is all or nothing.

That is also the sentiment of outgoing Town Commissioner Jim Brown, who has volunteered to lead a review of the project to figure out the “what's next?”

Brown is the right person for this task. He has 16 years of experience on the subject of developing a Longboat Key Community Center. Brown led the first committee in 2003 to determine what kind and where the town should have a community center. After months of citizens expressing their wants and desires, Longboat voters turned down a referendum to develop a \$6.5 million community center at Bayfront Park.

The consensus then was the proposed center was too costly. Before expending much effort recruiting big donors for that \$18 million, Brown told us this week he thinks Longboat Key residents and taxpayers first need to answer at least one important, fundamental question:

Do Longboaters want a cultural, arts and education center with a “black box” performing arts hall, or just a cultural, arts and education center that can host lectures, art exhibits and community gatherings?

If you ask all 7,184 voting-age, full-time residents what they want, you're likely to get 7,184 different opinions.

But the answer to Brown's question hinges in part on: 1) the town's aspirations — what its residents want it to be; 2) what is financially practical — what taxpayers are willing to bear.

No one can define the town's collective aspirations — what residents want Longboat to be in the future; everyone has individual tastes. But history has

shown Longboaters are in agreement that they want Longboat to remain Longboat — as the late Murf Klauber would say: a casual, elegant resort-residential community.

With that aspiration, a cultural, arts and education center with a small, black box performing arts hall sounds like a great fit and an appropriate amenity. Indeed, many Longboaters have said such a center would relieve some of the traffic backups on Gulf of Mexico Drive and in downtown Sarasota during season because fewer people would be driving to the mainland for their weekend nights' out.

But how much of a difference would that make? There's a big difference between seeing a small ensemble performing a portion of a Verdi opera versus the full production. Likewise with the Sarasota Orchestra and Sarasota Ballet.

And then there are the practical and financial sides. The smaller the audience, the pricier the admission for top talent, or the more philanthropy is required to support the shows and the cost of the black box.

That latter point would become a constant worry for Sarasota's arts and social-service organizations that rely on Longboat Key residents. Would they support Longboat's cultural center at the expense of the long-standing performing arts and social-service institutions?

Then there is what we'll call the Wayne Huizenga challenge. When the late Waste Management founder bought the Miami Dolphins and what was then Joe Robbie Stadium, he once told a reporter that the stadium reminded him of his dumpsters and a movie theater. To make the dumpsters profitable, he needed customers to keep filling them. To make a movie theater profitable, you must keep filling the seats. To make a stadium profitable, you must keep filling the seats with events.

The same with a black box performing arts hall. Who would do that? How? How much would it cost? Who would fund it? There is not a performing arts organization in the region that

can make it on ticket sales. Look what it takes to keep the seats full at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall.

To be sure, it would make Longboat Key an amazing community to have a first-rate cultural, arts and education center with a black box performing arts hall. But if that is to occur, it would require one, two, three or four major donors — people who believe in Longboat Key, and beyond them, it would require the annual support of Longboat Key residents and, to be sure, subsidies from town taxpayers.

From the start, you have to admit: A cultural community center with a black box performing arts hall sounded great. Aspirational. Visionary. But in the context of the other institutions' visions cited at the outset, they make Longboat's project all that more daunting.

This we know for sure: Longboat Key needs a place for community gatherings; a place for art exhibits; a place where 200 to 300 people can gather for controversial zoning hearings; a place for lectures; and a place for Town Commission candidates' forums and debates; and more.

Brown is right. He needs to answer the question: What do Longboaters want — a cultural, arts, education, community center with or without a black box performing arts hall?

When you look back on that proposed \$6 million community center that voters rejected in the early 2000s, it looks much more palatable today.

LONGBOAT
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“If we are to build a better world, we must remember that the guiding principle is this — a policy of freedom for the individual is the only truly progressive policy.”

Friedrich Hayek

“Road to Serfdom,” 1944

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OPINION / OUR VIEW

New site for the center?

It makes sense to leave out the black-box theater. A new location may make sense, too.

Smart move. As time passed, it appeared more and more inevitable that the best decision for the Town Commission was to scale back the vision for the town's proposed arts, culture and education center and drop the idea of including a black box theater.

And that's what the commissioners did Monday night at their monthly meeting.

The cost was totally unpalatable for Longboaters: \$18 million — and potential donors. And there were just too many obstacles and issues that made the inclusion of a black-box theater impractical:

- Ringling College of Art and Design, the town's partners in this venture, didn't want to operate a black-box theater.

- Managing a theater and booking shows, to be sure, are not in the town's core competencies. It's easy to envision that theater becoming a money-sucking "black elephant" unable to attract shows and audiences

that would keep it from becoming a financial black hole.

- And this, which we have cited before: We've always thought it highly implausible the town, Ringling College or the Longboat Key Foundation would be able to tap enough philanthropists to fund \$18 million — especially as so many other arts organizations and not-for-profit social service organizations are undergoing their own major capital campaigns or thinking of one.

You know the list: Mote Martine Laboratory, Marie Selby Gardens, The Bay, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Van Wezel Performing Arts Center, Sarasota Orchestra, Sarasota Ballet and on and on.

There is only so much to go around. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine Longboat philanthropists diverting funds from those organizations that make Sarasota's cultural offerings so rich for a minor venue on the Key.

Having shelved the black-box theater for the time being, the Town Commission and Ringling College believe they can raise \$11 million in private money for an arts, culture and education center.

At the risk of sounding like a Negative Nabob, even that seems like a stretch. We'll see.

OBSERVER RECOMMENDS

Longboat Key voters will decide two charter amendment questions on Tuesday's ballot.

COMMISSION TERMS

Shall Article II, Section 2 of the Town Charter be amended as set forth in Ordinance 2018-18 to change the Town Commission term of office from a two (2) year term to a three (3) year term, and change the Town Commission election cycle to correspond with the term of office change?

We recommend: Vote no

DENSITY QUESTION

May the Town allow the property located at 5630 Gulf of Mexico Drive and comprising approximately 1.82 acres, to increase density from C-1 commercial uses (which allows no density) to either R-4MX or R-4SF residential use (which allow a maximum of four (4) residential units per acre), for a maximum total of 7 residential units on the property?

We recommend: Vote yes

Don't forget to vote: Tuesday, March 12

But before fundraising begins in earnest, and as you envision a taxpayer-owned arts, culture and education center on the site of the razed Amore restaurant property, perhaps it's worth considering an alternative. Here goes:

Sell the Amore property. Relocate the center to the underutilized site of the Longboat Key Library and the four northern Longboat Key Public Tennis Center courts. Relocate the four

courts to be contiguous to the existing courts.

Why? Putting the arts center next to Town Hall would create a contiguous town-government complex. The town owns the land. And while there would be cost relocating the four courts, the town could defray some of the cost of developing the arts center by selling the Amore property.

It just seems to make sense to cluster the town's assets.

Griffin's writing, and himself, made him a Longboat treasure

Longboat Key has amazing people. H. Terrell Griffin was one of them.

The popular author of nine Matt Royal crime novels died Feb. 21 at age 76 (see page xx).

Griffin had a deep love affair with Longboat Key, and Longboat — many of its residents and the *Longboat Observer* — had a deep love affair with Griffin. It went on for 38 years.

That relationship turned more passionate than ever in 2005, after the debut of Griffin's first Matt Royal novel, "Longboat Blues." Prior to that, Griffin and his wife split their time between Longboat Key and Orlando, where Griffin practiced law.

After the success of "Longboat Blues," Lisa Walsh, then executive editor of the *Longboat Observer*, saw Griffin's notoriety and popularity picking up on Longboat Key. He was our local literary celebrity.

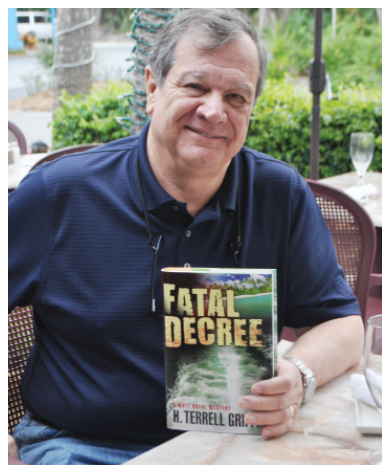
That sparked an idea for the summer of 2006.

News is hard to come by during Longboat's slow summers. So Walsh propositioned Griffin about adding some spark to the summer editions of the *Longboat Observer*: a weekly serial crime mystery that would run through the summer.

Griffin didn't hesitate. He was on it.

The serial mystery debuted July 6, 2006, with a front-page teaser promising: "It's going to be a 'Killer Summer.'" That was the title: "Killer Summer."

And it was classic Griffin. You have to love this passage from the opening paragraphs of Chapter 1:



H. Terrell Griffin with his seventh novel, "Fatal Decree."

I had popped the top of my first Miller Lite when the little radio tuned to the jazz station suddenly jumped to life with the sonorous voice of an announcer telling me that somebody had just blown up some of the good citizens of my hometown of Longboat Key.

I wasn't too worried, because some of them needed blowing up, and I was quite sure that any half intelligent bomber would know whom to and whom not to blow up.

My cell phone rang. I knew that wasn't going to be good news, but I answered it anyway.

"Jake," a familiar voice said, "this is Charlie Goins. Somebody just blew up the planning and zoning board."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Not anybody important. We lost two board members, and Town Hall's a little worse for wear, but we can fix it."

I finished the beer and popped

another one.

"Who did it?" I asked.

"We're thinking terrorists."

Griffin made it a "killer summer" for *Longboat Observer* readers all right. As the series progressed, editor Walsh received phone calls from Longboaters offering bribes to her to send them advance copies of the next week's installment.

"One man called and said he was going into the hospital the next week and couldn't wait to read the next installment. "I know you have it," he told her, offering to pay her for an early peek. She told him: "Why don't you have your wife bring the *Longboat Observer* to the hospital?"

Afterward, Walsh called Griffin to report the commotion he was creating. Griffin said he was getting the same calls — readers offering him bribes to send them advanced copies of the next chapter.

Griffin's popularity on Longboat and elsewhere in the crime novel world mushroomed. He wrote nine more Matt Royal novels. In June 2016, Griffin agreed to an encore of the summer serial in the *Longboat Observer*. This time it was called "Trouble in Paradise," 13 installments we dubbed "another zany adventure featuring protesters, pot and a peacock killer."

If you have a love of Longboat, you need to read Griffin's nine novels. Not only will Griffin's writing deepen your appreciation and fondness for Longboat Key, but you will grow a greater appreciation for a fun guy you

H. TERRELL GRIFFIN ON LONGBOAT KEY ...

"Longboat Key has a plethora of bars and restaurants where my island friends gather each evening for a little good cheer and, on occasion, boozy fellowship. We enjoy the beaches, the golf courses, tennis courts, fishing and some of the best boating in the world. The ideas for my stories spring from these relationships, these friends who people my life and bring me such joy. I value their ideas, their support and the fact that they often buy me drinks."

Acknowledgements, "Chasing Justice"

OUR FAVORITE GRIFFIN QUOTES

From the Longboat Observer:

You won't find any spoilers here, but Griffin offers this hint: He's never killed off one of the good guys.

"I have only killed people who needed killing," he said.
Dec. 11, 2012

Where do you get the inspiration for your bad guys?

"My wife says those are the product of a sick mind. She may be right."
Dec. 12, 2012

Sales [of Collateral Damage] were even ahead of Suzanne Collins' "The Hunger Games" and John Grisham's "The Racketeer."

The mystery behind the book's success?
"Great writing, handsome author," Griffin said.
Feb. 20, 2013

knew and loved, or you will wish you had met one of Longboat's wonderful treasures.

LONGBOAT

Observer



"If we are to build a better world, we must remember that the guiding principle is this — a policy of freedom for the individual is the only truly progressive policy."

Friedrich Hayek

"Road to Serfdom," 1944

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OPINION / OUR VIEW

What do Longboaters want?

For partnerships to succeed, all the partners must be in alignment.

Partnerships are always a challenge. To succeed, everyone must be in alignment.

When there's misalignment, they typically don't work or end well.

That's in the private sector. Now consider that increasingly familiar organism: the public-private partnership.

Difficulties and challenges become magnified, and reaching the ultimate goal almost always takes far longer than it would in the private sector.

Two cases in point: the Bay Park Conservancy and city of Sarasota; and town of Longboat Key, Ringling College of Art and Design and the Longboat Key Foundation.

Both efforts — redeveloping the city's 53 acres surrounding the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall and developing a Longboat Key Arts, Culture and Education Center — have been underway

for about five years.

This past Monday, the Bay Park Conservancy achieved a major milestone when the city agreed to a partnership agreement with the conservancy. Here in Longboat, the Town Commission inched ahead Monday toward finalizing a memorandum of understanding with Ringling College.

The partnership on Longboat still appears to be a slow climb.

But that slow pace sometimes can be viewed as a good thing: Elected officials want to get it right as much as possible. That's the typical M.O. with the Longboat Key Town Commission. It picks and pecks at every detail.

Mayor George Spoll and Vice Mayor Ed Zunz don't want to expose town taxpayers with slipshod decision making. They want listed in the memorandum of understanding 35 possible types of programs that would be offered in a new arts and culture center, along with the specific types of rooms and classrooms that would be included. Really?

On the other side, Commissioner Mike Haycock and Longboat Key Foundation Chair Jeff

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

Help us take the temperature of Longboat Key residents on the proposed arts, culture and education center.

Go to: YourObserver.com/lbk-survey and answer the following questions. Your answers will be anonymous; we'll publish results April 25:

- 1) Do you agree that Longboat Key needs an arts, culture and education center for Longboat Key? Yes/No
- 2) If yes to question 1, should the center have a "black-box" theater for live performances? Yes/No
- 3) Do you believe the center

can be developed 100% with private funds? Yes/No

- 4) If yes to question 3, are you willing to contribute to a fundraising campaign? Yes/No
- 5) If taxpayer funding is necessary to construct a center, are you willing to fund its construction via the issuance of bonds that would be repaid by a town-wide increase in property taxes? Yes/No
- 6) If you support the development of a center, where should it be: Amore restaurant site; Longboat Key Library site; other?

Mayers also make valid points: Fellas, let's move on; those details should be decided later. Mayers also made the salient point of "the longer we continue to delay, this is going to hurt our credibility."

At this point, it's a strain to see a three-way alignment. You also

can say the Town Commission really doesn't know taxpayers' and residents' appetite for such a center. Perhaps that's a place to start.

Let's hear what Longboaters have to say. Go online for our six-question survey.

City of Sarasota's overall strategy: Whack-a-mole!

Sarasota's votes on the Bay Park and Fruitville Road illustrate a helter-skelter strategy, which is no strategy. Thankfully, it tabled narrowing Fruitville Road.

Who knows what ultimately gave Sarasota city commissioners the courage, reason and skepticism Monday to reject that city staff's proposal to narrow Fruitville Road to two lanes between U.S. 301 and U.S. 41.

But Longboaters gladly will accept the outcome.

Commissioners tabled the idea for now.

Prior to Monday's meeting, here's what we published on Your Observer.com, urging commissioners to table the proposal:

Perhaps it's just our cynicism toward government, and the Sarasota city government in particular. But if you step back and assess the bigger picture of what's happening near downtown Sarasota, Monday's Sarasota City Commission meeting actually provides a great illustration of how a downtown resident described the city's overall operating strategy:

Whack-a-mole.

On Monday's agenda are two items that can and will change the city for generations to come, and they are two items that will have connected consequences. And yet, it appears they will be forwarded without consideration of the consequences on each item or the consequences they will have on other major city decisions to come.

Indeed, what is the city's overall strategy — other than that of jumping from one mole hole to the next?

Let's break down the two items on Monday's agenda:

■ One is the proposed partnership agreement between the city and the Bay Park Conservancy.

We voiced our support for that partnership on April 9, with the belief the future of those 53 acres of city bayfront will be better off under the control and management of the nonprofit Bay Park Conservancy than under the thumb of the City Commission.

There still are details to be addressed, the biggest concern we've heard from those who have read the proposed agreement is how much of a financial burden will be put on city taxpayers.

■ The second big item on the agenda is whether to approve a plan to shrink Fruitville Road from four lanes to two lanes in a segment between U.S. 301 and Tamiami Trail. That's what City Manager Tom "Pedestrian Friendly" Barwin, the city staff and a few downtown constituent groups want.

Those two items may seem disparate and unconnected, but now put the rest of the puzzle pieces together:

What happens if the Bay Park Conservancy and Van Wezel Foundation's visions come to fruition?

What happens if the bayfront park becomes a center of constant activity, similar to what has occurred, say, at Cincinnati's Fountain Park? What happens if the bay constantly draws residents and visitors in cars?

What happens on that stretch of Fruitville that is shrunk to two lanes? More, longer backups? To avoid the slowdowns, will motorists find other ways out of the park through the Rosemary District and nearby neighborhood streets?

The city staff will be telling city commissioners Monday that

its consultants are recommending a two-lane Fruitville because it will "provide similar corridor travel times, better intersection operations, more improvements to north-south traffic flow and conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists and a safer overall design."

But now go a few more steps into the future:

What will happen when the second Ritz Tower condominiums, The Auteur condominium next to the Hyatt Regency, the Blvd condominium, the remainder of Greenpointe Holdings' 14-acre Quay development and a new Sarasota Performing Arts Hall all are developed — on top of what already exists?

How will future roundabouts at Gulfstream and Tamiami Trail and Fruitville and Tamiami Trail handle all of the residents, parkgoers, service vehicles and travelers and residents from the barrier islands?

What would happen, say, if there was a serious pedestrian-multiple car accident at Fruitville and Orange in the height of season?

Have you heard anyone from City Hall address this bigger picture? Not likely. There are too many moles being whacked to make sense of it all.

Make the list:

- The Bay Park Conservancy
- Narrowing Fruitville Road
- Multiple roundabout construction on north Tamiami Trail
- Bobby Jones Golf Club renovation
- The Lido Beach Pavilion
- Big Pass dredging lawsuits
- St. Armands Circle garage
- St. Armands Circle parking meters
- St. Armands Circle toilets
- Downtown parking meters
- City parks taxing district
- Implementing form-based code

LONGBOAT Observer



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OPINION / OUR VIEW

Survey results: 'No' to center

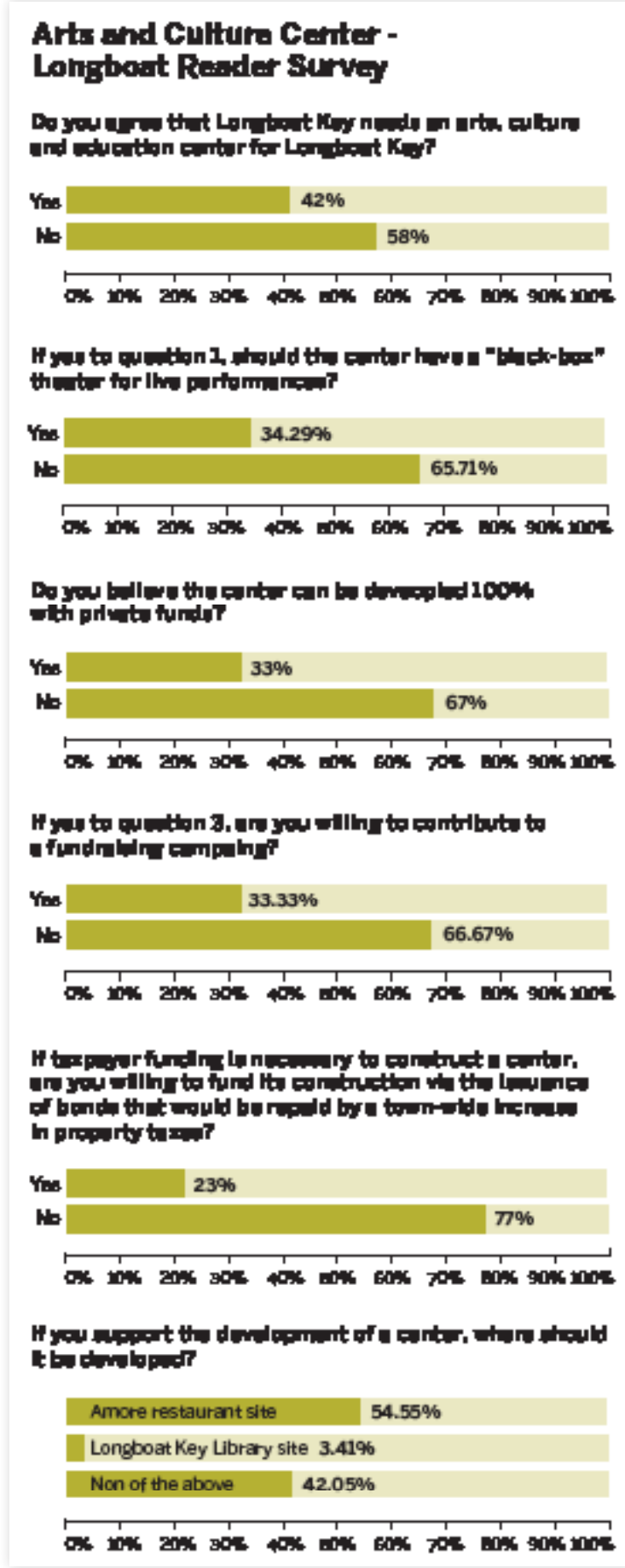
Whoa. Respondents to our online survey about the proposed arts, culture and education center say it's not needed and don't want to pay for it. Commissioners need to find out more.

Surely you'll find the accompanying survey results revealing. And, we should say, they're not surprising. Last week, we asked readers to answer six questions in an online survey about the much-discussed proposal for an arts, culture and education center on Longboat Key. The results are in the accompanying box. Mind you, this was not a scientific or professionally sponsored poll. Nor is it a valid sampling of Longboat Key's 6,990 full-time residents or the 9,000-plus property owners. Only 100 people responded to our survey. That's almost as if we sent a reporter to Publix for a day to do what we call "Man on the Street" interviews. And let's add this slight discount, which we know from experience: The people who respond to these types of surveys tend to be passionate about the subject — either for or against. Typically, you don't hear from the silent majority. But having given all of those qualifiers, the results of our survey nonetheless send some clear, almost shocking, signals to the Longboat Key Town Commission. First, here's what you can glean from the results:

- Longboaters don't believe the Key needs an arts, culture and education center. "Need" and "want" are different. But with 58% of the respondents saying Longboat Key doesn't need an arts, culture and education center sends an important message.
- Those responding definitely do not want a black-box theater.
- They also don't believe a center can be developed 100% with private funds. And likewise, they don't want to donate money to fund its development.
- At the same time, for sure they don't want to be forced to pay for it via taxation.

Whoa. Those are strong messages. And with those negative responses being as definitive as they appear, the question about the location of a center doesn't

even matter. Our survey suggested only two possible sites. A slight majority of the respondents like the former Amore restaurant site, while 42% preferred neither site we suggested. Almost no one favored the site we think makes sense for a community center: Tear down the Longboat Library (the property is underutilized); relocate the adjacent tennis courts next to the existing courts; and create a contiguous town-owned complex. That idea has no traction at the moment. Town commissioners are holding on to the vision of creating a walkable town center and promenade along the road that runs between the Bank of America and SunTrust Bank buildings and along the north side of Publix Super Market, complete with the arts, culture and education center, retail, offices and restaurants. It's a nice vision. But if this limited survey and history are guides, on a scale of realistic to unrealistic, this vision is a lot closer to unrealistic. Longboaters rejected a \$6 million community center about a decade ago. It's a reasonable guess Longboat taxpayers definitely do not want to be taxed to bring a town center to fruition. If a private developer wants to take it on, they'd say: "Come on down." At the least, town commissioners should take our survey responses as impetus to find out more. One suggestion that has surfaced toward that would be to use the Amore property once it is graded for outdoor concerts, a la the Concerts in the Park at Joan M. Durante Park, sponsored in the 1990s and early 2000s by the Longboat Key Chamber of Commerce. Those concerts would be good times to survey Longboaters on what they want and for what they are willing to pay. The town also could conduct its own statistically valid surveys. Or go even further: Conduct a non-binding vote in the March 2020 town elections. Such a vote would end all of the guessing.



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Friedrich Hayek
 "Road to Serfdom," 1944

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Millennials blind to their prosperity

Many of us live in distress these days when we hear members of that famous millennial generation decry capitalism and rave about socialism. It's frightening how little they know and how much they have been brainwashed. But every now and then there is cause for hope. Here's one: Alyssa Ahlgren, a 26-year-old Minnesotan who writes for AlphaNews. Here are excerpts from one of her recent posts: "I'm sitting in a small coffee shop ... I scroll through my newsfeed on my phone looking at the latest headlines of Democratic candidates calling for policies to "fix" the so-called

injustices of capitalism. "I put my phone down and continue to look around. I see people talking freely, working on their MacBooks, ordering food they get in an instant, seeing cars go by outside, and it dawned on me. We live in the most privileged time in the most prosperous nation, and we've become completely blind to it. "Vehicles, food, technology, freedom to associate with whom we choose. These things are so ingrained in our American way of life we don't give them a second thought. "We are so well off here in the United States that our poverty line begins 31 times above the

global average. Thirty. One. Times. "Virtually no one in the United States is considered poor by global standards. Yet, in a time where we can order a product off Amazon with one click and have it at our doorstep the next day, we are unappreciative, unsatisfied and ungrateful ... Why then, with all of the overwhelming evidence around us ... do we not view this as prosperity? We have people who are dying to get into our country. People around the world destitute and truly impoverished. Yet, we have a young generation convinced they've never seen prosperity ... Why? The answer

is this, my generation has ONLY seen prosperity. We have no contrast ... We don't know what it's like not to live without the internet, without cars, without smartphones. "We don't have a lack of prosperity problem. We have an entitlement problem, an ungratefulness problem ... "[W]ill we see the light? "We have an opportunity to continue to propel us forward with the gifts capitalism and democracy has given us. The other option is that we can fall into the trap of entitlement and relapse into restrictive socialist destitution. The choice doesn't seem too hard, does it?"

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OPINION / OUR VIEW

Now what? Don't give up

Ringling's president didn't shut and lock the arts center door. When two sides want a deal to happen, they'll find a way.



The original Longboat Key Art Center building, constructed in 1952.

Whenever projects, jobs, business deals, sports competitions, marriages go awry, it's almost human nature to look back and say such things as:

- "Let's not ever do that again."
- "Where did we go wrong?"
- "What do we need to do differently to correct the mistake and not repeat it?"
- "What did we learn?"

There is another common reaction as well: We look to blame.

All of this comes to mind in the wake of the Ringling College of Art and Design's announcement Monday, to quote its press release, that "it has reconsidered its involvement at this time in the collaborative effort with the town of Longboat Key and the Longboat Key Foundation to develop the Longboat Key Arts, Culture and Education Center."

It was not a definitive "we're done." "At this time" says there could be another time.

But for now, while some tempers, or temperatures, are still on the high side, let's start with the blame game.

No doubt there are and will be many who have been involved in this project and outside of the project who will blame the *Longboat Observer* for Ringling's withdrawal.

Readers of this page over the past two weeks are aware that we posed questions to our readers in an online survey to gauge Longboaters' temperatures for the center. We received 100 responses, and we emphasized the survey results were not statistically or scientifically valid. The responses, nevertheless, were demonstrably cold. Not favorable.

Ringling President Dr. Larry Thompson did not blame the *Longboat Observer* specifically in the college's press release, or that the survey results were his tipping point, but you can infer. Here is what he said:

"Unfortunately, this questioning of the desire for the Center and even potential opposition to it significantly hampers the potential for success of the project at this time. This increasingly negative feedback that we have received has led us to conclude that the raising of the philanthropic dollars needed to create this Center, even at the lower cost, is not probable at this time."

Former Mayor Jim Brown was equally distressed with our survey. "Why are you being so negative?" he asked last week. "You're hurting the fundraising ... Not one dollar of taxpayer money is going to be involved to build it."

Read Brown's letter to the editor on page 9.

TIPPING POINT?

Yes, you can blame the *Observer* for contributing to the "negative feedback." And perhaps the results of our reader survey indeed became the tipping point for Dr. Thompson.

This outcome was not our intent. The survey was intended to give town commissioners, Ringling College and the Longboat Key Foundation information that might send signals for how to move forward.

If you think back, who really knew how Longboat residents

and taxpayers felt? Brown said he knew, based on his work on the community center idea for 17 years. Former Mayor Terry Gans quoted Sir Thomas More in a letter to commissioners that "silence implies consent."

Perhaps. But that silence also could be that Longboat residents just didn't know what to expect and were waiting.

No one doubted that having Ringling would be good for Longboat Key. But as this effort meandered, there were ups and downs. Should there be a black-box theater? Yes? No? Will private donors contribute \$18 million, \$11 million? What will it look like — a large, single structure? Multiple buildings?

Beyond those questions, if this center were to be built with private dollars, then what? Who pays to maintain it? We heard over and over Ringling would manage the programming. What about the structure? What would that mean for taxpayers? "At the least," we wrote, "town commissioners should take our survey responses as impetus to find out more."

For sure, readers' negative sentiments obviously worsened the climate between the Town Commission and Ringling. Their negotiations, mind you, already were in a state of uncertainty and consternation before the survey, a result, primarily, of two commissioners preferences and questions about details to be included in an agreement.

The talks appeared to be losing momentum and devolving into what often happens with city commissions. Longboat's Arts, Culture and Education Center was becoming Sarasota's parking meters — a back-and-forth tar baby that ends up frustrating the non-government party on the other side of the table.

Ringling College may have its own bureaucracy, but it's a private school where its president is an entrepreneur. And entrepreneurs seldom have patience for slow government decision making — and lukewarm receptions.

Worth noting is that while these discussions were stopping and starting between the town and Ringling College, across the bay the Sarasota City Commission was finalizing a partnership agreement with the Bay Park Conservancy, a not-for-profit private organization that will be responsible for fundraising, developing and managing the day-to-day operations of the city's 53 bayfront acres.

That, too, was another five-year process. And if you watched that one unfold, you'll remember the advocates for redeveloping the bayfront engaged the city's residents and taxpayers in dozens of discussions to hear what

they had to say and to use those voices to create a vision for The Bay. There's a lesson there.

We've been told by more than one person involved in the Longboat arts-culture center process that it involved the town's elected officials; town administrators; Ringling College leaders and board members; Longboat Key Foundation board members; "community leaders"; and philanthropists. One group was missing. As a former town commissioner told us Tuesday: "What's wrong with letting the public know and getting its thoughts?"

FIND A WAY

What's next?

A grassy knoll with a band shell is not the answer. Longboat Key still needs what it had before — an arts and education center with facilities and classrooms for a variety of art forms; a place to accommodate lectures, speakers, music, art shows and public forums. Former Vice Mayor David Brenner told us he envisioned a campus setting on the Armore site with multiple buildings, not a monolithic blob.

We continue to believe it's possible, and the less the town is involved, the better. Governments are lousy developers and stewards of property and businesses. Why not a Longboat conservancy?

When the original Longboat Key Art Center began in 1952, it was the vision of Longbeach residents Grace Yerkes, Lora Whitney and Allis Ferguson. Gordon and Lora Whitney donated the land in the Village, and about a dozen volunteers raised money. The group borrowed \$14,000 to get it started, and its first building came from the donated labor of Longboat contractors and volunteers. There was no government involved; only enthusiastic Longboaters.

It's wishful to think that can happen again with the current taxpayer-owned property. But it's not wishful to gin up public enthusiasm for what could be and to make it happen.

While Ringling College has "reconsidered its involvement at this time," President Thompson said in the college's announcement "Ringling College remains committed to supporting the educational and cultural needs of the town of Longboat Key." He spoke about other venues available elsewhere. But he left the future open to finish the vision.

For those who believe in the vision, it's not a time to give up. Do the post-mortem on both sides. Compare, converse and search for solutions. If two parties really want something to happen, they'll find a way. A better way.

If you break law, why get a sanctuary?

State Sen. Joe Gruters, R-Sarasota, has been the target of plenty of criticism this legislative session for his sponsorship of Senate Bill 168, known officially as "Federal Immigration Enforcement," better known as the anti-sanctuary city bill.

The bill calls for state and local law enforcement agencies to use their best efforts to cooperate with federal officials trying to enforce immigration laws.

It explicitly would prohibit any Florida law enforcement agency or local government agency from having a sanctuary policy. And it would require any law enforcement agency that has custody of someone who is subject to an immigration detainer to notify a judge of the detainer and comply with the detainer.

The open borders advocates have gone bonkers over this. How dare Gruters and the Legislature require state and local government agencies help

federal officers enforce federal law — especially upon people who are here illegally?

Sorry. Their argument makes no sense. We don't get it.

What would the pro-sanctuary city advocates say to this: Let's say Manatee County Sheriff's officers stop an American citizen who was accused of harassing customers at a local convenience store. When officers researched his background, they discovered he is wanted by federal law enforcement for multiple charges of assaults on women, armed robbery and attempted murder.

Would you want the sheriff's office to notify federal authorities they have this hooligan? Of course you would.

What's the difference between that and an illegal alien human trafficker and drug dealer?

The Gruters bill would make Florida safer.

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"Road to Serfdom," 1944

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OPINION / OUR VIEW

SOMEONE MAKE THE CASE

Why should the town own the 4 acres near Publix? The city of Sarasota shows the perils of too many parks.

We couldn't help but note the coincidence last week. While many of Longboat Key's town commissioners, town officials and interested citizens enthusiastically walked the site of what was to be the arts, culture and education center near Publix and the Chase Bank building, the Sarasota City Commission voted to adopt a parks master plan that could cost city taxpayers \$50 million over a decade.

Mind you, that's on top of the \$250 million needed to complete The Bay park, and it doesn't include the \$20 million the city would need to renovate the Bobby Jones Golf Club or the \$5 million or so needed to renovate the Lido Beach Pavilion.

Think about that: \$75 million to bring the city's parks up to desirable standards, and \$250 million to build one. Nor does that include the \$300 million being discussed to develop a new performing arts hall.

Astonishing numbers. Indeed, they make the \$283,000 the town spent on parks and recreation last year seem like the pennies that pile up in your car's change holder. Those numbers might even make you think that \$11 million to develop an arts, culture and education center next to the Publix isn't so bad at all.

Au contraire.



The Longboat Key Library: Best use of this property? Why not a multi-purpose community center here, including a library, gallery space for art exhibitions; public forums and speakers?

The point that should not be lost here is what it takes to be an owner and operator of parks and public recreation facilities. Keep in mind, too, what we've cited above are just the capital costs to keep those properties in shape. Those figures don't include the ongoing personnel costs required to maintain and operate the parks.

In fact, the state of Sarasota's parks are vivid reminders of why we're always wary of the eagerness of elected officials to purchase property with other people's money (e.g. your money). And you can include in that wary skepticism the wisdom of the town of Longboat Key purchasing, owning and developing those four acres where they envisioned the arts, culture and education center.

It's a great vision and well intentioned.

But we see it happen all the time. Elected officials often become monument builders, driven to create physical proof that they actually did something to make their city or county a better place to live.

And so the spending grows. In the past 30 years, the town's park land has grown to include Quick Point Park; Joan M. Durante Park; a twice expanded Bayfront Park — the parcel between the park and Pattigeorge's on the north and the former Harry Nikias property sold to Sarasota County; the Longboat Key Public Tennis Center; and now the two parcels next to the tennis center.

You can see the justification for Quick Point Park. Joan M. Durante Park came to be because of a \$5 million bequest from the late Jim Durante, a long-time resident who loved

the Key. The tennis center came about because of the enthusiasm and private funds by many of the Key's avid tennis players. Bayfront Park, likewise was the result of a groundswell of citizens more than 30 years ago.

But now consider what we'll call the Amore park property. Someone please make a compelling case why the town and taxpayers need to own those four acres?

Make the compelling case, when at the same time, the Bayfront Park Recreation Center is obsolete and a waste, and the Longboat Key Library property sits underutilized. Sorry, Ladies of the Library; while the library may have plenty of patrons, that property could be put to greater public use.)

Don't take this the wrong way: We're not against an arts, culture and education center. But where is the public groundswell? Where are the groups of arts and education center enthusiasts lobbying for it?

The reality is such a place on that Amore property will not come from philanthropic contributions. If Longboaters want such a center, they will have to be willing to fund it with a tax.

Who knows. That could happen.

But if we held the keys to the kingdom, we'd sell the Amore property to private interests; redevelop the library property to accommodate the library, plus space for art exhibits and speakers and a room for public forums. And then we'd tear down the recreation center and give the pickleballers that site — as long as they raised their own funds to build more courts.

The less land the town owns, the better.

Apparently, it's OK when Democrats use voter registrations

This is priceless. A few outspoken Sarasota Democrats are throwing darts at the all-Republican Sarasota County commissioners for considering the idea of redrawing commission districts this year instead of waiting until

2021 after the 2020 census. This is a prickly issue because the commission is faced with this dilemma: Sarasota County voters decisively voted in November 2018 to create five single-member districts.

Unfortunately, the balloting didn't specify when the redrawing of districts should occur. State statutes say such redrawing can occur only in odd years. So the questions are: Redraw now or wait until 2021? And, if now, what numbers should be used — voter registration, other population data?

One reason Democrats want to wait until after the official census is they expect population data to favor their winning the District 1 seat held by Commissioner Mike Moran. Democrats are worried that if the districts are redrawn now, Republicans will gerrymander Moran's district to assure his re-election.

Some history might help: This is not a precedent. County commissions drew new districts nine times from 1979 through 1995, all in the years after county elections and without waiting for census results.

But here's the priceless part: Democrats are throwing darts at Republicans about not being transparent on this process and protesting the use of any numbers other than new census data.

Interesting. Now take a look at the accom-

panying memo. In January 2017, School Board Member Shirley Brown, a well-known Democrat, personally asked board attorney Art Hardy to figure out how to redraw the school district boundaries.

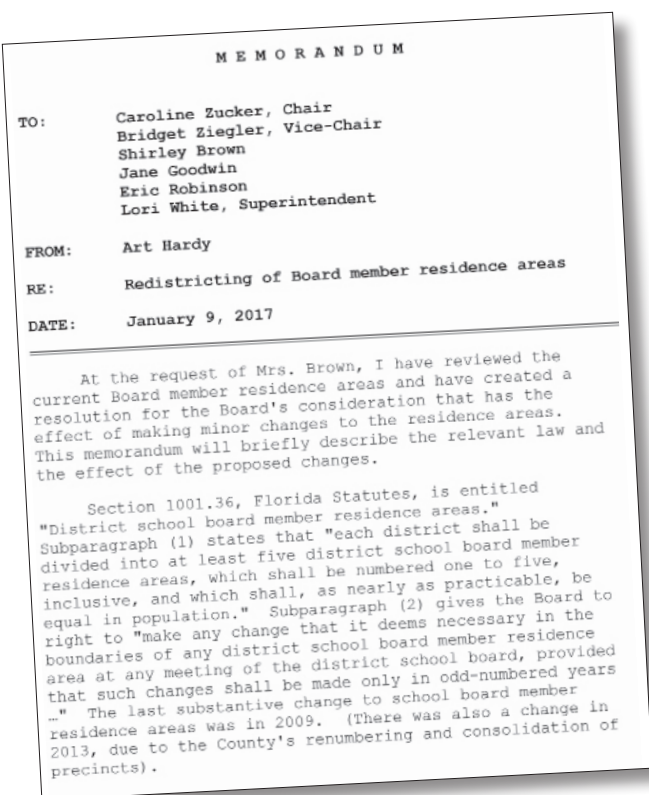
It just so happened that Brown and her husband had purchased and moved into a home a year earlier outside of Brown's district, which, according to state law, would have disqualified her from serving on the board.

But lo and behold, the board adopted newly drawn districts, with Brown's district now including her new residence.

And the kicker? The district used voter registration numbers, not the census.

There wasn't a peep of a protest or a news story anywhere — about transparency or drawing districts to favor a board member.

Brown explained: "When my house in the Lakes became available again, I saw that it was no longer in District 4; the district lines in the area were confusing and unequal. I worked with Art to put my house in the Lakes back in my district, clean up the lines and more evenly distribute the population."

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OPINION / OUR VIEW

Five issues for Longboat

There is a lot of good going on in Longboat Key for 2020. But there also are five issues worthy of addressing for the good of the town. Some will take a decade to execute.

As the New Year begins to rev up, Longboaters' daily discussions and planning already are gravitating toward that perennial pain point: Traffic.

Be prepared.

Days after Christmas and before New Year's Day, traffic backups were horrendous. At 6 p.m. a week ago, cars were creeping in a bumper-to-bumper line to the mainland from U.S. 41 and Gulfstream all the way up to Longboat Key Town Hall on Gulf of Mexico Drive. Ugh.

If that's an indicator, it's going to be a long season. (Once again, great timing by the Florida Department of Transportation — to be excavating on the Fruitville Road-U.S. 41 roundabout in prime time.)

At the same time, sadly, you also can still feel a sense of mourning around the Key over the deaths of Chuck and Margery Barancik in that terrible auto accident Dec. 18 on Gulf of Mexico Drive. Longboaters know how dangerous GMD can be, and that tragedy underscored the reminder to be extra cautious this time of year.

But even with the surge in traffic, it's still the start of a New Year and a time to look ahead with optimism and positivity. There is a lot of good happening on the Key.

The pickleballers are thrilled the Town Commission agreed to construct more courts — expanding to five by the end of this month. Similarly, Longboaters, for the most part, are upbeat about the new Shore restaurant and its stunning view of the bay in the Village (Villagers, of course, may have a different view — of the traffic). Many Key residents also are looking forward to the opening of James Brearley's Whitney's fast casual restaurant at the corner of Broadway and Gulf of Mexico Drive. Those two openings feed the eagerness to see construction on the new Buccaneer restaurant on the site of the former Pattigeorge's. And all Longboaters continue to wait for that moment when Chuck Whittall's planned St. Regis Hotel and condominiums on the old Colony site becomes a for-certain project. That answer should come in the first half of 2020.

Add to all of that the progress on the new lobby building at the Longboat Key Club and Resort's Inn on the Beach, as well as the Paradise Center moving completely into its new quarters by summer on Bay Isles Road. And day by day, we watch the utility teams unspool reams of underground utility lines along Gulf of Mexico — the largest undergrounding project in Florida. Still to come: New and remodeled fire stations; and a vote in March on whether to issue no more than \$34 million in bonds to fund beach renourishment.

This little place is on the move. But, wait, there's more.

There are at least five more important items, issues and projects on the town's to-do list:

- The town center.



File photo

This Longboat Key Historical Society needs about \$450,000 to secure a permanent location.

- The recreation center building at Bayfront Park.
- The Longboat Key Historical Society buildings.
- Residential density and commercial redevelopment.
- Converting Longboat Key to a one-county town — shifting the Manatee County portion of the Key to being in Sarasota County.

These are big issues, and all of them are worthy of addressing this decade. That's how long some of them will take. What's more each one will require the doggedness of a champion or champions to lead to successful execution. One by one, the easy ones first:

• 1) The Longboat Key Historical Society: Every municipality at some point realizes its history is worth preserving. It certainly is on Longboat Key. If you took the time to read the few books that exist on Longboat's colorful past, you'd understand more about why this spit of sand is more special than you think. To his credit, Longtime Longboater Michael Drake, president of the historical society, saved two of Longboat's historical cottages from destruction after the Longboat Key Center for the Arts shut down. Drake was able to raise the funds to move the buildings to their present location on Broadway and negotiate an agreement with the landowner for a permanent site. But the society needs about \$450,000 to purchase the land.

It seems there is an easy way to secure the funding. The town maintains a land-acquisition fund, whose source is a tax on new development on the Key. For nearly 50 years the town has used the fund to purchase park property. But heretofore the Town Commission has balked at purchasing a park site for the historical society.



File photo

The recreation center at Bayfront Park needs to be replaced.

This project could be ticked off the list in no time.

• 2) The recreation center building. It seems like this should have a simple solution as well — replace the outdated, outmoded recreation center building at Bayfront Park.

But longtime Longboaters know this issue has been a source of controversy for nearly 20 years. Just ask former Mayor Jim Brown.

Whenever the subject comes up of what's needed in its place, the discussions inevitably end up focusing on what happened most recently: the idea for an expensive, all-encompassing arts, cultural and education center.

Perhaps, however, the marketplace and residents have dictated what's wanted and needed. The primary uses for the recreation center over the past 25 years have been for exercise classes and weekly adult card games. At one time, it also served as a hub for summer camp for kids, a place that accommodated indoor children's games.

It doesn't need to be a \$6 million palace as was suggested a decade ago. But it needs replacing. This is another project that could be and should be ticked off the list in fewer than five years.

Now for the hard ones:

• 3) Town Center. Surely, most everyone embraces the idea of a town center lining both sides of the tiny road that stretches from Bay Isles Road between the SunTrust and Bank of America buildings, past Publix and the Chase Bank building almost to Bay Isles Parkway.

The vision is that one day a Longboat Key Arts, Cultural and Education Center would anchor the Town Center, once and for all giving Longboaters a top-flight venue that takes the place

of what they lost after Ringling College of Art and Design shuttered the Longboat Key Center for the Arts in the Village. (BTW: It was shuttered because it proved financially unviable.)

This appears to be an unrealistic vision, as great as it is. Neither Longboat taxpayers nor Longboat philanthropists were anxious to fund a \$16 million facility. And it's difficult to think how that will change, especially given all of the capital campaigns in Sarasota (Van Wezel, Mote Marine, Selby Gardens, Sarasota Orchestra, etc.).

While thinking big is good, so is pragmatism.

We have always thought the Town Hall parking lot and Longboat Key Library property is a perfect location for a community center — a facility that can accommodate large public meetings, Town Commission debates and other gatherings.

As for the Town Center, this will require innovative, flexible thinking: The Town Commission should consider an open invitation to any developer for a creative proposal suitable for the site(s), no zoning rules apply. See what emerges.

• 4) Residential density and commercial redevelopment. This is one of the most difficult issues of all: How to resolve that Longboat Key has an oversupply of deteriorating commercially zoned property and almost a zero tolerance for increasing residential density.

Unless the density limits are lifted to some degree and some of the commercial properties are allowed to be rezoned to residential or mixed use, commercial places like Whitney Beach will never change and drag down the values of surrounding residential properties.

This is another long-term issue that will take a decade to resolve.

• 5) Converting all of Longboat Key to being a part of Sarasota County. Here are the issues: Longboat Key residents in Manatee County pay more in property taxes than do Longboat's Sarasota County residents. What's more, meeting all of the state and county requirements is costly and bureaucratic for the town.

All Longboat residents would win if all residents were part of Sarasota County.

But to be sure, Manatee County and the Manatee County School District do not want to give up more than \$25 million a year in property-tax revenue from Longboat Key. Somehow, there must be an even trade.

Town Commissioner Irwin Pastor has been a champion for the conversion. But he is leaving the commission. If this is ever to occur, it will require new champions and a groundswell of Longboat residents on the Manatee side to find a way to create an equitable swap — Longboat-Manatee property for Sarasota County property. A decade's job for sure.

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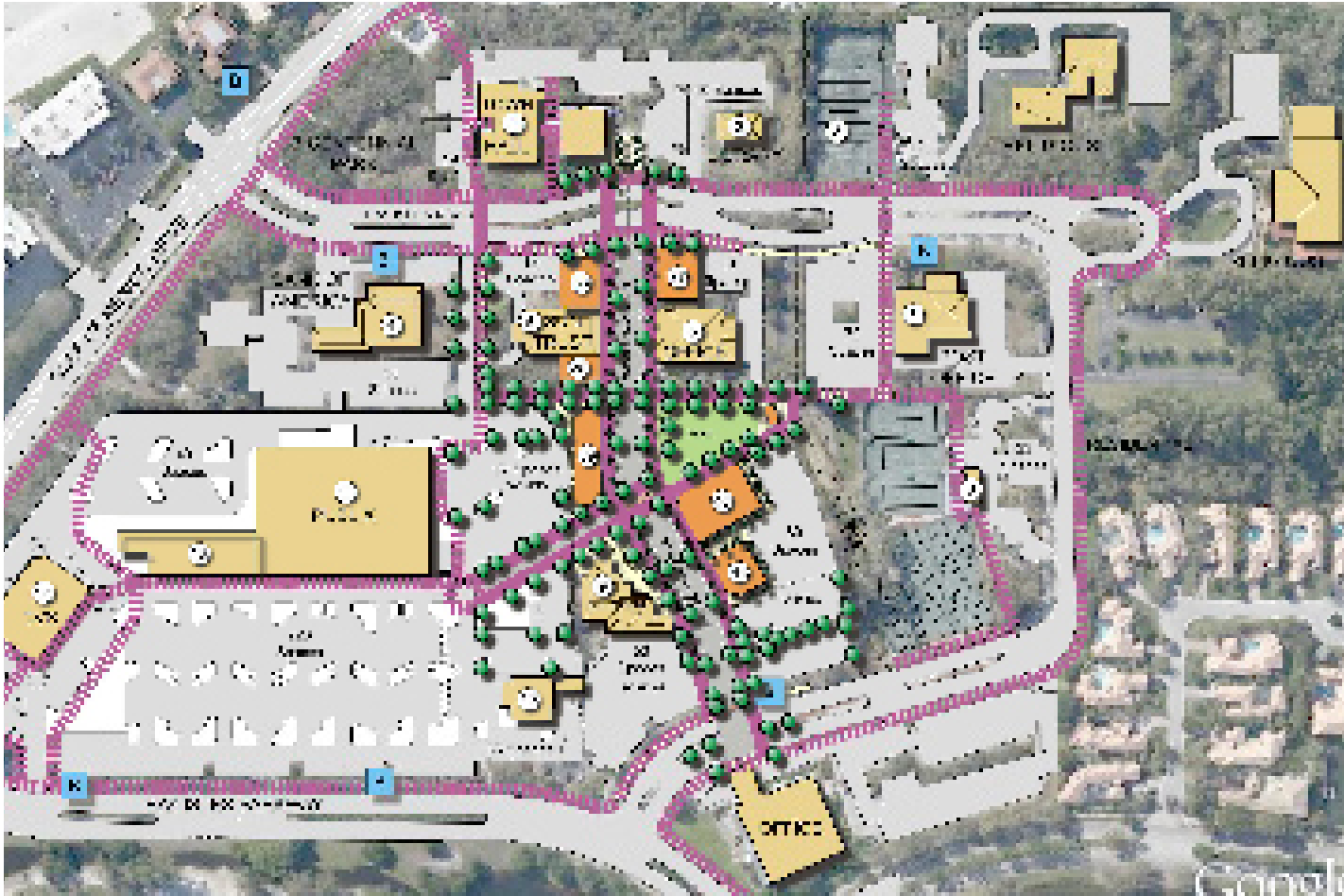
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OPINION / OUR VIEW

Keys to a town center

If Longboat Key commissioners are convinced the town needs a town center, they face two tough decisions: giving subsidies to developers and what to do about density.



Sarasota architect Gary Hoyt created this rendering of a town center parkway, including the much discussed Center for the Arts, Culture and Education (Nos. 40 and 41) and a new road that would extend from Bay Isles Road to Bay Isles Parkway, with commercial/retail buildings, the existing SunTrust and adjacent office building and a park fronting the new road (Nos. 36, 37, 5, 6, 38, 39 and 9).

There is the community that doesn't strive to create some type of small-town town center like St. Armands Circle — where residents and visitors stroll the sidewalks, dine in the restaurants and shop in the boutiques. The Truman Show always comes to mind — the quaint little town where everything was perfect (it wasn't really). In any case, city elected leaders just about everywhere all seem to crave that idyllic vision.

Longboat Key is no different. If you have lived here the past five years or so, you probably are familiar with the many discussions at Town Commission meetings and the many news stories in the Longboat Observer about town commissioners' and others' desires to create a town center in that area between Publix and the Longboat Key Public Tennis Center.

That's what the above illustration depicts. Sarasota architect Gary Hoyt created the above overhead rendering of what could be in much of that unused and underutilized property.

As we've said before: It's a great idea. The challenge is figuring out how to pull it off.

ONE OWNER IS THE KEY

It's all about ownership — who owns the land and the buildings. Consider these examples:

- South Beach and downtown St. Petersburg: In the 1980s, the city commissions of Miami Beach and St. Petersburg had blocks and blocks of dilapidated, in some cases, slumlike properties from the bygone eras. Their cities were dying.

The elected leaders in both cities decided to amass the large blocks of properties into a single

development zone and put out requests for a master developer to transform them.

The two commissions, separately, spent years examining and rejecting proposals, never signing on with anyone who had the financial wherewithal to pull off the projects. Not only that, even if they did find a developer, the developer faced major challenges assembling properties to make it work.

Neither worked. The commissions wasted nearly a decade from beginning discussions to giving up.

But we also know both of those areas became some of the most vibrant urban areas in Florida. South Beach became internationally famous, and downtown St. Petersburg is the most vibrant large-city downtown in Florida.

How did that happen? In essence, property values dropped so low that they attracted multiple individual investors and developers, not just one master developer.

That's one lesson: If you want

development, the costs to do so need to make sense.

- Downtown Lakewood Ranch and St. Armands Circle: If you've been to Main Street in Lakewood Ranch, it has that Truman Show quaintness, just the kind of look, feel and vibe that commissioners want on Longboat Key.

Here's the key to that success: One landowner, one developer — Schroeder-Manatee Ranch Inc.

Schroeder-Manatee controls everything. It's not like Main Street Sarasota where you have a different landowner for almost every building and just as many different tenants. That's why downtown Sarasota looks the way it does (not that it's bad).

St. Armands Circle has 76 properties and almost as many owners. It's almost impossible to get them to agree on anything collectively. But two ways St. Armands Circle businesses have been able to maintain the Circle to the degree it has is with two organizations: the St. Armands Business Improvement District, a taxing authority governed by three elected landowners (or

their representative) and the St. Armands Circle Association, which consists of Circle merchants, landowners, city officials and others.

Lesson two: The property owners must be willing to work together. Or, it's best when there's only one property owner.

INCENTIVES: WRONG, NEEDED

It's all about incentives.

Every community does it, and it's the wrong thing to do: Give tax breaks and subsidies to private companies to spur development. But if Longboat Key town commissioners are convinced the type of town center that architect Hoyt designed is the right thing for the town, they will have to provide incentives.

One developer told us the town should be ready (and/or willing) to give the four acres the town bought for the cultural center to a developer.

That's not all. This developer said commissioners also should be ready to create a zoning district that will allow mixed uses and herights — e.g. residences on the second and third floors of buildings.

Everyone knows why retailers and others struggle on the Key. There aren't enough people to sustain them.

And that's the multimillion-dollar conundrum: Residential density.

Residential density is capped on Longboat. Voters must approve any increase in density. And voters typically have rejected any increases.

So if Longboat Key residents want a town center, they must be willing to let more people live on the Key. And that would mean more traffic — but also more choices for dining and shopping.



Hoyt Architects of Sarasota created this rendering of "Town Center Park," site of the former Amore restaurant near Publix.

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