

Preservation ordinance would help Manatee hold onto its past

Since 1981, I have tried to help address impacts to our nonrenewable cultural resources. Most recently, I have worked with Manatee County in the careful use of the Emerson Point property. I currently serve on the county's Historic Preservation Board.

I have repeatedly appeared at public hearings to raise concerns over archaeological sites, often at the eleventh hour of proceedings, as I must work for a living, too. After several events over the past two years, it is clear that something more comprehensive and systematic must be done to protect cultural resource sites.

In November 2001, I noticed clearing operations on a small parcel of land on Terra Ceia Island. Because I had recorded an archaeological site on it, I contacted the Planning Depart-

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ment. Twenty-four days later, I received a phone call from a planner who said no permit applications had been submitted, so I should contact the Building Department.

I faxed that department, as well as Environmental Management, since there was also sensitive native vegetation. Getting no replies, I wrote my county commissioner on Feb. 28, 2002. I have yet to receive a reply. A house is now built on the parcel and the archaeological site is destroyed.

Several months ago, I learned that a grove on Terra

Ceia had been sold and a subdivision approved. When I drove by, I found the grove and its two 1920s buildings had been bulldozed. No professional assessment had been made of these historic structures, nor had an archaeological survey been conducted. So, more of our history was lost without documentation.

In December, I noticed a grove on Erie Road had been removed. I had monitored this acreage because a prehistoric burial mound was on it. Talking with the owner, I found that the county had approved a subdivision rezoning. When I checked the Planning Department files, I read a staff report that "no known historic features of significance exist on this site nor is this an area of high sensitivity for archaeological resources."

My 1981 Planning Depart-

ment internship had produced a map pinpointing the locations of recorded archaeological sites, including this mound. My surprise was compounded after I saw a letter to the Southwest Florida Water Management District from the Division of Historical Resources in Tallahassee, noting the presence of an archaeological site and requiring a professional archaeological survey. Human skeletal remains, no matter their age, are protected under Florida statute with felony-level provisions.

From these events and others, it is clear that Manatee is not doing enough to address impacts on our cultural resources. There is no professional staff qualified to make decisions on these matters. I do not fault our present staff; I appreciate how hard they work and how busy they are. But proper

archaeology cannot be done by unqualified personnel.

I recently attended the first Imagine Manatee session and suggested that "Manatee County needs a historic preservation ordinance." I would add, "and qualified, professional staff to implement it."

Please understand that cultural resources do not prevent development. There are no laws, federal, state, or local, that mandate preservation of sites. Apart from discovery and professional recording, most sites do not require additional excavation, and development can proceed. Archaeology, both prehistoric and historic, is about preserving information.

I'd guess that if you needed surgery, you wouldn't go to a friend who had an interest in medicine to conduct the operation. Determination about and

investigations of cultural resources, whether prehistoric mounds or standing historic structures, should be made by qualified professionals.

These resources are irreplaceable parts of our national and local heritage. Once they're gone, they're gone forever. Unlike endangered species, they cannot reproduce. Manatee County needs a historic preservation ordinance to both salvage knowledge of the past and to financially encourage preservation, rehabilitation and reuse of historic structures.

To quote Abraham Lincoln, "A country with no regard for its past will have little worth remembering in the future."

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