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Paul Nicoletti: How we're to preserve and enhance 'Stuart Life'



The 26th annual Downtown Stuart Art Festival on Feb. 27 in Stuart. (HOBIE HILER/SPECIAL TO TREASURE COAST NEWSPAPERS)

By Paul Nicoletti

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Downtown Stuart has a problem. Fortunately, it's the problem every downtown area wants: Parking is often in short supply.

We anticipate public interest in downtown to grow further, especially as restaurants take advantage of new rules allowing rooftop dining and as expansion of the city's Community Redevelopment Area enables additional reinvestment and growth.

As we're preparing the city budget for fiscal year 2017 (which begins in October), we're seeing how several tough decisions made during difficult financial circumstances are yielding good results.

Certainly, the success of downtown Stuart belongs to the talents, creativity and risk-taking of the individual business owners. The Downtown Business Association, working with Stuart Main Street, the Stuart City Commission and the CRA, has cemented downtown Stuart as a great place to spend an hour doing business, the day taking in an event or the week shopping, sightseeing and relaxing.

Although it's not exactly been described in these terms, the overwhelming philosophy of the city commission is to contribute to the conditions that let "Stuart Life" flourish, then get out of the way so our residents, business owners and visitors can do the rest. For the city, this means providing reliable, responsive services that are efficient, accountable and delivered with a "customer-service" mindset. Each employee and city department head deserves credit for upholding this culture. Space limitations prevent me from giving everyone their due praise, but I can touch on a few.

First comes public safety. After a spate of nonfatal shootings in East Stuart, then-Mayor Kelli Glass Leighton teamed with Police Chief David Dyess to organize a December town hall at the East 10th Street Center. The overflow crowd shared their concerns with law enforcement while seeking support for securing the safety of their community. The renewed partnership between police and the community is working well and, thankfully, there's been no gunfire since.

We're blessed to have several department heads who serve in leadership positions elsewhere, learning ideas and innovations that benefit the city. Sam Amerson, our public works director, represents the state on the Southeast Stormwater Association. The experience he has gained served our Haney Creek restoration, among other city stormwater projects.

Teresa Lamar-Sarno, our CRA administrator, and Thondra Lanese, CRA project manager, delivered outstanding results on redevelopment projects, particularly the Colorado Avenue improvements, which transformed the entryway of downtown and welcomed new boutiques and restaurants.

Jim Chrulski, head of community services, has expanded the number and quality of events and attractions the city puts on each year.

Joseph Hoffkins, our building official, emphasizes a smooth and efficient turnaround time on permit applications. Terry O'Neil, development director, rewrote the city's land development code to clarify terms and options, a massive undertaking that makes the process easier for residents, businesses and investors to navigate.

Stuart's warm reputation toward investment is spreading.

In addition to approving select requests for voluntary annexation into the city, we field frequent inquiries about the process.

New Urban Communities' plans for the Triangle parcel, approved late last year, will address the need for upscale apartments while incorporating some additional parking. The city's free valet and tram service are alleviating some of the parking inconvenience. The forecast is sunny, but past lessons make us cautious.

The city still operates with 80 fewer employees than we had before the economic downturn sliced city revenue by 41 percent and forced some difficult cutbacks. Even then, we kept tax rates stagnant so residents and businesses could better weather the tough times. The fire assessment fee — which balanced the tax burden previously borne by only 3 percent of the city's 16,000 residents — finally filled the budget hole. Such decisions were unpopular but necessary. Otherwise, we'd prefer the city's presence remain only lightly felt. That way "Stuart Life," the sum of wonderful qualities about our community, can be enjoyed by the citizens.

Paul Nicoletti is the city manager of Stuart.