

DELRAY BEACH INTELLIGENCE REPORT

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The Great Campaign of 2011

Another year, another set of incumbents waltzing to re-election. Not to mention a newcomer who sailed unopposed to a vacated commission seat.

While thousands rally across the globe for the freedom to vote in real elections, the citizenry of Delray year after year voluntarily disenfranchise themselves.

As a result, Mayor Nelson McDuffie, Commissioner Adam Frankel and newcomer Tom Carney were "elected" recently without opposition.

Who loses in this scenario?

One would argue the public which does not get a chance to hear from candidates or question their track record or their ideas for the future.

So Mayor McDuffie gets to talk about his "vision" for Delray, the "efficiencies" he has brought to city government, the budget wizardry he has championed and the "public-private" partnerships he has put together. But none of this has been put to scrutiny or debate.

Same for Frankel, who ran two years ago on a no new taxes pledge before raising taxes and even Carney, an experienced community volunteer gets a free seat without the public hearing his ideas.

Next year, Commissioner Angelita Gray is up, along with an open seat as Fred Fetzer is term limited.

Delray has an interesting tradition of reserving one seat for the African American community. In the past 20 years, that seat has been contested twice--in 1990 and 2006, despite a two year election cycle. Former City Commissioner Alberta McCarthy served for six years without ever appearing on a ballot. Her predecessor, David Randolph served for 10 years and was only challenged once.

While other cities have choices and campaigns, Delray's political scene is stagnant.

Even when there is an election, turnout is abysmal 5-6 percent. So in a city of 28,000 plus voters, a small percentage call all the shots. Sad, indeed when the election 12 years ago brought many more voters to the polls.

Speaking of elections...

Despite not even a rumor of an opponent for Mayor McDuffie or Commissioner Frankel they continued to raise money until the very end of the qualifying period. Some people are questioning the role of land-use attorney Michael Weiner in spearheading fundraising for both candidates when he has appeared so often in front of the Commission.

It should be interesting to see what they do with their campaign haul. They could return any unused money to donors, donate to local non-profits or use it to "thank" the voters.

Newcomer Tom Carney took a different tack to fundraising. First, he resisted formal fundraisers hosted by Weiner. Next, he raised a small amount from close friends and family, which he plans to return to them.

Speaking of poor turn-out

City Commissioners were wringing their hands over the scant turnout at the annual Town Hall meeting.

About 30 people turned out to hear presentations from the City Manager, CRA and the Planning Department.

Those who did complained about the poor audio at the Old School Square gym and the lack of substance in the presentations--some of which appeared to be updated from year's past.

Some of the commissioners expressed displeasure at the poor turnout and said they worked hard to inform residents and boost attendance. Others were OK with the attendance saying people were happy and that only angry people tend to show up at these kinds of events.

Some residents said they did not go because the city is lacking vision, energy and therefore there is no excitement for civic engagement.

Meanwhile, some senior staff worry that the Commission is really not committed to engaging the public, despite that being a strong value of former commission's.

Regardless, there were calls to redesign the town hall meeting. City Manager David Harden, who blamed the poor turnout on the State of the Union Address (which started at 9 p.m. two hours after the town hall meeting started), said he would ask police officers working in neighborhoods to inform residents.

Mayor McDuffie said he would work with a volunteer event planner to boost attendance.

Commissioner Frankle said "something must be done."

Pompey Park

What happens when a \$200,000 project balloons to \$425,000?

In the private sector, heads may roll or at the very least the project is redesigned to meet the original budget.

But recently, Parks and Recreation Director Linda Karch was dispatched to the CRA where she asked the agency for \$200k plus to build an enhanced press box, with an elevator and second floor meeting space for a Little League field at Pompey Park.

Now, some may question the need for meeting space at a facility that has thousands of square feet available steps away. But Commissioner Angelita Gray has pushed the project (some say in attempt to match Mayor Nelson McDuffie's support for a press box at Miller Field).

The City Manager said the project could be phased and paid for over time, but Gray convinced fellow commissioners to ask the CRA for the money.

What ensued was a spirited debate about design fees (it appears the city has only one architecture firm it gets bids from) and whether or not it makes sense to have a two Little Leagues--one black, one white in 2011.

Regardless, the press box is not designed for the kids and appears to be a pet project of a certain city commissioner--a costly one at that.

The CRA agreed to a \$200,000 interest free loan for three years to fund the press box, elevator and meeting space. But it appears that the loan is not sitting well with the City Manager.

So back to the commission it goes....

Stay tuned...