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OTHER VOICES

County leadership nothing to talk about

BY BURT SUGARMAN

SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER

This is an open letter to the Marion County Commission:

I was absolutely flabbergasted when I read you had turned down the recommended changes to the way the impact fees are assessed. This was your consulting firm, MuniFinancial, which Marion County had hired for recommendations.

Millions of dollars could have been brought in for Marion County's use; yet their recommendations were turned down by you, our County Commission.

How many meetings and workshops have I and others sat through and listened to when statements were constantly being made on how Marion County needs additional funds? Just a rhetorical question; the answer is many!

We have listened how the Marion County Utilities Department is \$77.5 million in debt; we have listened how the Sheriff's Office needs additional funding; we have listened how funds are needed for growth within our Fire-Rescue, ambulance and 911 departments; and we have listened how funds are needed for Marion County's infrastructure.

Yet, you, our County Commission, turned down the recommended changes to the way impact fees are assessed. Am I missing something? I think not.

I and many others call this total irresponsibility on the part of our Marion County officials, and a total lack of leadership with a vision for the future.

I have sat in meetings where talk of increasing impact fees was absolutely needed. Yet you, our County Commission, voted down the proposal. You say one thing, then do something else - unbelievable!

Marion County's image is being severely tarnished by the lack of aggressive leadership. People are selling their homes and moving out of Marion County because of what they have seen. I know, because I have talked to many of them about county government.

Right now, our economy is being highly affected by the subprime mortgage crisis. WCJB TV-20 recently reported that 84 percent of the nation's foreclosures are in Florida, and of

that 84 percent, approximately 90 percent are senior citizens.

They also reported that Miami-Dade County led with the most foreclosures within Florida, and Marion County is second. Does that tell you something? Yes, second.

Senior citizens on fixed incomes, and small supplemental incomes, are losing the American dream for which they worked so hard. This should really help the tarnished image of Marion County, and make people want to move here - I do not think so!

Yet you, our County Commission, vote down proposed changes to impact fee assessments that could have brought millions of dollars into Marion County.

I suppose we can always raise money by increasing water rates. Let's clobber the residents, and seniors, and let the developers off the hook. Wow, this picture of what is really happening in Marion County is becoming more and more clear. One does not have to be a genius to see what is happening.

U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson recently came to a Marion County Commission. When informed about our "debatable" water crisis in Marion County, he replied, "I did not expect water concerns in Marion County, a county on top of the Upper Floridan Aquifer, which is the main source of drinking water in the state of Florida. I did not know there was a question of quantity of water here in Marion County." Those were the senator's exact words.

Our own U.S. senator does not know what is going on in Marion County? Give me a break. Maybe there is no water shortage in Marion County. Maybe everything we have been hearing is not true. Maybe that is why he has no knowledge of our debatable water crisis in Marion County. Maybe it is all a farce!

I have heard that by 2013 we are going to run out of water. Who is trying to kid whom? We are not going to run out of water by 2013 - I know it, and you know it.

The way things are going in Marion County, and as the word gets out about its lack of strong leadership, it will just be a matter of time that the tarnished image of Marion County will be irreversible.

Marion County needs strong leadership, and from what I am witnessing, Marion County surely is lacking in strong leadership. I am talking about leadership that is not afraid to impose recommended changes from its own consulting firm regarding impact fees; leadership that is not afraid to tell the director of Marion County Utilities that he is not going to get everything he wants at the expense of residents and senior citizens; leadership that has a true vision of a successful future for Marion County.

I am an advocate for the betterment of the senior lifestyle, a lifestyle that has become a situation of survival. I can assure all of you commissioners that there will be a day of reckoning, a day on which Marion County's senior residents will scream "no more" - that day is called Election Day.

Candidates for Marion County leadership in the future will come forth with no hidden

agendas, no private companies that they own; just highly educated, experienced, people who will want to lead Marion County into a solvent, successful future.

How you, our County Commission, can justify voting down the proposed changes to impact fees, especially when the proposal came from your own consulting firm, is beyond my comprehension.

How you, our County Commission, have mismanaged Marion County Utilities to the point it is \$77.5 million in debt is beyond my comprehension.

How you, our County Commission, can justify the fact that Sen. Nelson states he knew nothing about our "debatable" water shortage is beyond my comprehension.

In summary, I have no faith in our present Marion County leadership; thus, there is nothing more for me to say.

Burt "Sug" Sugarman is a retired marketing director for a medical company. He lives in Summerfield.