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Pinellas Past, Present, and Future [1992-2012]

James Anthony Schnur

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“Pinellas Past, Present, and Future: 1992-2012”*Remarks Delivered at the Final “Pinellas by the Decades” Program**Pinellas Room, Heritage Village**15 July 2012, 2:00 p.m.**by***James Anthony Schnur***Past President, Pinellas County Historical Society**Associate University Librarian, Poynter Library, USF St. Petersburg*

Welcome to the final (tenth) 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. Since last fall, we have focused on the history of the Pinellas Peninsula from the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, a measure that opened the frontier to settlement, up to the present. In June, we covered the period from 1982 through 1991. This week we will look at the past twenty years and also discuss some prevalent themes that we have experienced throughout our journey.

One important theme that began to take shape in the 1960s, gained momentum by the 1980s, and became standard practice in many phases of our life over the past 20 years was the need to think regionally. With its opening in April 1987, the new **Sunshine Skyway** became a visible symbol for the region at a time when leaders had to abandon parochial interests and think of solutions that crossed political boundaries. Although various Pinellas municipalities have stepped up the battle to annex unincorporated areas such as lands east of Lake Seminole and much of Lealman, battles over these areas have become part of a larger struggle: **A built-out, heavily urbanized county** must find new ways to sustain and enrich the experiences of residents and visitors but cannot follow the slash-and-build practices that kept the economic engine in overdrive when land was plentiful and people few. Similarly, a heavily urbanized region with limited amount of green space has to think beyond county lines.

{Describe Pinellas as essentially built out today when compared with other counties, and this has had to deal with this earlier than Pasco, Hernando,

Hillsborough, Manatee, and Sarasota. Countryside and Innisbrook in central and northern Pinellas may have been the 1970s/1980s versions of what Lakewood Ranch and Wesley Chapel and Trinity are today, but there is an important difference: in these other counties, even as developments start to appear east of I-75, there is still space for new developments. The west sides of these counties are urbanized, but there is some wiggle room on the east end. In Pinellas both sides of US19, our dividing line, are full.}

Management of natural resources, such as water, serves as an excellent example of a challenge that requires solutions that cut across county lines. **(IMAGE OF BIRD ON NATURE TRAIL)** During periods of drought, water tables in lakes in Pasco, Hernando, and Hillsborough counties drop as Pinellas pumps out potable water. Pinellas communities have owned and pumped water from neighboring counties for decades, often prompting wars of words over water. This is a necessary fact of life: Salt water intrusion has compromised most of the aquifer below Pinellas. Our artesian wells have all but disappeared, and the fresh water ones that do remain are heavy in sulphur and light in reserves. With little land to build upon, Pinellas civic, business, and political leaders had to think of collaborative partnerships to preserve their slices of paradise by the early 1970s. By the early 1990s, these partnerships became regional out of a need for survival.

In June 1998, governmental bodies throughout the region decide to work together to create **Tampa Bay Water**, originally known as the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority, a new utility to oversee water across municipal and county jurisdictions. *{Talk about this approach, as well as the need to look at plants for purifying salt water, etc., and clean-up efforts in Tampa Bay and Boca Ciega Bay that have them in better shape today than they were forty years ago.}*

The pursuit of sports teams encouraged both teamwork and competition at the regional level. The region's first professional sports franchise, the **Tampa Bay Rowdies**, spent time on both sides of the bay, playing outdoor games in Tampa Stadium and **indoor games** at the Bayfront Center in downtown St. Petersburg.

Pinellas residents gladly crossed bridges to see the **Tampa Bay Buccaneers** after the National Football League team took the field in 1976, even during the early years when losses far outnumbered wins. As we talked about last month, since the 1970s, the Tampa Bay region had pursued a Major League Baseball franchise. After a failed attempt to bring the Minnesota Twins to Tampa in the early 1980s, Pinellas County leaders approved an ambitious plan to construct a multipurpose stadium in an area east of downtown St. Petersburg before any promise of a team appeared on the horizon **(2 images)**. As the region courted the Chicago White Sox, Texas Rangers, San Francisco Giants, and Seattle Mariners in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the former Gas Plant site became a massive construction project for the Florida Suncoast Dome. Opened for concerts and trade shows in 1990, the stadium became an early home for the Tampa Bay Storm, an Arena Football League franchise. During the mid-1990s, the stadium—renamed the Thunderdome—also served as a temporary home for the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Finally, after many years at the altar, the summertime union of baseball and the region was consummated when the **Tampa Bay Devil Rays** came into existence in March 1995 under a Major League Franchise awarded to Vince Naimoli. After substantial enhancements, Tropicana Field hosted its first opening day on March 31, 1998, when the Devil Rays played the Detroit Tigers. Many would argue that the team really did not come into existence until after the new millennium, when Naimoli was replaced by Stuart Sternberg as the managing general partner. **(2 images)** An exciting 2008 season with a **World Series appearance** brought crowds and excitement to the Trop for the rechristened Tampa Bay Rays after years of bedevilment. Even as other suitors have started to test the marriage of the Rays to St. Petersburg and its domed stadium, the franchise remains a valuable community asset for the entire region. We all know about the discussion of attendance that appears in national press, the way ESPN and others complain about the **catwalks**, and the way pundits who have never been to a game complain that baseball should be played outdoors. However, whatever the future of the Rays, whether the stadium stays in Pinellas, moves elsewhere in the region or further away, nobody will ever be able to take away the excitement of the last

few years, as our team has made it to the postseason three times since 2008, winning the division championships in 2008 and **2010 (multiple images)**, and having an amazing **Game 162** last September on what many have said was the most exciting night in our National Pastime's history.

Regional thinking will have to become more common, not just about the "perfect" location of a stadium, but over issues such as mass transit, public safety, and development management. We have made baby steps across and beyond county lines, but have a long way to go. With mass transit, more than 25 years ago, the Central Pinellas Transit Authority and St. Petersburg Municipal Transit System merged into **PSTA**, the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority. Before that time, the St. Pete system generally was confined to that city and CPTA connected with it at points such as Tyrone Mall. It worked, but was disjointed. The PSTA has offered an improved solution within the county. Thinking regionally, the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transit Authority (**TBARTA**) was established in July 2007 but without much funding. It is difficult to address regional solutions without resources. *{Talk about going from downtown St. Petersburg to Tampa International Airport via bus and how unacceptable the current situation is.}*

In some areas, opportunities have disappeared. While rail service is highly touted in Europe, the expansion of car culture has diminished the importance of passenger rail in much of America. July 1995 marked the last time that the St. Petersburg Amtrack Station offered bus service for trains in Tampa. Regular passenger rail service had ended a decade earlier. For a few more years, buses would run from the Pinellas Square Mall in Pinellas Park, but that ended as that mall was demolished and replaced.

Public safety: Expansion of **Pinellas County Sheriffs Office**. In the 1980s, places such as Seminole and South Pasadena contracted with them. Since then, many beach communities, such as Madeira and the Redingtons, along with cities such as Dunedin, have followed this model. While it's a safe bet that St. Petersburg, Largo, and Clearwater will maintain their own law enforcement agencies for the

foreseeable future, along with Kenneth City, of course, others may look at contractual services as a money-saving measure. *{Ongoing debates about EMS funding.}*

Growth management: Although most municipalities and all counties in our region maintain sovereign control over growth management, permitting, and development regulation, a half-century ago the **Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council** came into being as an entity that can look beyond these boundaries by working with partners in more than 40 jurisdictions.

{Smaller towns and cities jumped ambitiously at development in the years following World War II, trying to catch up with St. Petersburg and Clearwater. However, just as older homes have special and often expensive needs, older infrastructure is an issue—i.e., Redington Beach and the decision to “sell” its sewer system to Pinellas County rather than address issues at the municipal level. Recent water main breaks, such as the one along Belcher Road at 142nd Avenue about a year ago, show that we cannot ignore the aging network of infrastructure under our homes any more than we ignore warning signs with our bodies.}

In many ways, we are a victim of our own success. Just as nobody would have envisioned Pinellas as a place with nearly 1,000,000 residents 100 years ago, few people 50 years ago would have thought that places such as **Celebration** in the Orlando area or The Villages near Wildwood would have become what they are today. But all we have to do is look at our own history to see it, using Sidney Colen as an example. *{Developed St. Pete subdivisions, then Kenneth City, then **On Top of the World in Clearwater** and, as Pinellas filled up, **On Top of the World in Ocala** that he started in 1975.}*

Some cities and municipalities have preserved or reshaped their core. [St. Petersburg, Tarpon’s historical initiatives **MULTIPLE PICTURES**, Safety Harbor **(2 IMAGES)**] Others have found it to be more of a struggle, but have had success [**Largo, Oldsmar**]. *{Discussion of area code in late 1990s. There was talk of 10-digit*

*dialing before it was decided that 727 would be given to Pinellas on February 1, 1999 and the only area still with 813 is Oldsmar, a bridge community where Hillsborough Avenue meets Tampa Road and St. Petersburg Drive. Other areas lack a true core [unincorporated Palm Harbor] and some see their core as facing an uncertain future [**Seminole**].}*

{Discussion of metro concept in Duval and Miami-Dade as one alternative, but probably not here, especially since the momentum some have called for is to have all unincorporated areas join a city. USEM (the Unincorporated Seminole movement) and Lealman challenging this.}

Postsecondary and cultural heritage institutions also enriched the Pinellas landscape. St. Petersburg College had humble beginnings in 1927 in borrowed space at a high school. Campuses now span the entire peninsula and partnerships abound. By the mid-1990s, what was then still known as St. Petersburg Junior College began an ambitious expansion plan that included the development of lands in the Seminole area it had owned since the 1960s. The **Seminole Campus** became the focal point of the College's distance education and technology initiatives, as well as the home of the College University Center, later University Partnership Center. *{describe.}* The college dropped the "Junior" from its name and now offers bachelor's degrees in high demand areas.

Since its opening in 1960, **Eckerd College**—originally named Florida Presbyterian College—has sustained a tradition of liberal arts education. Its outreach to the community continues to expand through a vibrant on-campus senior college program and other initiatives. About twelve years ago, there were some questions regarding the endowment, but the college has addressed those and moved forward.

The University of South Florida launched a branch campus along Bayboro Harbor in June 1965. The Bayboro Campus has since evolved into the separately accredited **University of South Florida St. Petersburg**. The path was a long and

exciting journey. USFSP was the first branch campus in the State University System. *{briefly describe.}*

Historical museums, art galleries, performing arts centers, and parks enjoy broad support. In January 1995, the Florida International Museum opened in the former Maas Brothers with “Treasures of the Czars” exhibit that brought more than 600,000 visitors in five months. In June 1998, the Florida Orchestra acquired the former First Church of Christ, Scientist, and converted it into the **Palladium**. The Florida Orchestra held the first performance in the former church on 7 February 1999. The downtown area celebrated on January 11, 2011, after a lively morning parade from its former structure along Bayboro Harbor, when the new **Salvador Dali Museum** opened at the site once occupied by the Bayfront Center.

Passenger rail service may have ended in Pinellas in February 1984, but long segments of the former railroad tracks now serve as the **Pinellas Trail**, a continuous recreational path that links Tarpon Springs with St. Petersburg. We mentioned that the first segment of the trail covered the space between the Seminole City Park and Taylor Lake Park by the early 1990s. In the middle and later part of the 1990s, the trail expanded from St. Petersburg at Gibbs High School and Pinellas Vo-Tech up to Tarpon Springs. Since 2000, the spur into downtown St. Petersburg has been finished, along with other trails in East Lake and Clearwater. The new (and current westbound span) of the **Gandy Bridge** opened on December 21, 1996, allowing for the span opened in the mid-1950s to serve as a recreational area known as the Friendship Trail. This span was later closed as questions about the integrity of the span were raised, though there have been talks of other recreational trails in the area.

Beaches at Fort DeSoto, Honeymoon Island, Caladesi Island, and other Pinellas locations regularly win international acclaim. Our park system brings us a great quality of life. [**SHOW SOME OF THE PARKS HERE**]

Now that we have toured some of our county's natural beauty, let's take a trip through the good, the bad, the ugly, and the crazy of the 1990s.

Early in the 1990s, a signature building in St. Petersburg reopened, while another met its demise. Let's tear down then rebuild. Despite the objection of preservationists, including the group Save Our St. Petersburg (SOS), the planned implosion of the **Soreno Hotel** took place as the Bay Plaza development company moved forward with its redevelopment plans for downtown on January 25, 1992. Machines crushed much of the rubble into material for use in roadbeds. The demolition of this sixty-eight year-old structure became the closing scene for the movie Lethal Weapon 3, released later in the year, although early hopes that actors Mel Gibson and Danny Glover would appear on site never came true. In a fitting irony to those who sought to save the building, the closing credits offered "Special Thanks" to "St. Petersburg," thus misspelling the city's name. On July 31, 1992, a couple of months after the Soreno came down and after a couple of years of renovation, the Stouffer **Vinoy** reopened to great fanfare. For the first time in almost twenty years, the hotel was back in service. There were many false starts and failed attempts at redevelopment before Fred Guest and his investors brought together the resources to refurbish the hotel, acquire and improve the golf course and country club on Snell Isle, and develop the new marina along Vinoy Basin.

That summer, news from Barcelona brought residents of the Sunshine City and the entire county great pride as we learned that Nicole Haislette, a graduate of Lakewood High School, brought fame and glory to the US Olympic Team in Barcelona by winning three gold medals in the 1992 Summer Olympics. Her first medal was awarded on July 27, 1992. A big ceremony took place at the Mahaffey Theater after she returned from the games.

Tension also filled the air in St. Petersburg during 1992 and 1993 due to the ouster of a controversial chief of police. On February 28, 1992, Don McRae, serving as acting city manager, fired Ernest "Curt" Curtsinger, the police chief.

Controversy ensued as Curtsinger's supporters mounted a campaign to get him reinstated. He later accepted a settlement and briefly assumed duties as the city's port director. He decided to run for mayor in 1993. Strong racial overtones punctuated the dialogue in 1992 and 1993 as campaign literature included harsh characterizations. This culminated in the March 23, 1993 elections. Although voters in St. Petersburg agreed to reform the City Charter to create a strong mayor form of government, the "strong mayor" candidate, Ernest "Curt" Curtsinger, lost to incumbent David Fischer in a bitter battle that pitted opponents on issues such as urban redevelopment and racial/economic issues. The close election required recounts, and Curtsinger failed to win the mayor's office. A few years later, another incident would spark outrage at an even higher level.

On October 24, 1996, TyRon Lewis, an 18 year old, was stopped by two St. Petersburg Police Officers at Eighteenth Avenue and Sixteenth Street South. After some tense moments, Lewis was shot and killed. **Civil disturbances** hit areas in Midtown and southern St. Petersburg. This sparked international attention that came shortly after the success of the Vice Presidential debates of October 9 that brought much of the nation's media to see Al Gore and Jack Kemp engage in the only debate of Vice Presidential candidates during the 1996 election. By late October, the television trucks had disappeared as the lots of the Tropicana Field site, then under renovation for Major League Baseball, became a command post for National Guard troops and vehicles. Another round of violence took place in mid-November, after a November 14 grand jury report decided that Officer James Knight would not be indicted.

In the late 1990s, leaders such as David Fischer and Rick Baker have focused on the area many people refer to as "South St. Petersburg." The redubbed "Midtown" community efforts have met with some success, such as bringing new **businesses and shopping opportunities** into areas where merchants and companies had left years earlier.

Downtown development also came into question in St. Petersburg. By September 1996, Bay Plaza announced its intentions to pull out of its downtown redevelopment partnership with the city, meaning that the lofty plans of the early 1990s were left with little more to show than lots of complicated real estate arrangements and two largely vacant parking garages. The city brought this chapter to an end on 1 February 1996. New hope came about in June 1999, when Mel Sembler and other developers bring together resources and tenants for the proposed Bay Walk development on lands the city had acquired for Bay Plaza. *{Recent Bay Plaza problems.}*

Other storms that were weather related also caused damage and prompted rebuilding in the 1990s. Hurricane Andrew's devastation in south Florida in August 1992 was a wake-up call for all of us, reminding us that the fury of storms can destroy any semblance of paradise. Many people who lived in Cutler Ridge, Homestead, and other affected areas actually relocated to the Tampa Bay and Orlando areas, including Pinellas County, after suffering Andrew's wrath. On a smaller scale, an October 1992 tornado touched down south of Largo in the area known as Ridgecrest, Baskin Crossing, and Dansville. The **predominantly African-America settlement** took shape in the 1920s as a place for families involved in harvesting the nearby citrus groves and farms. Much of the area lacked paved roads and county water service until the 1970s. The tornado caused extensive damage; it also brought attention to an area along Ulmerton Road that many residents of neighboring communities had largely ignored. As this area began to rebuild, the infamous March 1993 "no name" storm hits Pinellas, causing substantial damage of hundreds of millions of dollars along the Gulf coast of Florida.

Water damage also took place because of a terrible man-made tragedy. On August 10, 1993, in the waters near Fort DeSoto, two barges and a freighter hit and cause a terrible oil spill that damaged beaches all along Pinellas County. Clean-up was slow and expensive. By some estimates, over 325,000 gallons of oil were released. ***[Show images]***

New bridges spanned the county and new thoroughfares promoted settlement. The **Bayside Bridge** officially opened to connect Forty-Ninth Street and McMullen-Booth Road on June 2, 1993. A bridge or possible expressway had been planned for that site since the mid-1970s, but voter referenda failed to gain support. By the late 1980s, the deteriorating condition of traffic on **US 19** called for an alternative north-south route. During the mid-1990s through today, plans have been put in place to create pockets of limited access roadways along US19 between Pinellas Park and the Palm Harbor area. *{describe.}* The expansion of **Belcher Road** northwards towards Klosterman Road and the expansion of the corridor connecting **118th Avenue** at I-275 to Bryan Dairy Road with the bridge across Lake Seminole to 102nd Avenue also transformed commuting patterns during the past ten years. One thing is for certain, traffic barricades will be with us for years to come.

Since no talk about Florida history would be complete without a section devoted to the “news of the weird,” we should take a brief moment to remember another wild and whacky moment. Last month, we heard about the “Largo 8,” a group of retirees that were arrested for card games. This month, our strange moment involves a cup of coffee.

On August 30, 1995, Dixie Sue Bottari, a resident of Belleair Beach, and her daughter visiting from Chicago, ***Magica***, filled two plastic cups with iced coffee and crossed Gulf Boulevard to watch the sunset on the street-less municipal limits of Belleair Shore. Two officers from Belleair Beach, under contract to provide police services to Belleair Shore as well, arrived and asked them what they were drinking. The officers gave each woman a \$30 citation for drinking coffee in violation of Belleair Shore ordinances that prohibit food, drink, pets, bicycles, or watercraft. The ordinance did allow breathing, I believe, but little else. Belleair Shore Mayor ***Bob Clayton*** was glad the officers enforced the law, claiming that the town had withheld its monthly payment of \$1,924 to Belleair Beach in June because he wanted them to clamp down on enforcing the rules.

The police also had recently issued citations to an Orange County family that flew a kite along the beach. Within a couple of days, a media circus ensued, as WFLZ (93.3FM) radio disc jockey **Bubba the Love Sponge** and others passed out coffee and sodas. **Bernie McCabe**, the Pinellas-Pasco state prosecutor, refused to pursue charges against the Bottaris, citing the costs to taxpayers involved in prosecution. Hearing this, Clayton dispatched Town Attorney **Leslie Conklin** to misdemeanor court to pursue a case against the Bottaris. On Wednesday, 20 September, the Belleair Shore town commission (including Mayor Clayton) decided unanimously against prosecuting the Bottaris. The meeting took place at the dining room table in Clayton's home with members of the media crowding into the living and dining rooms.

Although the "Belleair Shore Coffee Party" of August/September 1995 was behind this small enclave, another brouhaha ensued as Mayor **Bob Clayton** and commissioners decided in January 1996 to erect \$19,000 wrought iron gates at the beach access areas provided by agreement for residents of Belleair Beach, across the street from them. Citing abuse of rules by Belleair Beach residents, including "rowdy parties and sexual liaisons," Clayton claimed that "something had to be done." Things heated up again in April when Clayton saw a car without the proper sticker in one of the lots for Belleair Beach residents. A Safety Harbor resident claimed that Clayton grabbed his arm and tried to prevent him and his family from leaving. When the man told Clayton he planned to call the police, Clayton showed a "mayor" badge and claimed to be the police, said he should get his "BLANKing self off the beach" because he did not "pay any BLANKING taxes." Clayton resigned as mayor on May 15. On December 12, a jury convicted Clayton of battery and criminal mischief for the incident in April.

The convention and visitors bureau work diligently to promote our beaches, one of the greatest assets. However, those wanting to have a cup of coffee, or even walk, along Belleair Shore should take heed. **HIGHLANDER IMAGES FOR FILLER**

A July 6, 1997 fire at a \$700,000 home in Tierra Verde also sparked a lot of press and brought unwanted press attention. In September 1994, Reverend Henry Lyons of the Bethel Metropolitan Baptist Church in St. Petersburg gained prominence as the elected president of the National Baptist Convention USA, a historically African American organization established in 1880 to serve black Baptist churches. The fire started a series of investigations that ultimately defrocked him and led to criminal charges and prison time in both state and federal courts.

By 2000, over 920,000 people called Pinellas County their home. Seasonal residents and tourists brought the population to more than one-million. New immigrant communities began to arrive by the 1970s that reshaped the cultural mosaic. Commercial establishments catered to new immigrant communities from Central America, Mexico, and Southeast Asia. Vietnamese and Thai restaurants robustly competed with older Chinese and Japanese establishments. While St. Petersburg's International Folk Fair remained a wonderful place to learn about other cultures, old patterns of racial and residential segregation also began to erode as new neighbors moved on the block.

A vibrant real estate boom ushered in the new millennium. Real estate prices soared at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. From Redington Beach to Belleair and beyond, speculation abounded. Year-round residents received junk mail urging them to sell, while escalating homeowners insurance rates made it more difficult to stay. Although Pinellas County missed most of the damage from the especially bad 2004 hurricane season, unfavorable legislation and poor business decisions cast clouds upon the peninsula.

The economic downturns and mortgage crises that left many Americans upside-down on their debts hit Pinellas County especially hard. Property values plummeted, while governmental entities and businesses retrenched. Coastal dreamlands became beachscapes where bankruptcy filings began to surpass building permits issued. For the first time since the mid-1800s, the population

declined as Pinellas became one of two Florida counties that lost people in the 2010 decennial census.

Figures released for the 2010 census show that although Pinellas' population dropped by almost 5,000 from the 2000 census, the countywide Hispanic population grew by 71.3 percent during the last decade (a gain of 30,481 people). Eight percent of the county's population, or 73,241 residents, claimed Hispanic/Latino ancestry. Of this total, about 20,000 were of Mexican ancestry, 20,000 of Puerto Rican heritage, and 8,000 were Cuban. The remainder claimed other Latino roots. The Hispanic population of Clearwater, at 15,200, exceeds the number of African-American residents in that city. The unincorporated county saw its Hispanic population grow by 78.3%, St. Petersburg grew by 54.4%, Largo by 140.6%, and Seminole by 206.1%. The population of Asians, especially Southeast Asian from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Lao, continues to grow as well. These statistics indicate that older approaches of viewing cultural matters in simple "black" and "white" terms are no longer applicable.

Despite these economic challenges, the Pinellas peninsula continues to thrive and remain a place of beauty. The beaches attract crowds. The water quality of both Boca Ciega Bay and Tampa Bay has dramatically improved since the 1970s. In searching for a brighter future, we can learn from the lessons of the past. Vibrant indigenous cultures flourished here for millennia. Spaniards, Cubans, and Florida Crackers enjoyed the bountiful harvests of our estuaries. Tourists braved mosquitoes to enjoy our dolphin shows and hotels long before air conditioners made summer evenings tolerable. Newlyweds, young families, and retirees abandoned their long-established roots in places like Cincinnati and Detroit to find that perfect ranch home for their collection of plastic pink flamingos. Pinellas County has a rich and wonderful history. As we begin our second century of independence, we have many new chapters to write.

Thanks for coming today. I do have time for questions.