

A Cautionary Tale

Last October, a series of events was put into motion, and these events continue to move in unexpected directions. A group of North Port St. Joe residents and property owners began to voice objections to the inclusion of their community in the CRA. In March, these objections were filed in Federal Court as a lawsuit alleging a far-ranging litany of civil rights violations. Attorneys, litigants and defendants have spent untold hours and likely hundreds of thousands of dollars throughout these early stages of litigation.

A couple of months ago, we were told that a settlement had been reached, removing the North Port St. Joe community from the CRA and dropping all allegations. Each side would cover their own costs. Five out of 12 litigants initially signed this settlement, with two additional signers later that day. Within three days, each litigant apparently withdrew their support of the settlement for reasons noted in letters submitted to the court under seal. I do not know the content of those letters, and whether or not the litigants have the legal option to withdraw support of the filed settlement remains unanswered.

Recently, the NAAP entered this tale and has supported a new direction—one that preserves the expanded boundaries, including NPSJ in the CRA. The litigants have concurred and have signed a document to that effect. New motions have been filed by both sides.

After all this, here we are, over one year later...yet exactly where are we? I surely don't know. I do know that legal machinations often bear little resemblance to the merits of the case. I know that when we begin legal action, we lose our ability to manage our affairs and that the "point of law" can override public sentiment (after all, public sentiment is changeable; the law should remain stable). In one of my favorite movies, "The Winslow Boy," the following quote resounds in my mind: "To do justice is easy; to do right is much more difficult."

Nonetheless, by the time this is in print, the participants in the lawsuit will have attended the "status conference and hearing on all pending motions" with the Federal Court Judge, who up to this point, must have been wondering who in the world are these people, and what do they really want? Strategy, tactics and maneuvering are not my strong suits. I rely on the basics—those things that I know to be true: the PSJRA is a public agency that represents the consensus of the communities, within statutory requirements and in coordination with the governing municipality. I know that North Port St. Joe will stand to gain focus, improvements and millions of dollars of committed and restricted revenue spanning the next 29 years (it was thirty until we used up this year in legal maneuvering). I also know that we are under the jurisdiction of the Federal Court, an institution of prominent legal significance, and that that judge will rule as the law requires.

The Rule of Law controls our destiny at present, and dialogue has taken a back seat. In this convoluted set of conditions, who can presume which will attract the focus of the judge? I, for one, continue to feel great sadness at the potential loss to this community, a community that can benefit so remarkably from inclusion in a CRA. What ever way the judge rules, I am hearing the community of NPSJ asking to make this entire experience a call to unity. Now, that is an inspirational message and a goal worthy of our sustained, collective effort.