

Opinion

Soup-to-nuts lesson in Martin County

Come on, admit it. You could stand to know more about the county you live in.

This isn't anything like the place you came from, now is it?

Water doesn't smell like sulfur or chlorine back in Hartford.

It didn't stain the sidewalk when you turned on the sprinkler in Bethpage.

And you didn't have to fight off fire ants in Teaneck.

Oh, yes, and how many counties in Pennsylvania need new schools faster than they can find the sites to build them? Is there a single town in Michigan you can leave for a two-week vacation, only to find when you get back that you've missed the grand opening of two new discount superstores and a 200-unit apartment complex?

So much is different in exotic, booming, fragile South Florida.

I remember how long it took me to get a real handle on Martin County when I moved here 25 years ago. Only a handful of people knew a lot about anything — about the environment, the history, the government, the sociology of the county. Because of my job, I figured I had to seek them out and ask. *Fast.* It took a while, several years in fact. But they tutored me well and eventually, all the pieces fell into place.

Martin County folks have it better today.

They have at their fingertips access to a brand-new program that I think will do in two sessions what it took me two years to learn.

Appropriately enough, it's called "Martin County 101: It's Different Here." Developed by the not-for-profit Sustainable Martin Alliance, the program — in Executive Director Stacy Ranieri's words — "looks at Martin County through its history, environment, built-in landscape, economic climate and current social issues."

Try on this list of scheduled topics:

- In the Beginning — our unique water and land resources in Martin County and Florida.

- Visit With an Enviroscape — see how the water flows.

- Natives vs. Exotics — plants and animals.



NANCY SMITH
associate editor

- Why/How Did People Change the Natural Systems?

- Did You Know We Have ... — "a look at cool local stuff!"

- Where Are We Now? — triumphs and tradeoffs.

- Growth Management and Planning for the Future.

- Social and Community Issues — there's more going on here than the growth debate.

- The Economics of Our County — how does the money flow?

Oh, I know there are two other well-established programs for people who want to learn about Martin County. And though I admit I haven't been a full-time participant in either, I know for a fact they're both very popular and highly successful.

It's just that the Chamber of Commerce-backed "Leadership Martin County," in which participants are usually sponsored by their employers, is structured primarily for budding community movers and shakers. It isn't really intended for just-folks.

And then there's "Martin County Cares," which county staff presents every Thursday over several weeks. It's flawlessly organized, open to anybody in the county, free of charge. But the program does focus on the county primarily from a "government" perspective.

What's so different about "Martin County 101," on the other hand, is this: It will try to cover all the bases, avoiding anything — political rhetoric-of-the-day in particular — that might narrow its focus.

Explains Ranieri, "No other program has been designed to show the linkages between our environmental, economic and social systems and how they affect the way Martin County is growing and changing.

"The environment," she says, "is what originally attracted folks to the area. People, in turn, because of economic and social reasons, impacted the natural environment.

"We wanted to present this inform-

ation to the community with an historical perspective, without finger-pointing and without a biased agenda to promote. ... We need to know where we've been to better understand where we are and where we want to go."

Amen to that.

Through neutrality and balance, the goal is a better-educated citizenry. How can it get any better than that?

A committee of seven or eight volunteers spent the last nine months planning "Martin County 101: It's Different Here."

In fact, all the speakers are volunteers: John Wakeman, Martin County Environmental Studies Center; Dan Martinelli, Treasure Coast Wildlife Hospital; Gary Roderick, Martin County Office of Water Quality; Nicki van Vonno, Martin County Growth Management; Ted Astolfi, Business Development Board of Martin County; James Vojcsik, United Way of Martin County; Carol Bailey, Martin County Cooperative Extensive Service; and, of course, Stacy Ranieri.

As good as this program is, I wanted to make sure everybody realizes it's available for sign-up right now.

Two sessions are scheduled at the Robert Morgade Library on Salerno Road next to IRCC's Chastain Campus. The first is all-day Monday, Aug. 19, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. The second is over two evenings, Aug. 26 and 27, 5:30-9 p.m. It costs only \$10 to register, and that includes food and beverages. Call Stacy Ranieri at 223-6312.

Better hurry, though. Only 60 seats per session are available.

In another couple of years, Sustainable Martin Alliance will be in its own renovated space in the old maintenance building at Indian RiverSide Park. "The architects are drawing up the schematics now for 4,500 square feet," Ranieri said. "We start the actual building early next year."

Contact Nancy Smith by telephone at (561) 221-4238, or by e-mail to Nancy.Smith@scripps.com. Her columns are archived on the News' website, TCPalm.com.