

Tierra Verde Community Association's answer to Mayor Rick Baker's Opinion Article

The recent "Opinion" by Mayor Rick Baker published in the *St. Petersburg Times* on January 15th ignores reality for the residents of Tierra Verde. We should not be surprised that politicians see the world differently than we do. Confronted with a politician's spin, who are we to attempt to respond? Anyway, this is how we see it.

For several decades folks have been moving to Tierra Verde to enjoy life in a more laid-back island atmosphere with most amenities available on the island or within a short drive to St. Pete Beach. Almost the entire island was developed for residential use, and the few commercial properties served the need of the residents and visitors. Because the vast majority of residents like Tierra Verde the way it is, in 2007 they voted in support of Pinellas County adopting a Comprehensive Overlay Plan to maintain the current sense of place and quality of life that among other things, limits the density and intensity of development.

Unfortunately, two developers bought commercial properties at the gateway to Tierra Verde at the peak of the real estate market. They decided they needed to intensely redevelop these properties in order to maximize their profits. But intense development is not part of Tierra Verde's past or present and is not consistent with the Tierra Verde community's vision for the island's future or the State-approved Community Overlay Plan. They were unable to get the county to allow them to build what they wanted so they turned to the city which has more liberal rules and, of course, was eager to attain a foothold on the island.

St. Petersburg has been working for two years to establish land use and zoning categories that could be applied to these northern Tierra Verde commercial properties to set up unbelievable maximum build-out density and intensity. For example, the city re-created a commercial land use classification and a new zoning category that will be applied for the first time on these properties. In combination, these changes would allow 15-story hotels and additional density credits that can be transferred from one of the developer's historic downtown properties (Jannus Landing). All of this maximum density and intensity for an area that is on a barrier island with an outdated, often malfunctioning draw bridge and a dysfunctional and dangerous intersection (Pinellas Bayway/Madonna Boulevard). Currently, a hotel built on the northern commercial properties could not be more than 5 stories, but the city's proposed changes incredibly would allow 15 stories and greater density than most properties in the city, and the developers say that sounds good to them. On January 15th a city attorney sent our lawyers a letter that states if the Tierra Verde Community Association refuses to drop its legal action by January 21st, the city will not limit the developers to 8-story buildings and reduced floor area ratio. Some of our residents feel as though we are being blackmailed. I wonder why?

Historically, the purpose of annexation was to allow a municipality to extend services like water, sewer treatment, police and fire protection to an unincorporated area that did not have such services in return for an increased tax base. That is not the case in Tierra Verde, for we have all of these services, and the residents here have demonstrated at the ballot box their satisfaction in being part of unincorporated Pinellas County.

Mayor Baker, you say that the city is not annexing, is not attempting to annex and, during your term, has never planned to annex the homes of the residents of Tierra Verde. How do you explain the land use section of your (St. Petersburg) Comprehensive Plan that states the city's goal is annexation of all of Tierra Verde for its tax base? The city filed three times last year for the annexation of our island, and the final application filing excised the docks from the Tierra Verde Resort and left them in unincorporated Tierra Verde. Why? Could it be that the people who live aboard their boats would force a vote of the residents for approval? By the way, the United States Department of Justice is investigating whether or not there is voter interference in the changing of the boaters' voting addresses without their permission. You wouldn't oppose our "All or None" bill and our incorporation if you had no intention of annexing the entire island. The people, Mayor Baker, have spoken loud and clear by a vote of 98% that they do not want St. Petersburg to annex any part of their island.

Mayor Baker, the county and cities, St. Petersburg included, agreed to postpone any annexations in Pinellas pending a mutual agreement of how best to achieve annexation. You violated that agreement despite the wishes of the Pinellas Planning Council and many elected officials. Why? In your own city, CONA, and its President Barbara Heck representing approximately 100 community associations, opposed this annexation. Don't you think that they have the city's best interest at heart?

Mayor Baker, we all know why the two developers came to St. Petersburg to be annexed—because they could not get the county to let them build higher than our Comprehensive Overlay (passed by 86% of our residents). Yes, the people here to have the right to have an Overlay Plan for the island; the city has passed similar community or neighborhood plans for its residents. The developers bought these properties at a premium price at the height of the real estate boom knowing full well they were buying into a county-regulated environment, and now, in order to amortize their investment, went to the city for its higher building limits and increased density. What is so unreasonable about the Tierra Verde community's anger and objection to this seedy quid pro quo of development rights in return for money?

Mayor Baker, you say that a representative of our Community Association stated that 8-story buildings are the basic element of a mutual agreement between the two sides. That is just not true. Any discussion of building heights above 50 feet was for discussion and debate between parties attempting to find common ground. Any agreement exceeding 50 feet would have been brought to the community for approval due to the Overlay Plan.

Mayor Baker, you don't have the right to spread your tax burden to us in Tierra Verde. We might have a lower millage rate, but that is more than offset by our high appraised values. Your city has the highest millage rate of any city in Pinellas County, and I would surmise that your decades-old policy of annexing communities to balance the budget is not working. You might try looking within the city limits for answers. I could not help but notice at the recent annexation hearings that the city had more lawyers present and on the payroll than Tierra Verde has employees. You could start there if you need to cut costs.

You state that the City's revised land development code will ensure quality development. Quality development for whom? And why should you decide what is right for the island? Neither you nor the two developers live here.

In this budget-challenged environment we find ourselves in, we hope the residents of St. Petersburg will track closely the hundreds of thousands of dollars you plan to spend on litigating your annexation dream.

Paul R. Murray
President
Tierra Verde Community Association