

## Citizens must stand up now to protect Siesta Key's quality of life

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“Development on Siesta Key has strained or exceeded the ability of many natural and man-made systems to support the existing human population living on Siesta Key.”

“Any increase in population on barrier islands increases the threat to human life from hurricanes and requires additional time and effort to carry out evacuations.”

These statements were among many concerns cited in an ordinance by the Sarasota County commissioners in 1981. And they still hold true today: The two-lane road that connects the two bridges can never be expanded. No new bridges can ever be built. Meanwhile, hurricanes are now more frequent and are less predictable – and they intensify much faster than ever before.

Public safety and the aging infrastructure of the barrier islands have been among the many concerns of Sarasota County commissioners since the 1940s. By 1989, the county commission took several actions – including imposing building moratoriums and downzoning. To protect the island’s residents and visitors, the county’s Comprehensive Plan has policies limiting the development of Siesta Key to the zoning regulations existing in 1989.

This restriction included hotels that are considered residential in nature – due to the fact visitors stay at least overnight and must also be evacuated in an emergency.

In 2021, the county commission approved changes to the zoning code that eliminated existing room density restrictions for hotels – and it approved three separate large hotels with a total of more than 400 rooms. The resulting outcry led to citizen-led lawsuits and a grassroots effort to incorporate Siesta Key to remove the growth decisions from county hands.

## **Safety, infrastructure are concerns**

When Hurricane Idalia passed 100 miles to the west of Siesta Key, access to our bridges was shut down because of severe flooding. Many tourists perished in Lee County due to Hurricane Ian. With the rapid intensification of hurricanes, we don't know for certain the strength a storm will have when it lands along Florida's coast.

During the past two years, the litigation plaintiffs spent a considerable amount of their time and finances to protect our island. And we were successful in both state and circuit courts. After spending an untold amount of taxpayer dollars fighting the citizen-led lawsuits, the Sarasota County commissioners decided to appeal the state judge's decision.

In defending that move, one county commissioner stated that the commission members owed it "to all vested parties involved to see it to the end." But who are their "vested parties"? Fortunately, after losing in court for the second time, the county decided to drop its appeal.

But just weeks after a circuit court judge ruled that Sarasota County's approval of the hotels violated the density and intensity limitations of its own Comprehensive Plan, county planners received three proposals from developers requesting to exempt their hotels – or to eliminate key provisions of the Comprehensive Plan's most significant protective language that currently protect Siesta Key residents and visitors.

These actions should greatly concern *all* residents of Sarasota County who use and enjoy its beautiful barrier island beaches. Access to Siesta Key, already strained with nearby mainland development, will become virtually impossible. The existing infrastructure on these beaches is not sufficient to withstand the volume of tourists that numerous large hotels will bring.

## **The community must speak up**

On Nov. 28th, county staff will ask the commission to allow it to begin the process of considering proposed changes to the Comprehensive Plan. Your voice is needed to convince the county to act responsibly to protect the safety and lives of residents and visitors of a hurricane-risk barrier island.

Since the late 1980s the county has had the wisdom to limit increases in development on its barrier islands for reasons that were important then and even more critical today. While those rules allow for the construction of high-quality, desirable but appropriately scaled

hotels, they do not allow for the construction of the megahotels envisioned by today's developers.

Your voice is needed on Nov. 28 and beyond to ensure that the county commission will choose quality over quantity – and that it will not harm the safety and quality of life of those who visit and live on Siesta Key.

*Lourdes Ramirez is president of Siesta Key Community. Robert Sax is president of the Marina Del Sol Condominium Association. Ramirez and Sax were successful litigants in separate Siesta Key hotel disputes.*