Building Bridges and Aspiring for the Major Leagues [1982-1991]

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Welcome to the ninth program of “Pinellas by the Decades,” a series of lectures and conversations sponsored by the Pinellas County Historical Society at Heritage Village to commemorate the centennial of our independence from Hillsborough County on January 1, 1912. After today’s lecture, we will have one final lecture on Sunday, July 15, that covers the period from 1992 until the present and leaves us with some parting thoughts about our county's amazing history.

For today, our goal is to examine the period from 1982 through 1991. During the 1980s, developments along the Pinellas Gulf Beaches reached a level of maturity and balance, SUCH AS SEEN HERE LOOKING AT ST. PETE BEACH. New subdivisions continued to appear in former citrus groves and pasturelands. Green spaces along U.S. 19 between communities gave way to strip malls, subdivisions, and planned communities. The unincorporated areas of Palm Harbor and northeastern Pinellas County experienced a building boom, INCLUDING THE SUBDIVISIONS AROUND LAKE ST. GEORGE between U.S. 19, McMullen-Booth, Tampa, and Curlew roads shown here, while older urban cores in St. Petersburg and Clearwater showed their age and robust conversations took place about the best ways to redevelop those downtowns. Even smaller cities, such as LARGO, developed plans to transform their downtowns, as longtime institutions, such as the John Taylor packinghouse, BARELY RESEMBLED their once grand appearance on the landscape.

New spans were built. A TOLL BRIDGE OPENED between Indian Shores and Seminole that connected Park Street with Gulf Boulevard. Overpasses spanned sections of U.S. Highway 19 north of Pinellas Park and into Largo as planners tried to create segments of expressway to address the growing volume of cars. The new Sunshine Skyway took shape just north of the original twin spans. Here IS A VIEW FROM MANATEE COUNTY IN THE LATE 1980s and ANOTHER VIEW LOOKING SOUTH towards the mouth of Tampa Bay. Twin spans also became necessary to handle growing traffic between Pinellas and Hillsborough counties. In 1975, the second span of the Gandy Bridge opened, offering eastbound travelers their own span and allowing the older 1956 span, now abandoned, to handle traffic westbound on U.S. Highway 92. By the end of the 1980s, the frequent accidents, breakdowns, and traffic jams on the Howard Frankland Bridge, dubbed "Howard Frankenstein" by many, led to the construction of a second span that opened in the summer of 1991.
Despite these new bridges, some roadblocks to regional thinking remained. The battle between Pinellas and Hillsborough counties over attempts to secure a Major League franchise, a struggle that continues in some form to this day, exemplifies this regional rift. Although St. Petersburg civic leader and former St. Petersburg Times publisher Jack Lake (2 images) started to lay the groundwork for an MLB franchise by the 1970s, the struggles between Tampa and St. Petersburg over the site of the stadium during the 1980s often worked to the detriment of the entire region. Just as current MLB Commissioner Aaron "Bud" Selig's notable lack of support for baseball in St. Petersburg is obvious today, the actions of earlier MLB leaders, such as Commissioner Peter Ueberroth and National League President Bill White, SHOWN HERE, forced us to have to play for extra innings before finally winning the game.

We will review that scorecard in great detail a little later in the lecture. First, let's talk about another game that had eight players rather than nine, and grabbed international headlines. Then we will take a little trip to the beach.

The eight players I am talking about are, of course, the LARGO EIGHT. Eight retirees were arrested for penny poker games in their mobile home park in violation of Florida’s gambling laws. Although the state began the Florida Lottery in January 1988, card games in private homes were popular ways to pass time for those who did not want to go to the tracks or jai-alai games and wager legally in the days before the lottery. The Largo Eight, SHOWN HERE, usually limited their bets to forty cents and the pots were usually $5 or less. Their arrest and subsequent trial in early 1982 attracted international attention. In early February, a jury found them guilty and the judge fined each $75 and put them on a thirty-day probation. Hoping to gain some publicity, a casino in Atlantic City, NJ, offered these “offenders” a three-day sentence of gambling along the boardwalk, along with a press conference, dinner shows, and $75 in quarters for the slot machines. One of them even thanked the anonymous tipster who had contacted the police, since the ensuing publicity had allowed them to fly to Atlantic City from Tampa. One of the Largo Eight was unable to make the journey. He had recently suffered a heart attack and could not travel. Have no fear: Two friends went in his place.

As seven of the Largo Eight travelled, travelers to the beaches of the PINELLAS SUNCOAST enjoyed the diverse accommodations, attractions, restaurants, and residential rentals available. Let's visit some of the beaches, talk about how they even gained broad attention on the silver screen, and discuss the developmental balance of the beach settlements and communities during this time.

Let's get on the beaches at the south end of the county, passing by Eckerd College. On Halloween Day 1982, Eckerd decided to do something smart rather than scary, when it launched the Academy of Senior Professionals at Eckerd College (ASPEC) as a way to connect retirees, notable scholars, and students in intergenerational studies. Notable ASPEC members have included James Michener (SHOWN HERE IN 1990 AT ECKERD) and John Hope Franklin.
After paying our toll and going onto the Bayway, we notice that condos and developments have taken shape, as shown in **THESE TWO IMAGES**. The first image looks east from Isla del Sol towards Eckerd and St. Petersburg, and the second is a view sometime after 1990 with Isla del Sol in the foreground and downtown St. Petersburg in the horizon.

At the end of the Bayway, we will see the **DON CeSAR**. Enhancements during the 1970s transformed this pink palace into a well known destination. Even movie makers visited, such as Robert Altman. His spoof on the fitness craze of the late 1970s led to the release of a film made in 1979-1980 shot primarily at the Don CeSar and around St. Petersburg. **HEALTH** was Altman's attempt at satire about a convention at a health resort, portrayed by the Don, that never gained traction and received poor reviews despite a cast that included Carol Burnett, Lauren Bacall, Dick Cavett, and James Garner. Perhaps the **COSTUMES** of characters dressed as corn and carrots were not a hit, despite the beauty of the beach and hotel. The movie did get airtime when CBS broadcast it nationally and on then-local affiliate Channel 13, on August 16, 1983.

Despite the sick ratings for HEALTH, the beaches of St. Petersburg Beach remained a popular marketing attraction for lower Pinellas County, so much so that postcards often placed the Don in the wrong city, as is **SHOWN HERE** on this 1986 postcard. Either they dropped the "Beach" or they were geographically incorrect. While Clearwater Beach is part of Clearwater, the frequent confusion between St. Petersburg and St. Petersburg Beach led residents of the beach community to change their incorporated name to "St. Pete Beach" in 1994.

The view from **PASS-A-GRILLE** northwards showed the changing landscape of St. Pete Beach. Condos, hotels, and rental sailboats were found along the **SHORELINE**. Where an expansion NFL franchise for Miami had trained in sandy soil in the mid-1960s, Dolphin Plaza provided comfortable shopping opportunities to St. Pete Beach, **SHOWN HERE** with Gulfport in the background and before the county beach access opened in December 1988. **LOOKING NORTH** from this point, we can see that the Aquatarium had been replaced by condos in the 1980s, and also that Blind Pass had taken a different shape due to dredging activities. Here is a view **LOOKING SOUTH** from Treasure Island towards St. Pete Beach, and another **LOOKING NORTH**. St. Pete Beach was a popular destination, with its **BEAUTIFUL BEACH** and attractions, such as the **LONDON WAX MUSEUM**.

Before heading into Treasure Island, let's go across the Corey Causeway to **SOUTH PASADENA**. As we have discussed earlier, this area had gained a reputation by the 1970s as a place with retirees and condos. However, a letter written by Helen Addison, chair of the city's beautification committee, brought some international excitement to the community beginning in the summer of 1982. Addison had written to Sheikh Mohammed Al Fassi at his residence in Hollywood, Florida, asking about a possible money donation for a city park after she learned that the sheikh made a similar donation to another community. The sheikh, related to Saudi’s
royal family, called the South Pasadena city hall and soon thereafter a representative from South Pasadena visited with him. The sheikh agreed to offer a donation with some conditions: the commission would have to cover expenses for a visit by the sheikh’s entourage, provide limousines, give him a key to the city, celebrate an Al-Fassi Day, name the park Al-Fassi, and name at room at city hall and a street in his honor.

He arrived on August 23 when a chartered Air Florida jet landed at Tampa International Airport. An entourage that included Muhammad Ali and American Indian Movement leader Russell Means joined him. The visit took less than an hour, with Al-Fassi proclaiming that "the love is enough." City officials proclaimed "Sheik Muhammad Al-Fassi Day" during his quick visit. Al-Fassi gave the town $20,000 for youth and beautification programs. Although the money did not purchase a park, some of it was dedicated for scholarships to youth in South Pasadena. This posed another problem: In May 2004, there were no applicants for the funds that year. In a city with a median age of 71, finding eligible youth (residents a minimum of four years who were accepted to a college)--or merely any youth to apply--was a big challenge.

Heading into Treasure Island, many of the older 1950s and 1960s-era hotels remained, though Gulf Boulevard finally received some long overdue attention as crews widened and improved the roadways. In 1984, the city agreed to a land swap with landowners that provided the municipality with ownership of Elnor Island, an island east of Johns Pass and north of the Isle of Capri, in exchange for other lands. Elnor Island remains a preserve and wildlife refuge surrounded by developed and dredged beach communities. Here’s another POSTCARD VIEW of Elnor Island from the late 1980s. As a promotional activity, the creation of World’s Largest Sandcastle along the beach in 1985 and 1986 brought many residents and tourists to Treasure Island for this temporary attraction, one that was sponsored by the local chamber of commerce as part of an annual beach festival. These two images show the castle in 1985.

As we cross over into Madeira Beach (2 IMAGES), let's look at this municipality in greater detail to talk about how successive generations of development have transformed the landscape of the Pinellas Gulf Beaches. To do this, we will look at some earlier images of Madeira, including some great photographs from the Island Garden Club at Gulf Beaches Public Library. While many changes are obvious, such as the transformation of Johns Pass from the 1980s (2 IMAGES) to today, knowing how they took place allows us to understand how residential and tourist patterns have changed the meaning of life on the beach.

Early views, 1950s: Limited infrastructure (3 images)

1960s transition then and now, splitting the difference to the 1980s (many images, with last 2 aerials from Mad Beach in the 1980s).
You will see similar transitions as you head into the areas of **Redington and North Redington Beach**, where once popular locations such as the old **Tides Bath Club** seemed to be on borrowed time. And . . . they were.

The vulnerability of coastal living is best exemplified by a notable storm that arrived along the Florida coast but never directly hit Pinellas in late August and early September 1985. **Hurricane Elena** stalled along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, bringing waves of rain and flooding to many areas of Pinellas County. Lower areas of the coast, including the Gulf Beaches, faced mandatory evacuation orders. By some estimates, 300,000 people in Pinellas either evacuated or were supposed to evacuate. Members of the National Guard patrolled some of the beach communities in search of those who stayed. Sporadic looting did occur. Here are **SOME IMAGES** showing parts of Redington Beach in early September, as the storm disappeared.

Ironically, August 9, 1985 marked the release of **Summer Rental**, a comedy starring **John Candy** as an air traffic controller who visits Florida for a long-overdue vacation. The “dilapidated” **rental home** the family used in the film sat along Gulf Boulevard in Redington Beach, just south of 160th Avenue. Other areas used in the film locally included St. Pete Beach, Madeira Beach, and Johns Pass.

Meanwhile, some areas of North Redington seemed overdue for **BEACH RENOURISHMENT**. Small hotels **FROM THE 1960s** felt increasing pressure to maintain their bottom line as condos began to surround them, and soon the occasional **MOBILE HOME PARK ALONG THE BEACH** gave way to **condomania**.

During the 1980s, a balance existed along the Pinellas beaches. Let's finish our journey (**multiple images**), going up to Clearwater Beach.

In 1981, seven women interested in preserving the history of this community established the **Indian Rocks Historical Society and Museum** and ran the organization in the beach cottage. Five years later, in July 1986, **Hamlin’s Landing**, a shopping center with a Victorian architectural theme, opened on the Indian Rocks side of the intracoastal waterway just south of the Indian Rocks Bridge. Built at a cost of $18-million, the waterfront stores also served as the docking station for the **Starlight Princess** paddlewheel boat from 1986 through 1995. After the development suffered a downturn, it was refurbished in 2005 as a condo-hotel. Another casualty of Hurricane Elena was the **Fishing Pier at Indian Rocks**.

**(Views of Clearwater Beach, before transitioning with the pelican)**

The beaches were not the only areas that witnessed redevelopment. Although shrimp boats still sailed from the docks at Ozona (**2 IMAGES**), the sponge industry was no longer the largest
economic engine in Tarpon Springs. As the **SUN BEGAN TO SET (2 IMAGES)**, tourist enterprises grew in significance along the former sponge docks. Sponging continues and the demand for natural sponges remains strong, but the economy diversified by the 1980s. **MULTIPLE TARPON IMAGES**

South of Tarpon Springs, developments such as **Innisbrook** took shape and expanded, while the groves that once adorned the hillsides near Alderman Road gave way to homes. Still, as late as the late 1980s, Alderman remained a two-lane country road with a couple of four-way stop signs to prevent joy-riders from treating it like the "Thrill Hill bridge" in St. Petersburg. It looks much **DIFFERENT** today.

Profound changes took place in the areas of East Lake, northeast Pinellas County, and Palm Harbor. New subdivisions grew north and west of Oldsmar and all around Safety Harbor. Green space between coastal areas of cities such as **DUNEDIN** and places such as Safety Harbor disappeared. As Clearwater’s eastern communities grew, some of the older landmarks downtown, such as the **Gray Moss Inn**, fell into disrepair and disappeared.

Growth management required thoughtful approaches. With almost all of our potable water coming from outside of Pinellas, we could no longer act without considering how our conduct influences our neighbors. When periods of heavy water use occurred during droughts, lakes in Pasco and parts of northwestern Hillsborough disappeared. As more people appeared, older sanitary management solutions could no longer continue. Originally designed as a residential subdivision, **TOYTOWN** became a place where much of lower Pinellas County's waste found its final home. In April 1983, testing took place at the new incinerator plant located in the Gateway area south of 118th Avenue and west of 28th Street North. With this plant going online, thousands of tons of trash were converted into electricity each day and the city of St. Petersburg’s Toytown Sanitary Landfill could cease operations so that its future as a possible venue for baseball could become a topic for debate.

Speaking of the Gateway area, this became a prime location for some of the annexation battles of the 1980s, as St. Petersburg studied the possibility of annexing in this area in 1981, began to do so in 1982, and became very aggressive in its plans by early 1985. Although some areas avoided development, such as the Weedon Island Preserve that officially opened to the public in December 1980 after the state acquired the lands in 1974, the lands around Carillion, the suburbs in High Point and other unincorporated areas between Largo, Pinellas Park, Seminole, and St. Petersburg became prized possessions in annexation battles that sometimes were won with the acquisition of a single house. Communities such as this at **RANCHERO VILLAGE** along Ulmerton Road southeast of Largo, increased the value of properties that had been cattle lands and groves a generation earlier. Similar to the concerns expressed in parts of Lealman more recently, unincorporated areas in central Pinellas often were targeted by nearby municipalities.
St. Petersburg's redevelopment struggles deserve some attention as well. By the 1980s, the skyline—shown here looking from the Area Above Snell Isle and here Towards Vinoy Basin—had grown. But important pieces were missing. The Vinoy Hotel, closed since the early 1970s, was derelict and there was talk of tearing it down as numerous developers and their ambitious plans came and went while the boarded up and fenced in hotel was a gathering place for the homeless.

City leaders began to look at some of the smaller, older, and aging buildings in the city's heart as places that required a larger master plan for redevelopment rather than a piece-by-piece approach. (2 IMAGES) In February 1982, St. Petersburg’s City Council tried to spark downtown revitalization through the creation of the Intown Redevelopment Plan. According to Rick Baker’s history, the plan led to $354 million in construction projects by governmental entities as well as $681 million by private groups between 1982 and 1999. Four areas targeted by this plan were the downtown “Core” area, the Gas Plant district, lands east of the Gas Plant, and lands around the recently closed Webb’s City. Bay Plaza and Bay Walk were among the developments that grew out of this redevelopment plan, along with renovations to the Bayfront Center and new construction in the University Park area.

Some things were working in the city's favor. Phase I Expansion of the USF St. Petersburg campus at Bayboro Harbor was complete, allowing for the expansion of course offerings at the Bayboro Campus. Gov. Bob Graham attended the dedication May 1981 ceremonies. On March 10, 1982, at the other corner of the harbor, the new Salvador Dalí Museum celebrated the grand opening of its collections at a former warehouse along Bayboro Harbor. Reynolds and Eleanor Morse, longtime friends of Dali, donated the collection to the State of Florida. On October 1, 1982, a newly reinvigorated Jannus Landing celebrates its grand reopening. And, in a move of great significance and one with some controversy, a month later, the St. Petersburg City Council voted unanimously to demolish homes in the Gas Plant area so the site could be repurposed as a baseball stadium. By 1984, most of the remaining structures were removed. As plans for the stadium took share, the city later decided to acquire the Laurel Park Housing Project on the west side of Sixteenth Street as the site of additional parking (lots 1, 2, and 3 at present-day Tropicana Field).

Ordering condemnations was easy. Relocating homes, stores, churches, and other institutions proved to be more difficult. During the 1960s and 1970s, St. Petersburg’s African American population expanded into previously all white areas such as Child’s Park, Bartlett Park, Lakeview, and Fairmont Park. During the 1970s, the southward construction of Interstate 275 bisected the black community, leaving many areas, such as the Deuces--Twenty Second Street South--looking much different than the vibrant areas they once were. (3 IMAGES)
In the **Gas Plant area (3 IMAGES)**, once a segregated community on the other side of the tracks, as of December 1984, the city had acquired 64 of 66 acres of property, knocked down 264 buildings and moved 461 households and businesses to other areas.

There were some false starts during the early 1980s. In September 1985, Controversial City Manager Alan Harvey resigned just before members of the city council were scheduled to consider his fate. Among many issues was his involvement in the sale of the city’s former Municipal Services Building, once the downtown location for Sears on the 200 block of Ninth (Dr. Martin Luther King) Street North. The Fotomat Corporation acquired the building and forced county offices to evict before their lease, ultimately leading O. Sanford Jasper, the longtime tax collector, to open an office in the Tyrone area, ironically near the new Sears that had left downtown St. Petersburg. Although this happened in 1983, by 1985 questions about the dealings by Harvey and his successor, Robert Obering, embroiled city hall during the mid-1980s. On June 5, 1984, residents of St. Petersburg voted down plans for the “Pier Park” project that would have allowed the city to lease public lands to create a park and marketplace. At that time, the inverted pyramid was entering adolescence. *(Discuss with four images—make connections with today.)*

Looking back at the city, at the same time the city was trying to reinvent its image, *shown here in these two pictures* from the Pier, a movie released in June 1985 gained wide acclaim by building upon the stereotypes of the city’s past. A popular science fiction film directed by Ron Howard, **Cocoon (2 IMAGES)**, was released in theaters. The story focused on residents in a St. Petersburg retirement community and included venues throughout St. Petersburg, such as Park Street (along the "brick streets" section), downtown sidewalks, the Coliseum, Northeast Shopping Center, and Westminster Shores.

Other drama came to Demens Landing. The first annual production of Shakespeare in the Park in downtown St. Petersburg sponsored by the American Stage Company took place in April 1986 and brought more than 8,500 people during a ten-day schedule of performances. The inaugural performance was “The Taming of the Shrew.” If noise and speed were your thing, in early November 1985 the inaugural St. Petersburg Grand Prix came to downtown St. Petersburg. The race occurred through the end of the 1980s and on a couple of occasions in the mid-1990s before resuming as an annual event during the new millennium.

The roads may have been noisy, but another center of transportation became quiet. Regular passenger rail service ended along the Pinellas Peninsula in February 1984 when Amtrak decided to replace rail service with bus service to Tampa. The Silver Meteor and its thirty-six passengers left the depot in St. Petersburg at an event marking the end of an era. Although there was some discussion of using the railways for mass transit, much of the track became a
countywide recreation path. Pinellas Trails Inc. was formed in November 1988 to promote the rails-to-trails conversion on segments of the original railroad right-of-way in Pinellas. The original five-mile segment opened between Seminole City Park and Taylor Lake Park a couple of years later.

In addition to the Pinellas Trail, other enhancements occurred on a countywide basis, thanks in part to a narrowly passed November 1989 measure. While a similar measure in Hillsborough County failed, voters in Pinellas approved the "Penny for Pinellas" measure by a close margin, 67,605 to 67,201. The penny enhancement took effect in February 1990 on the first $5,000 in taxable sales. The penny funds allowed for improvements in infrastructure and transportation. Some roads that were originally slated as toll roads, such as the proposed Bayside Bridge, opened without tolls, and tolls were removed in a couple of areas, such as the bridge between Indian Shores and Seminole and the Sand Key Bridge. This measure and other ad valorem enhancements also supported the creation of the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative.

Let's get back to St. Petersburg. In May 1987, members of the city council come to terms with Bay Plaza Company, owned by a firm in Kansas City. A contract lasting until 2000 gave Bay Plaza the role of "Master Developer" in the downtown area, allowing it to manage the Pier, Bayfront Center, and future stadium. A major part of Bay Plaza's responsibility was to redevelop substantial areas in a nine-block section of the city's downtown. The city allocated $38 million to erect parking garages for the so-called "North Core" and "South Core" areas. The South Core Garage became the first structure completed under this partnership when it was finished in December 1990. In late August 1988, as it passed its fifteenth birthday, the Pier reopened after renovations that had lasted nineteen months and cost approximately $12 million. New shops occupied the structure, though the excitement would not continue as long-term struggles to maintain business led many stores to close. Nearly 50,000 people attended this event. On September 4, 1988, a comparable crowd celebrated the reopening of the remodeled Bayfront Center and Mahaffey Theater.

The biggest redevelopment project, of course, was the plan to transform the Gas Plant area into the site of a MULTIPURPOSE stadium such as the prototype shown here, and this required countywide support. By a 3-2 vote in December 1983, Pinellas County commissioners agreed to support funding for a baseball or multipurpose sports stadium in St. Petersburg. Support was strong in St. Petersburg, though many hotels and establishments in north county questioned the value of using dollars from tourists to fund the complex that became Tropicana Field. Early funding and loan notes were drawn up and executed before the end of the year. With the defeat of Gabe Cazares in his re-election bid in November 1984, an anti-stadium majority held control of the county commission and in mid-November 1984, the new commission voted
against supporting the stadium initiative. St. Petersburg responded by suing the commission to assure that it would honor the original agreement, and the city prevailed in court in 1985.

By this time, the Twins had courted with Tampa, and Frank Morsani (describe).

In the mid-1980s, the Texas Rangers became a possible team for relocation as well (describe).

Things really became interesting in the mid-1980s. In July 1986, Baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberroth informed St. Petersburg's Mayor Edward Cole via telegraph that the city "is not among the top candidates" for a franchise. A week later, on July 23, a public hearing at the Bayfront Center attracted approximately 2,000 people to discuss the stadium, with supporters in the majority. On July 24, the members of St. Petersburg's city council approved a measure to build the stadium by a six-to-three vote. "Build it and they will come," was the thought of the time.

A well-attended groundbreaking (4 images) took place at the future site of the stadium, on November 22, 1986, with 9,000 in attendance. By that time, the Chicago White Sox seemed to be the perfect suitor. The White Sox played in old Comisky Park, a venue that had shown its age since opening in the summer of 1910. On December 5, this chapter of the baseball drama seemed to end, as the ownership of the Chicago White Sox said that the team would not move to St. Petersburg. After the Illinois legislature proposed a new plan to finance a replacement stadium, leaders in St. Petersburg felt that hopes were dashed. However, uncertainties of this plan for a $120 million stadium allowed residents of the Tampa Bay area to believe that the "Florida White Sox" might become a reality after all. The drama resumed on and off for another year and a half.

Construction on the Florida Suncoast Dome began on January 5, 1987. The original stadium design, slated to cost about $85 million, allowed for flexibility and multipurpose events. The actual name was selected from over 19,900 entries and was announced on May 1. By mid-July, pockets of contamination were detected in some areas of the former Gas Plant. Remediation efforts delayed construction and added to the cost of preparing the site.

By the spring of 1988, it once again appeared that the White Sox were on their way to St. Petersburg. As evidence that the Tampa-St. Petersburg rivalry was alive and well, editorial writers of the Tampa Tribune blasted Chicago's city leaders for not doing more to keep the White Sox in their city. A May 1, 1988, editorial stated, in part, that St. Petersburg resembled "a particularly pinched Albanian village" and viewed the effort to build a stadium as nothing more than an urban renewal scheme for the "moribund part of that quiet city." Funding was lined up in early June.
In a long debate that took place in the halls of the Illinois General Assembly on June 30 and into July 1, lawmakers discussed plans to finance the construction of a new ballpark for the Chicago White Sox. Much excitement covered local media as it appeared as if the ownership of the White Sox would move the team to St. Petersburg. The legislature needed to have a vote before midnight, according to laws requiring the session to end before the beginning of July. Illinois Gov. Jim Thompson rallied lawmakers as the clock moved towards the witching hour. Although the requisite number of votes came after midnight, the clock was turned back to 11:59 p.m. of June 30. Thanks to some handy clockwork and political manipulations, plans for the "Florida White Sox" evaporated into the night.

Despite this setback, the Florida Suncoast Dome opened with a big celebration in February 1990. Later known as the Thunderdome and Tropicana Field, the original stadium configuration remained partially incomplete to allow for multipurpose activities. Costs to date were $110 million. (2 IMAGES) In June 1990, Major League Baseball announced a timetable for expansion that would allow for the addition of two teams in the National League with an announcement scheduled for June 1991. As we waited and local ownership groups courted MLB, in November 1990, the Davis Cup Finals that took place in the dome as the United States defeated Australia on the tennis court.

During the application process, Major League Baseball selected a potential ownership group for St. Petersburg. Ultimately, however, baseball selected Miami and Denver as sites for expansion by approving the creation of the Florida Marlins (now Miami Marlins) and Colorado Rockies in June 1991. While published reports claimed that the strength of Miami’s financial portfolio gave it the deciding factor, some also believed that National League President Bill White, a native of the Florida Panhandle who spent a few years with the St. Louis Cardinals (1959-1965, 1969), allowed some of his bitter memories of racial segregation in St. Petersburg to influence some of the conversations regarding the decision.

White, the first African American president of the National League, held that position from 1989 until 1994. White had remembered that he was often viewed with harsh comments for his complaints about the persistence of racial segregation while with the Cardinals. In fact, he even pointed out the Dr. Ralph Wimbish, the president of St. Petersburg’s NAACCP in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was also chastised in the Sunshine City for being "uppity." His lack of support certainly helped Florida’s first MLB franchise move south.

When the San Francisco Giants thought about relocating to the Tampa Bay region in late 1992, White no doubt played a role in allowing for a local ownership group in the "other Bay Area" to secure the resources its need to keep its franchise. (2 IMAGES) A Tampa Bay ownership group...
had acquired a memorandum of agreement in August 1992 that would have allowed them to purchase the team from Bob Lurie and move the team to St. Petersburg by the 1993 season. White’s actions helped to get a local ownership group in the San Francisco area and the new stadium, Pac Bell (now AT&T) Park, a waterfront venue that opened for the 2000 season. Thus, the Giants can thank Tampa Bay for providing the potential threat that allowed for a new ownership group to get them a new stadium away from Candlestick Park. In one final blow to securing a Major League franchise, baseball owners approved the sale of the Seattle Mariners to a Japanese ownership group in June 1992 after discussions took place about moving that franchise to St. Pete.

Despite these defeats, the Florida Suncoast Dome was the home of champions by 1991. The first professional sports franchise in the Florida Suncoast Dome, the **Tampa Bay Storm**, opened their training camp on May 17. Created as the Pittsburgh Gladiators at one of the original four Arena Football League teams, the franchise moved to St. Petersburg in 1991 after playing its first four seasons in Pittsburgh. The team’s first season in the Dome was a championship season. The team won the Arena Bowl V by beating the Detroit Drive 48-42. Although the championship game took place in Detroit’s Joe Louis Arena rather than St. Petersburg, the game marked the first time that Detroit had lost the Arena Bowl after taking the first four titles. The losing coach for Detroit, Tim Marcum, later became an important part of the Tampa Bay Storm franchise. The Storm played in the Dome until the end of the 1996 season, joined for awhile by the Tampa Bay Lightning. (3 images)

While we would have to **wait awhile for MLB** to award us a franchise, we could still enjoy the **Kids and Kubs** in St. Pete and Florida State League games in Clearwater, Dunedin, and St. Pete.

A few other milestones from this decade. The first move towards public magnet schools occurred after the Pinellas County School Board acted in the fall of 1983. In an effort to maintain court ordered racial desegregation under the **Bradley** decision, officials in the Pinellas County School Board created two magnet schools in St. Petersburg: the “Program for Academically Talented” at St. Petersburg High School that later became the first International Baccalaureate Program and the “Artistically Talented Program” at Gibbs High School. By the late 1980s and beyond, magnet programs came to other high schools and also middle and elementary schools. Some addressed concerns for dropout prevention, such as the GOALS programs (Graduation Options: Alternatives to Leaving School) at Boca Ciega and Dixie Hollins high schools.

The school system served a growingly diverse population, including students with special needs. The quality of educational programs and partnerships received national attention, such as when First Lady **Nancy Reagan** visited a Pinellas Park area school in February 1982. Six years later, in
February 1988, a shocking incident occurred at Pinellas Park High School after two students came to campus with weapons and shot at numerous people, killing Vice Principal Richard Allen and injuring others. We experienced pain and suffering long before the Columbine tragedy.

During the 1980s, the region lost both of its afternoon papers, the *Tampa Times* (owned by the *Tampa Tribune*) in August 1982 and the *EVENING INDEPENDENT* (owned by the *St. Petersburg Times* since 1962) that ceased publication in November 1986. The *Clearwater Sun* struggled to remain afloat until the end of the 1980s. Our biggest Pinellas County based bank, Park Bank of Florida, failed in February 1986 after it was sold by federal regulators to Chase Manhattan Corporation. This bank failure, along with failure of the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s that led to the end of Florida Federal Savings and Loan and other firms, tainted the business climate of the mid-1980s. Federal officials took control of Florida Federal in November 1990 and closed the longtime St. Petersburg institution in August 1991 after assets were transferred to First Union, a North Carolina bank. Also in August 1991, a longtime institution in downtown St. Petersburg, the Maas Brothers store just east of Williams Park, closed. Maas Brothers, like other Florida-inspired chains, fell victim to declining sales and bankruptcy. The store's closing threatened the ambitious plans of redevelopment that the city had worked in partnership with Bay Plaza to see to fruition.

Although so much seemed to fall apart by the end of the 1980s, there was hope. Bay Plaza's ambitious plans never materialized in their final form, but St. Petersburg did experience a renaissance in the 1990s. In the mid-1990s the former Maas Brothers became the home of the Florida International Museum and held blockbuster exhibits such as the "Treasures of the Czars," "Splendors of Ancient Egypt," "Titanic," and other exhibits. The twenty years since 1992 are in that blur between the present and history. Next month, we will take a quick walk through the past two decades and put this entire lecture series into a broader perspective. I will see you then!

Thank you for joining us today. I do have time for questions.