

HAVING IT ALL

Let me start with a disclaimer.

We all know that each and every one of us can't have everything we want.

What we hope for has two parts.

We want what we care most about and we want what the people we care about want. That includes our families, the people we love, and the community we live in.

That ends up in quality of life. If we are lucky, we live in a community that cares about the same things.

We are lucky in Martin County. We care about our river and our neighborhoods and each other.

Even on a bad day when they are dumping Lake Okeechobee, the majority of residents don't think this is a lousy place to live. We love it. We want to keep what we care most about it.

Because of that, the recently restored introduction to our comprehensive plan lists quality of life for the people who live here as an overarching goal.

Development groups have challenged that idea. They have declared in court filings that it is illegal to have quality of life as a goal.

They are wrong.

In spite of the fact that we have a monumental fight between slow-growth and pro-growth forces every two years in Martin County Commission races, I believe we have a community consensus that Martin County is a special place to live.

We don't have all the advantages of big city living, but we don't have all the disadvantages. We can't go skiing and sledding, but we can fish and splash all year round.

The argument we hear from developers and their consultants, the Economic Council, and the Chambers of Commerce is that trying to hold on to our quality of life cripples our economy and starves our children.

Rather than shouting back and forth, it's worth checking the facts.

You have a packet of information (it will be on the website soon) from reliable sources that I've spent the last month working on. Websites and numbers are included so you can check calculations and see for yourself if the sites are reliable.

I looked at the statistics for the seven counties on Florida's southeast coast. That takes us from Indian River County and St. Lucie County to the north down to Palm Beach, Broward, Dade, and Monroe counties south of us.

We are not the smallest county. Monroe County and the Florida Keys have 77,000 residents versus the 153,000 in Martin County.

We ARE the slowest growing of all seven counties. We ARE the least dense of all seven counties except Monroe County.

We look like a test case for whether big and faster is better than slow and steady.

It's no surprise that we don't have the unhappy afflictions of big city living. We don't have drive-by shootings, home invasion robberies and ten-lane expressways with bumper to bumper traffic.

We tend to believe that the bigger you are and the faster you grow, the worse the traffic gets. I checked the statistics. It's true. In terms of traffic accidents per thousand population we're a little higher than Indian River and St. Lucie County and much less than the counties south of us. In terms of injuries from traffic accidents, on a per capita basis, Martin County looks good. Only Indian River County is safer.

Look at the statistics for violent crime. Martin County is golden. No county out of the seven has a lower rate of violent crime. Not surprisingly, the rate of violent crime is almost three times as high in Dade County as it is in Martin County. Safe may sound dull to more adventurous souls, but it's a nice thing to have. Especially for the children.

Four years ago the Economic Council political action committee sent out lurid color postcards saying children would starve if Anne Scott was elected commissioner. Anne was elected. The children didn't starve.

Not surprisingly, the statistics show children are better off in slow growth Martin County.

Martin County has the LOWEST rate of child poverty of the seven counties. Martin County families have fewer severe housing problems than all of the seven counties. That statistic measures severe overcrowding and plumbing and kitchen problems.

Best of all, children under 18 in Martin County are less likely to die. The rate per 100,000 children in Martin County is 36. In Indian River County it's 57.

And the Florida Health Ranking Organization ranks Martin County third out of Florida's sixty-seven counties in overall health outcomes.

Martin County schools are rated third out of Florida's sixty-seven counties in a Sarasota Herald Tribune study.

Based on students performing at grade level in grade 3 to grade 10 FCAT scores, Martin County schools are far better than any of the seven counties in southeast Florida.

So it is simply not true that we are wallowing in misery in Martin County because of slow growth.

But what about dollars and cents?

Are we failing our residents economically and destroying business opportunities?

76% of Martin County residents own their home. That's the HIGHEST of the seven counties. Home values in Martin County are right in the middle. Three counties are higher and three counties are lower.

The median household income in Martin County is higher than it is in Dade, St. Lucie and Indian River counties. That's NOT the average income. That is the household income where half make more and half make less.

Advocates for faster, fiercer growth suggest that those statistics represent rich retirees and not the local economy. Eight years ago the Stuart Martin Chamber of Commerce paid a self-proclaimed economist to produce a report that said that the Martin County Comprehensive Plan was destroying the county's economy and making us one of the poorest counties in the country.

It claimed that the urban boundary and strict planning rules were destroying our tax base and that we needed to line our expressways with commercial development in order to survive. The statistics in that study appear to have been invented out of whole-cloth. The author said they were from private sources he couldn't divulge.

That report went on to say that Martin County was a servant-based economy with a few very rich people and a whole lot of poor people. That's not true. The Florida Health Ranking Organization provides a measure for income inequality. It is based on the ratio of the top 20% earnings vs. the bottom 20% earnings. In the seven counties, Martin County comes out right in the middle.

Let's look at real statistics.

I think you'll be surprised. A lot of people accept the notion that environmental protection and neighborhood protection will restrict economic growth.

You wouldn't guess that an area that is alleged to have a depressed economy without sufficient commercial opportunities would have the highest retail sales per capita in the whole region, would you?

Except for Monroe County, Martin County's retail sales per capita are the highest on the southeast coast.

But the critics then tell you that we need more industry and that without paying new manufacturing businesses to come here we will not be able to maintain a decent tax base. The census measures manufacturing shipments by county. Divide that by the county's population, and you get a per capita figure on manufacturing. A whole lot of people will be surprised to learn that Martin County has the highest manufacturing dollars per capita of any of the seven counties.

And our tax base?

Our tax base per capita is way higher than the biggest cities south of us. It's more than twice the per capita tax base of St. Lucie County. It is HIGHER than any of the seven counties except Monroe County.

Over and over the numbers seem to show that even if we can't have it all, we can have a whole lot of it.

I apologize for drowning you in statistics. I invite you to take home a packet and check those numbers out. I want to know if I've made mistakes. I want to know if there are more accurate sources.

Martin County is a real place where real numbers show that being a good place to live and

taking care of your environment is good for people and good for the economy.

What I want to know most of all from those who think we need to do away with the rules that keep it that way, is this:

Can they show us a county in Florida that exemplifies what positive benefits faster growth and looser rules can accomplish?

And if we go and look at that county, will we want to move there? Does it have what we care about and cherish in Martin County?

Martin County isn't perfect. There are things we can do better.

But residents here over the last forty years have accomplished something you can all be proud of.