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Land Use Oral History Project
Patel Center for Global Solutions
University of South Florida

Interview with: Ms. Denise Layne
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WM: We always put a label on the disc by saying: This is Bill Mansfield, from the Patel Center for Global Solutions talking with Ms. Denise Layne here in the Lutz Library on June 25, 2007.

Ms. Layne we always get people to start out by having them state their name and telling us when they were born and where they were born. So let her go.

DL: My name is Denise Donna Layne. (spells) L-A-Y-N-E. I was born February 25, 1955, in Chicago, Illinois.

WM: Okay. When did you come to Lutz?

DL: I moved to Florida in '74, right out of high school. Detroit is where I ended up, for my youth. I decided there was nothing for me in Detroit. I came down here for vacation and never went back. That was in Cocoa Beach.

[I] ended up in Tampa in '76. I've been living in Lutz since December 1978, that's almost thirty years, I think.

WM: Okay. What brought you here?

DL: Vacation, and [Florida] wasn't Detroit. (laughs) Think of where I came from.

WM: Okay. What brought you to Lutz, in particular?

DL: I had gotten married in 1976, to my first husband, in Wildwood, [Florida] believe it or not. I had lived in Wildwood for a couple of years, working at Sumter Correctional Institution for a year and a half.

We got married and his roots were in Tampa, so in the summer of '76 we moved to Tampa and by the fall of '76 he was back in Wildwood. I'd kicked him out. (chuckles) I had to get on with my life.

I met my [present] husband (We've been married thirty years.) in '76 and married in '78. So, my first home, my first real marriage (the other one didn't count) all took place in '78.

WM: So your current husband, that's what brought you to Lutz?

DL: I worked for a homebuilder, actually. One of the jobs, as I was working my way through my life.

I started working for Westbury?? Homes. I was the vice-president of the custom home building company. One of the guys died. The other one, John Westfall?? is still around. He's still working in Lutz. (As a matter of fact I hadn't seen him in twenty-five years and ran into him two years ago at a project he was doing in Lutz. It was like "home-week.")

Because we owned the subdivision I lived in. We were the developers and homebuilders in that. There were only 13 little lots, out there in Lutz. I bought one of the lots and designed the home, built the home and helped everybody on my street design and interior decorate all of their homes too. [While] working for a homebuilder.

So, yes, I do have the construction and development [experience]. That's what I did thirty years ago. And sold real estate, as well.

WM: But your development was here in Lutz?

DL: (Nods head, "Yes.")

WM: What was Lutz like when you first came here?

DL: Orange trees as far as you could see. I remember the orange blossoms. For years I just looked forward to the orange blossom season. I think there are maybe two or three little orchards left in Lutz, which is very sad. Very, very sad.

The last time I can remember Lutz looking like the "real" Lutz was about twenty-five years ago. The only place like that in the state now is around Lake Wales; where you just see nothing but orange groves everywhere—the true growing stuff.

Lutz still has its semi-rural character. I dare anybody that lives out here or moves out here, I dare them to say that it's still semi-rural. I'm not saying that it's a 100 percent rural. [I] never did. But that is one thing, that as a community, for years—for decades—to maintain that character. That rural, semi-rural character. The small town feeling, the feeling of belonging to a community.

Lutz is very lucky because it has a downtown that you can point to. It's not the prettiest in the world, but we have a downtown, we have a focus. You're sitting in the center of what everybody knows to be the core of Lutz. That helps because it gave off a physical as well as a community identity. So, now you know what I've been preserving for 30 years, all my time here.

WM: Now when you say that you want to preserve the rural, or the small town feeling of Lutz, describe what that means. How would you define that?

DL: The first thing anybody will tell you—we're actually jumping ahead—because if you see how I went through this. Through community planning, through all the different land use things that we have done—um—

People say that keeping open natural green space is top priority in Lutz. Read our plan; read anything about Lutz and within the first paragraph you will see that. Open space, not cookie-cutter grid-like streets. Yes [a grid] in our downtown. That makes sense when you want higher density. But when we're truly trying to protect our natural areas we need low density.

We had to compromise on one-acre lots. That's not the optimum in the best land planning. I will be the first to admit it. But this community has developed that way over a hundred years and all we did was to continue its pattern of development.

Would I recommend one-acre lots all over the county? No! Absolutely not! But we have a hundred-year history of showing that is the direction to go in and that's where we continued. What we wanted was one house to five-acres. But that wasn't going to fly so we had to compromise on the one acre [lots].

WM: Okay. So you've been working to maintain the rural, small-town feel. The green open space, that's part of the rural sense but what about –

DL: Channeling development in the areas that we want developed, not just everything up for grabs. It's not that we're telling anybody that they can't develop their land. There is a certain quality and quantity of development that needs to be planned in different areas.

Develop your property to what it is zoned. That's what property rights are all about. It's the zoning on your property. You're allowed to use your property as zoned.

What the development community has sold to our elected officials [is] the highest and best use. We [the development community] are entitled to the higher denser commercial [use of property].

That is not the property rights law. That is not the Bert Harris Act. It is the zoning you now have on your property.

WM: The what act?

DL: Bert Harris Act. That is the [said in a sarcastic tone] *Property Rights Law!* I've been playing with that in Tallahassee for three or four years now.

WM: You've given me a sense of your understanding of rural [community]. What about your sense of community, how would you define that?

DL: Oh it's the pulling together, like we have seen with—um—our markets in the park with our governor. I mean our civic association has been instrumental for years pulling our community together in a fun fundraising event. It gets a lot of publicity. It raises thousands and thousands of dollars [and] 100 percent of it goes back into the community.

DL: So that brings people together.

We created our train depot out here instead of always being known as organization fighting development [thumps table for emphasis]. We don't fight development. Now, we work with developers in our community to help them see the vision, rather than the negative energy that always seems to go out from different groups. It seems like because they are fighting for their homesteads and their lives. We decided to start doing positive things, so the governor?? thing has been out there in front.

We decided that the community—we asked the community, “We want to bring back one of the icons that made this downtown a focal point years ago. What do you want?” We asked them, “Do you want a band shell, so we can have concerts? Do you want the old train depot back? What do you want?” Everybody wanted the train depot back.

We built it and made sure that it could be used as a stage as well. So we actually [made it] a dual-purpose thing. So that's the kind of community—you should see—if you go read [the sign on] the depot [it tells you] **we the people of Lutz** paid for that. Not the government. This was not a tax subsidized [project]. Absolutely not!

So that's how [you build a community]. You get the people engaged. You let them buy in to their community. Then when you have problems and issues with in the community ... They rallied for the positive. That's part of their whole heritage now. They helped with the protection and they helped with getting the people alive and motivated to help defend the community.

WM: Okay. [Earlier] you asked me to ask you how you got started in this. So let her go. You said it started with a knock on the door?

DL: (chuckles) It started in 1995, in the fall, I can't remember what month exactly. But I got a knock on my door asking me to sign a petition to stop the Lutz High School on Mack Smith Road. It's a two-lane road. There was no water or sewage out there and they were about to build something that was going to have 3,000 students in it. [I didn't know much back then], but just from a pure planning, land-use perspective I knew a school of

that size was not going to fit on a two lane road with absolutely no infrastructure.

So I said, “Sure I’ll sign your petition.” [And they said], “Oh, by the way Denise, we’re having a meeting of concerned citizens at my house. Come by if you want.” That’s all she wrote.

That group was Denise Lasher, Denise Layne, Steve Paulizine?? Ron Stoye??, Caroline Meaker??. We started that initiative and it wasn’t to stop [the school]. [Sure] we actually tried to stop it there—yes. But we also were working behind the scene at the school board, to find another site. We wanted the high school in the community; they just kept trying to put it on two lane roads where it wasn’t going to work.

The [politicians] back then, they just dug in. We said; “Fine, we’ll just go in for the kill then.” We actually worked and looked at nineteen sites in the community. But people don’t realize that. They look at the Civic Association as killing the Lutz High School.

We worked our butts off for over a year, trying to find another site. The politics would not listen, the politics of downtown. That’s all I’m going to say.

Six months after we started that initiative, the Lutz Civic Association was legally alive, but technically we had not had a meeting or anything in three years. So it was still a corporation and still [active] but there were really no people in it.

Caroline Meaker had been keeping it alive for the three years, so it would not go defunct. Caroline and I played hand-bells at St. Mary’s Choir together and she looked at me and said, “We’ve got to re-activate the Civic Association. I’ve been there. I’ve done that. I’ll help you get it started. But we need you out in front doing it. We’ve got to get it going and get the community rallying behind the school issue.”

[That night] four hundred people showed up for the first meeting of the Civic Association to re-activate it. That night I was nominated as president.

Of course we declined, we had to do it right. Get the board, get everything back in place. And then do it legally. But I ended up president, [in 1996, as I say] the first president after they went to sleep. Then I spent nine years as president. Now, I’m on my third year, still with the Civic Association, but now as their land-use liaison; because I just started land use and growth management non-profit. I wanted to be part of protecting my community but I didn’t want any perceived conflict on board issues. So I just got off all of the boards and stuff. Now I’m just the executive-director of the Coalition for Responsible Growth.

WM: Tell me about—um—the activities of the Lutz Civic Association, to protect and preserve Lutz.

DL: What we found was once we got past the school issue, which took two or three years, but during that time there became a place for people to go when re-zonings were

happening in the community. That had stopped, so every little neighborhood was on its own, for a while.

The very first rezoning I did—we did—was mini-warehouses, on [HWY] 41, right in our downtown, what we considered our business [district] downtown, which is next to where the McDonald's is. Okay? There was some land there and they wanted to put mini warehouses on it.

Well, we're trying to re-build a vibrant downtown and we got this gumba trying to put "dead-space" in the middle of our downtown. Mini-ware houses don't create a lot of social activity. So we were trying to dissuade him from that and [get him to] work with us on another land use.

Obviously communication wasn't what it should have been, back then. He went forward with the re-zoning [request]. We won. It killed his rezoning [request].

His name is Cliff Livingston. He now sits on my board of directors of Coalition 4 Responsible Growth. He is not an enemy, he is a friend. He has built that whole development up there, behind the McDonald's. All that in there is Cliff's. He understands, as most developers, the true ones really want a win-win situation. They want to enhance the community. They want to make money for their clients and they're willing to work with the community to create a good project.

It's a handful of very, very large, very greedy—overpowering development interests that, right now, seem to be controlling [our elected officials in the county] to the point that it is hurting us.

WM: Okay, tell me—you all came together to fight the school?

DL: We've become the watchdogs for the community, ever since we reformed ourselves. We now get public notice of everything that goes on within our borders and with a mile around our borders, believe it or not. Except for Pasco [County], they don't play the game.

We've just done that and we've gone from [being] very negative [like] "We don't like it. We don't like it get out of my backyard. Get out of Lutz. No development."

We're not "no growth." We're [for] quality [growth]. I've been part of our Lutz Community plan, developing the code, part of the Northeast Plan, the Citrus Park Plan, Ruskin's Plan, I've worked on Thonotosassa. I've sat on a lot of different [meetings] to see the different dynamics of communities. They're all different.

Every one of them, Bill, even though there are similarities in rural character, the core of each community has its own unique character. That's something that "downtown" just doesn't seem to understand.

Our entire code and comp plan, until we got community plans, was all “one-size-fits-all.” One code! Right now we still have mostly that. One code fits every little issue in the county.

Well, I’m sorry. What’s in Lutz is not the same as Ruskin, which is not the same in Town and Country, which is not for sure [the same as in] Brandon. Okay? So we have become like the watchdogs. And then we learned—

I would say 90 percent of the time, after ten years, the development community will call me on the phone [and say], “Dee we’re coming into Lutz. We have a project we want to talk to you about. We want to make sure we are seeing the same vision in the community plan, the same code that you’re [seeing]. We don’t want to fight with you guys, we want to work with you.”

And I can tell you that maybe three times in the last five years have we actually had to stand opposed entirely to a project. We’re usually there saying, “We support 99 percent of this project. There is one issue you’ve got to take care of.” And we lay out what that issue is. Most of the time it gets resolved.

Of course the public out there still sees development as running rampant, which is funny. The normal “Lutz guy” that came out here to live in the rural and get away from the hubbub of downtown, now wants to slam the door behind them.

I felt that way ten years ago. You know? You’re here, you want it, it’s pretty, it’s staying nice. You don’t want any more [development]. “Leave it alone! Leave it alone!”

It’s called progress. And we either channel the direction of the progress or we take what we’re given. And I’m not, or our association is not willing to take what we get. We are shaping the future of our community. That’s why we’ve been very instrumental to do that.

Some will say we’re “no-growth.” Fine—that’s [their] opinion. If you don’t understand who [we are] and what we’re doing and how many hours we spend [working]. At least two days a week we’re in breakfast meetings with developers [discussing issues]. (We pay for our own breakfasts.) You don’t hear about it, you don’t read about it.

Newspapers don’t pick up on the good successful things we do. That’s not good news. They want us fighting and rabid. So you only hear [about] the fighting and rabid side of Denise Layne. You don’t understand that for every hour I’m being rabid I’ve spent twenty [hours] working behind the scenes to make a better community and actually done a very positive and productive thing. So—

I’m a very big optimist. I do not believe that it is all gloom and doom. We’ve got a very bad political situation in this county right now. And we, the stupid voters, have let it happen. This is nobody’s fault but our own. We get too caught up in our lives. We do not pay attention to who and what we’re electing. We go by pure advertising and name

recognition. We're now paying **dearly** for it.

WM: We could talk about that for a long time. But we'd better stick to land use.

DL: Well the land use is now a problem with our BOCC. The developers have got a strong hold on them. We cannot—

WM: BOCC stands for?

DL: Our County Commission, Hillsborough County Commission. They have succeeded with this new board, of getting a solid block of four votes.

WM: But BOCC stands for?

DL: Board of County Commissioners.

WM: Okay. Thank you.

DL: I'm sorry. Trust me, I'll be using acronyms [so] stop me, because I'm used to talking like that.

WM: Okay. I'll try to get you to clarify these things.

DL: Hillsborough Board of County Commissioners, okay.

WM: Well let's get back to the high school thing.

DL: Okay.

WM: They wanted to put this high school on a place that wasn't suitable for it. So you all organized to oppose it and you—

DL: Oppose it and look for a new site. It was the opposition that the paper always picked up on. They weren't reporting that we were spending hours looking at sites and walking the fields with the school staff. Okay?

What ultimately ended up happening is that Denise Lasher, out of her own pocket, hired an attorney, Ted Taub and had to sue the school board to stop them from there. Politically, what happened at that point was, the school—having a pot of money, ready to go in Lutz—because of spending two years fighting with the community, trying to cram something down our throats, that did not fit. Town and Country was also second on the list to get a school. They switched the priority from Lutz to Town and Country and got their school built first.

It's taken them ten years. They were slapping us, that's exactly what happened. (Said in a sarcastic tone) "All right you can sit on your high school." They are now coming back at

us with a high school on Lutz Lake Fern [Road].

The difference between that on a two-lane road—I mean, everybody is going, “What’s the difference? You’re still letting them put a high school on a two-lane road?” (Lutz Lake Fern is two lanes.) The difference is we spent two and a half years now as a community. The Civic Association mediated between the School Board, the Turn Pike, all of the homeowners’ associations in the area, [and] the county. Two and a half years of meetings where we coordinated [the planning].

“Okay, you want the high school? The roads have to go in. The Interstate has to open. This all has to be timed (slaps the desk for emphasis) and it all better work together. It’s called concurrency.”

And we’re still working on that now. You see the turnpike, we lobbied, finally got the money for the turnpike. The county’s doing studies on the road. The school is delayed a year, but it’s going to work better to coincide with openings of things. We will now have the infrastructures out there. (speaks with emphasis) We worked together and we brought the school in.

Had the school district not dug-in, back in 95, and worked with us, like they (finally!) are working with us now, we would have had a high school on Lutz already.

WM: Do you have any idea why they dug-in and—

DL: Politics. One word: Politics.

WM: Could you explain that a little bit more?

DL: (Sighs) The political will of where the district wanted to put schools, versus where the community wanted [to locate the school]. The school district is one of the last bureaucracies.

Mary Ellen Ellia?? has taken us a long way in the right direction. A long, long way! I admire her immensely for what she is doing

But years ago it was: (Assumes an imperious snob’s tone of voice) “WE are the school board. WE are the school district. WE don’t have to play any games but what WE want to play. WE will decide where the schools go. Be damned with the county planning. It doesn’t matter what you people want!”—That was the attitude eleven years ago.

Since the Lutz High School Issue, we took a beating. The Community is getting a bum wrap for not wanting a high school. [That is] not true. But because of that issue the district had the force to start including [us]. We went to Tallahassee. We changed laws.

See, now our governor forced the school district to plan its school with the Comp. Plan, [and] with the community. We passed that law in 2005, the Growth Management Act.

So the schools now are being forced to plan, which is what we need. You can't just—you can't have the community saying "We want this area rural. We don't want any big business. We don't want Home Depot. We just want little neighborhood things—here and here."

Then you throw three thousand kids in and change the whole character of the area. See that's what—the knowledge and the recognition now that these schools have the impact that they have, is finally being acknowledged. They would not acknowledge that back then.

So, it's come a long way. I mean we took a beating doing it, but the rest of the county is benefiting from the beating we took and the laws we had to change to get us there. (Not that they are doing a great job—but we are getting better.) (chuckles)

WM: I think it is to you all's credit that you stood together and opposed—

DL: It wasn't just the Civic Association. This was a huge community event. I mean—you know how people are: they like to label. We organized it, yes. But when we had to show up to community meetings, we had to go before the district, when we had to talk to the commission—it wasn't the Lutz Civic Association, sitting there alone. There were two hundred people in the room.

(Layne's cell phone blasts out a chiming ring-tone)

WM: But what you did to oppose the school is you just showed up at the meetings and voiced your opposition and had the support of the entire community—or a large portion of the community?

DL: Oh, it was letter-writing campaigns. It was showing up for meetings. It was talking to your attorney. It was rallying groups. It was speaking to different organizations and groups and making them understand what the issues were.

This isn't about—and politically the [school] district tried to lay this out as a political issue. It's (adopts a hysterical tone of voice), "You people don't want a school in Lutz! These people are anti-school Anti-children! My God!"

(Continuing in a calm reasoned tone) We had to go out and say, "No we're not. We have kids in these schools. We have grandkids in these schools. We want the school in Lutz. But we are not going to sacrifice the entire eastern, rural section of Lutz to accommodate a school. Put it on Highway 41. Put it on one of our four-lane [roads]. Put it on Dale Mabry. We have Gaither [High School]."

People forget that when they built Gaither High School, that [it] was called Lutz's High School. We lost our high school just that politically quick. We went from losing one high school into, "We hate high schools."

So the bottom line was, it wasn't just fighting on one thing. It's e-mail activity, letter writing, meeting with the commissioners, meeting with the district, meeting with the School Board. Attorneys are involved. Meetings with real estate people, looking at sites [for the school]. Going back to the school board telling them, "Your staff won't listen to us. We're trying to do [all of this] and they just keep throwing it off to the side!"

(sighs)

WM: Sounds like it was a frustrating experience, but ultimately a successful one.

DL: Yes!

WM: So—but —you—um mentioned the mini-warehouses, is that something that followed closely on the school issue?

DL: It had nothing to do with it, but it happened like four months after the school issue. Once the civic association kicked back into life—(with feeling), "Here come the rezonings honey!" They just started, one after another.

And at first, all we were doing [was fighting.]—Because we were new, we're waking up, we're learning everything was a fight—a fight—a fight. Anybody who knows me knows I do not like that kind of negative energy. I have a lot of energy. I've got a lot of things I will do. I do not want it negative. I want it positive.

So I just said, "I don't know about you guys, but I'm going to start sitting down with these developers before they file these things. If they will let us talk to them before they file we can avoid all kinds of negative headaches."

It took a couple [or] three years, but we got there. I mean if you're known as a group that is willing to talk—maybe not always agree, but not be ugly. I've heard a lot of other communities have problems with developers making promises and then breaking them—they've never done that to me. There is not one [developer] that I've worked with that [has lied to me]. There are a couple of them that have lied to my face. I don't work with them any more. Why I am I going to waste time getting a bunch of promises I know will not be kept? So we just do what we got to do.

But, seriously 90 percent is very positive and we can work with them. And they do call.

WM: Okay. So—I ask you this question because I'm trying to get a better understanding of the whole process. But the successful organization to protect Lutz from this unplanned school—um—energized the community to continue to protect Lutz from unplanned, unwarranted development?

DL: It's not so much unplanned, it's just that we know who and what we are. When you ask, "What is that character?" It's something that we all can tell you we have. We can't

always verbalize it well. But we know we like the green space. We know we love to see the eagles and the ospreys flying. We have deer in our back yard. We don't want to lose that.

So, over the years—we were the first community plan. We were the first rural community plan in the state; Lutz and Keystone, at the same time.

I'm proud of that. Now is it great? It's way better than just the comp plan. Which is "one size fits all." It helps guide the development community, on our character and vision. If you don't have a copy of our Lutz Community plan I can tell you where to go online to look for it. Actually it's under the planning commission Web site. Go to [Hillsboroughcounty.com] and then you'll see Lutz in there. When you go—you will read [and see] that these people are clearly telling [us] they want the open space. They want the nature. They want the eco systems kept intact. They don't want their wetlands trashed.

That brings me to my second part of my growth management. The environment is very much part of growth management. And when you have sixty-eight lakes in Lutz. And all the wetland systems and the creek systems. And we're part of what flows into Hillsborough River. What I had to do is take a "crash course" on the environment, that's what I had to do—in a very short of time. Over the years I keep learning and knowing more and more and more. But it is an integral part of our development now. The one thing we can't get anybody to really do is to say, "We know where we want to protect our lands." Off-limits. They will not put a line around those lands and say, "You cannot develop inside [that line]." They won't do it, state or local.

We all know where they are, but they will not politically come out and say, "Off-limits." So we have to keep fighting their battles, because we do not have a political will downtown to do very simple things that would make it so clear, we wouldn't have these battles.

I do believe government, as a whole really enjoys keeping the pot riled, because they then get to make the decisions. And they get to spin the decisions, how they choose. That's your politics.

WM: Okay.

DL: Back to them again, uh? (laughs)

WM: Tell me about the mini-warehouse issue. You mentioned that this guy wanted to put the mini-warehouses downtown.

DL: In downtown.

WM: That would essentially create a dead-zone.

DL: A dead activity zone, yeah.

WM: So walk me through the process of; he comes up with the proposal and you all—

DL: No we came up with it. He had an attorney. Her name is Judy James. She came in there slapped it down, refused to meet with us and never told him that we wanted to meet with him. We went to the re-zoning.

There were no discussions. There was nothing. We had to fight it flat out [and] kill it. Because his attorney wouldn't put us together. After he got his butt kicked, Cliff [Livingston] looked at me and says, "Why didn't we sit down and talk about this?"

I said, "We tried. We asked your attorney. She didn't tell you? What do you think about those ethics?"

Anyway, that's water over the dam. But I'm still dealing with old Judy James on some issues. I mean, she's the homebuilders' corporate attorney, if that tells you anything. Judy James is the homebuilder's attorney, for the organization. And she happened to be Cliff's attorney at that time.

And listen, she's done some beautiful projects. She's a bulldog for the development community. But—she didn't do her client justice, in my opinion. And ever since then Cliff realized, "I can talk to these people." So he looked at us, afterwards and goes, "If you don't want mini-warehouses, what do you want? Will you have lunch with me? Can we talk about the uses that will fit?"

You see the product.

WM: So he had this land that he wanted to develop and you all suggested some other—

DL: Listen, our community plan will let you do this and this and this. (Actually, back then we didn't have the community plan, but we knew it was coming. We knew the community plans were going to start. We told him: "I can tell you this is part of our downtown we know we're going to want to build it as an activity center. Not an un-activity center.

The problem that Cliff had was that the property he has is crossed by a railroad. As soon as you cross railroad tracks, the property isn't considered as desirable for a lot of tenants because of safety issues. They got to cross railroad tracks—just whatever.

So he decided on a lot of little office buildings. And every one of those people [bought] their little building and he keeps it up. He's about to add more into it.

WM: So it worked out—

DL: Something that the community needed. Something for him. Nobody complained

about those [offices]. Well—the people who don't want any growth [complained]. Anytime they see development, they don't want it. But he's done a very nice job, a quality job. And he's got quality tenants in there too, which is key.

I mean you can build a quality thing and put a bunch of trashy tenants in there and that's not going to help your community.

WM: Right.

DL: He filled needs for the community.

And we're still on that. We want restaurants. We cannot get restaurants downtown very easily, because of the marketing [studies]. You look at a restaurant [and they require] "X" number of rooftops in a three-mile radius.

Well, you're in rural downtown Lutz. We [have] one house to the acre. You're never going to hit the numbers, ever. What they don't take into consideration is a six-lane highway running through the community that brings an **enormous** amount of traffic. They don't even look at that.

Beef O'Brady's has been there now for five years. [They're] very successful. We need restaurants. I put the word out.

Two years ago (three years ago?) Lutz Civic Association hosted a meeting. We brought the community and the development community together in one big meeting and said, "Okay developers, get your pad and pencil out. Here's what the community wants you to develop. Here's what we want! Here's what we need!"

And, God bless them, they went out for a year and a half and tried. But because of the marketing stuff I was talking about, you can't get Applebee's. They play pure market numbers. They don't play any other game. It's a very tight game.

We're still working on it. We're not going to give up. We'll have some more restaurants here sooner or later.

WM: Tell me about the development community. Who are they?

DL: Anyone from land-use attorneys to planners to land owners to homebuilders. I mean it's the whole [group]; anybody having to do with development.

I know a lot of people right now are looking at all development industry as "black hats" [bad guys]. I've never seen that and I don't agree with that. They're not all black hats. I've got some beautiful "hats" [developers] sitting on my board.

Are there some black hats out there? Oh yeah! They're very powerful. [They have] a lot of money. They're the big guys and they're the ones who get to the elected officials.

Look at the campaign contributions. Look at what's going on.

But for the most part, they just have clients that want to develop their property. They know they've got to play by the rules. They know they've got to play and they have found, in certain communities they can come where you can talk to [the community] and Lutz is one of them. And if we hate it [the plan for development] and tell you "No!" enter at your own risk buddy!

You already know where we are coming from. Most of the time it's; "Well you can't do this or that or this. Try [something else.]" It either works or it doesn't. If it doesn't work for them, financially, they go away. If it does work for them, we have success. So what we're doing, piece by piece, is building a quality community.

Look at Dale Mabry from County Line Road to Van Dyke Road. Then look at it from Van Dyke south.

WM: Since we can't look at it with the tape recorder why don't you describe it?

DL: What you will see is green open space, very light land uses along Dale Mabry and Lutz. Because we have a Dale Mabry Corridor Plan, on top of our Lutz Community Plan. We said on Dale Mabry, you have three intersections that [we] need [to have] community services in. That's where you put them. Pure and simple, plain and simple—that's where they go. And for twenty-five years, that's where'd they go.

We've built a public shopping center that was in our commercial node. Have other things been developed out of those three nodes? Yes. Swimming pool instruction classes, [plant] nurseries, very low [impact] offices, a bank. Low key, low impact [structures], which can be done, according to the plan. But what you see along that first five miles [south from there] turns to pure concrete chaos, advertising signs nightmare.

So has our plan worked? Yeah, to a point. It's got problems. We're actually reviewing that Dale Mabry Corridor Plan again, updating it after twenty-five years.

What works? What isn't working? Do we need more nodes? Do we need to increase the nodes? Are we fine? We're discussing that now. It's constantly in progress. The community is constantly evolving. If you don't have people that at least understand—

The process is so complicated Bill. The normal guy out there does not have the time to dedicate [what it takes to] understand this complicated process. It takes a few community leaders to learn, to share, to guide, to help.

And over the years, I guess that's where I found my place as I've learned the system. I learned after two years I can't fight what's down here locally because it's up there in Tallahassee. They're screwing up my life!

Okay, there I went. Back in '98, I think, was the first time I lobbied for free in

Tallahassee for the Sierra Club. I went back in '99. I got pro-active and wrote a water bill connecting water planning to land-use planning. Does that sound familiar? It bombed big time that year. Bombed! I can't [believe it]. Victor Crist sponsored it for me in the Senate. Johnny Bird??, believe it or not, sponsored it in the House. It died. The next year another legislator picked it up and kept with it. In 2005 we finally got a comprehensive water planning [bill]. If the water ain't there the development doesn't happen.

Now it doesn't say that exactly, then there are caveats. But we finally got there. So I learned that, if we got it fixed down here they're going by state law, let's change the state law. So now I'm playing this local-state thing every year—local-state, local-state. That's why I'm so involved with the CPC issue. I was up there killing that wetlands amendment in Tallahassee this last session because our board of EPC would not allow their staff to defend themselves.

So—it's just—nothing is a coincidence in government. I'll tell you right now there is no such thing. I don't care what you think. It is all there. It's planned. It happens. There is no coincidence. So I started to become part of the planning [process] and the positive solution versus reacting all the time.

That's the message I'm trying to get on land use to people is that we're all too busy. I mean I am absolutely not the norm. I'm not your normal citizen, okay? I am in some ways, but I've spent twelve years, with no pay, giving to my community. I mean hours—forty hours a week at some point. I understand the system. I have a passion for the system.

I've learned how to put together a non-profit [that] gives me a little bit of money. But it gets my knowledge out there. If people would understand when you wait for the bulldozers to come in, if you wait for the re-zoning and you're not proactive in how you want to see your community and defend what you save. It's not good enough to just put words on paper.

I've spent more time defending our community plan, the Lutz Community Plan, since it's been in effect than fighting re-zonings. I have to now defend our plan to our government because they want to interpret it differently than we intended. And being someone who sat on the steering committee, as others in this community have, we're the defenders of the plan. I understood fully, when I sat on that steering committee, it wasn't just to put a vision together and walk away. You're committed and I need to be committed. (laughs at her own pun)

I'm just kidding. I needed to lighten up.

WM: No that's fine. It just hurts when I laugh.

DL: Oh, I'm sorry.

WM: No, that's okay.

DL: I'm sorry. You wanted funny. (laughs)

WM: No, I was going to ask how can you explain your passion for this. What drives you? What motivates you to take this on?

DL: When I first started it was my responsibility. I took it very seriously as president of the association, okay? I educated [myself] and for nine years it was my duty. When I started—I'm one of those [people] that you never just tell me [something] and I accept it and walk blindly down the road with it. No! All long the way I was questioning. Why? Why? Why? How? Why? And then I said, "Well where do I fix it? [If] you can't answer the question, who answers the question? How do we fix it? How do we make this better? How do we do this?"

One thing led to another. I've been in the legal world for thirty years. I love the legal world because it is a challenge. The law is constantly changing. Hello? Don't we all know that, unfortunately? Because of that, every case is unique. I have fine-tuned what I do in my legal profession as a paralegal to trial preparation and trial attendance.

I'm a litigation paralegal. I will go in right toward a trial; help an attorney organize a system in the trial. Help write the briefs, the laws—I mean the whole thing. I've been doing it for thirty years. That's challenging. Every case is different. I love it. It's just like a hands-on, really making a difference.

I took that knowledge and when I got into land use, the first year [it] didn't dawn on me that they were directly connected to each other. Well we're all about process. We're about comp-plans, which is a law. We're about land development code, which is a law. We're about the statutes, definitely law. Ordinances, all law. Everything that governs our land use is legal based. It really didn't take a year, but as soon as I figured that out I realized—whoa! Okay, I know how to play legal games. I know how to play with laws and process. So I started leaning more and more and more and asking more questions. As I was being shoved aside, just keep on. You just keep on and keep on and I forced myself to tables I was not invited to. And after awhile I made friends and [was] accepted.

So it takes a lot of tenacity. And now I guess the passion is I see solutions all over the place. They're right in front of us my friend.

The political will of elected officials right now does not want to see it and it is frustrating. So I'm not giving up until we see the light go [on]. And it's coming.

We hit a very bad period where the pendulum swung [in] the wrong direction. It hit its wall a year and a half ago. It's now swinging back towards the middle, back to where most people sit, which is moderation.

And I'm not talking democrat or republican I'm talking just basic people.

WM: Common sense?

DL: That's what it is, just basic common every day sense.

WM: But you were a paralegal?

DL: Oh, yes, that helped me. Everything is a legal process. Everything is legal, so it helped me tune right into that.

WM: Okay.

DL: Of course my thirty-year connections with lawyers didn't hurt. When we have a problem with a land use issue [we can ask], "Hey we need to sue these guys is somebody going to help me here?" So that helped.

And then when I got to Tallahassee my people skills and my leadership skills really developed during my presidency of the civic association. I was learning that I had to stand in front of boards all the time. I had to stand in front of people and talk. I was on camera. I don't even think about it any more, but back then it was like (mimes extreme nervousness). I could hardly speak I was so nervous. I would just stumble all over the place.

My speaking skills, my comfort level [and] my knowledge base [have greatly improved]. Now I stand in Tallahassee in front of Senate and House committees. I give them information. They listen, because after nine years I'm not giving them a line of scare stories. I give them facts [that] they can verify.

I give them talking points and information. In short, Bill, I've learned to play the game.

And you know what? There are very few what I call "white hat" lobbyists [good guys] that know how to play the game. And I am doing everything I can to share that knowledge down here, with other people, with other civic associations. [I tell them] "It's not hopeless. Work with me in Tallahassee.

We had an enormous e-mail thing going up in Tallahassee this year. My group went to their groups that went to their groups. It scared the heck out of those legislators. It was great. But it's the game they play up there. You got to learn the game.

If you don't have money—what we have is the community. Lutz, Hillsborough County, we have people. We don't have money, we have people. We have voters. We have to wake up the voters and that's what I'm doing now.

We're waking up the voters to see the decisions you're making. By not paying attention to who you're electing is killing this county right now and the city and the state.

But it's changing. It's changing,

WM: That brings me to a question. You've talked about working with the community to control growth.

DL: Manage. I don't want to say control. Direct it.

WM: Okay, well direct it. Okay. Who are your allies in the community? Who are the kind of people that make the effort to come out and attend meetings, write letters ...

DL: Civic groups, civic organizations.

WM: But how would you describe those people?

DL: Like me, the same thing. They wake up one day. [There's] a knock on the door. "Wake up!" "Oh my God! Look at what we've got! I did not realize it was this bad!"

Something hit them in their back yard. We all, we **all** start as NIMBYs [Not In My Back Yard] in the citizen world. Every one of us start out as Not-In-My-Back-Yard. Every one. I'm there too. I'm not going to say I wasn't.

Of course, I signed that petition. I don't want that damned school in my back yard. But it wasn't that I didn't want it in my back yard for personal reasons. It was because we were going to spend millions and screw up the character of an entire area, over a school.

Schools are supposed part of the community, not destroy a community. They were doing that. Again, things have changed.

WM: Well you say—

DL: And these people are everyday citizens. And what I've done over the years is, as I see a new one show up at a rezoning [hearing], I'm at the same rezoning [hearing] that they're sitting at. [I] get their name and get their number. We start connecting. We keep connecting. We're keeping connecting and connecting and connecting. So [I've put together] ten years of connections.

WM; I'm trying to get a sense of the kind of person who is there. Would you call them working people—um—managerial people?

DL: Yes. They're everything. They're from lawyers to housewives to single business people to—they're everybody and anybody.

They start out as NIMBYs. They see what the process is. They get incensed. It's what they see that angers them to learn more and try to fix it. And when they realize how complicated it is—it sucks you in like a vacuum. I mean truly, civic activism is a huge machine.

There are times I sit here and think, “I just wish I was back fifteen years ago in the abyss of oblivion.” It’s so easy to live your life just worrying about your family—which I still do. But I know too much now. I can’t pick up a newspaper anymore without [getting angry] and throwing it across the room. (laughs).

I know how to fix it and I see the greed, the stupidity—the—nonpublic—I’ve just watched so much that’s around here go. The public interest is being totally lost. And the public isn’t engaging in it yet. You’re starting to see it with the tax with the tax issue. That is a good example.

Let me tell you something, don’t you think for a second that it was all Tallahassee. They’re trying to blame Tallahassee. These “little darlings” down here took that extra glut of money and spent it like drunken sailors. Absolutely they did! When they should have been pulling in the reins and putting it in a pot for rainy days. We wouldn’t be doing these budget cuts now if they hadn’t grabbed every dime they could get their hands on and spent it as fast as they could.

That’s what they’ve been doing. Shame on them!

So now what they are doing, politically is saying “shame on us.” And hitting us, the public, and all of the things that we hold dear to this community. Our planning, our environment. You’re watching our growth controls and our land use stuff going straight down the toilet right now. Thanks to this County Commission we have in power. They are consistently now trying to get rid of the EPC, the Environmental Protection Commission, trying to get rid of the planning commission. Trying [to get rid of] anything that is putting the littlest speed bump in the road for a permit or development.

Now on the side of the permitting part of this, from a pure business perspective, it’s insane to ask any developer to go to four places to get wetlands looked at. We wouldn’t do that in a normal business world. We would not ask you to go four separate organizations to look at the same thing in different ways. (thumps table for emphasis)

I don’t disagree with the development community for wanting to streamline that. Absolutely, it makes good business sense. But it needs to come down to the local level. That’s where we can control best. That’s where we have the most input. That’s where the citizens have the most power, making sure our land use stays as local as possible. When we allow the state to take over and to oversee and manage, you lose control of your community.

So these community planes are very important and that, we as citizens take back our land use in Hillsborough County. We have to. Our future is at stake, not just in Lutz, but in this whole county.

Oh! Thonotosassa, their comp plan, talk about bad land use. Jim Norman [wants to put] little forty million dollar stadium out there in the middle of nowhere. [It’s] totally against

the comp plan! That comp plan say there will not be any significant growth out there for twenty years! It is to remain two lane rural agricultural. He's going to put a stadium, hotel and restaurant [out there].

That is not what our law says you can do, Mr. Commissioner. So watch, he's going to try and change the law.

You see what's going on? We've got absolute personal agendas going on now. (sighs)

WM: So these people are just trying to increase their own wealth?

DL: And for a handful of people, who give their campaigns that are helping them move into higher office.

We've created a nightmare with term limits. There is no historical knowledge in Tallahassee anymore. It's all in the staff. There is no historical knowledge in the County Commission.

Jim Norman is our historical knowledge base, for God's sake! That's scary! He could care less. He's done [positive] things in the past for our environment, but he darn sure isn't acting friendly with it now. So when you've got new people and they don't know and they don't understand you're losing all of that which kept you constant over the years, which kept your protections in place. These new guys don't have a clue what half of this stuff is. They are following bad leadership.

That's exactly how I'm going to say it, very bad leadership.

So our land planning is under attack right now. Our whole land use [system is under attack], every part of it, from environment, to planning to implementation to—just oversight.

WM: I've asked about your allies, tell me about your adversaries.

DL: Right now the biggest one seems to be our government, the bulk of our elected officials.

I can tell you that [the] staff are our allies. Staff in the county and the city, they really want to do the right thing. [With] the politics and the power above them, they really can't. Their hands are getting tied. It's very frustrating. If you look at the amount of turnover at planning and growth management in the last five years, it's amazing! It's an amazing thing. And none of them will blow the whistle. None of them will say, "The commissioner is leaning on the bosses and we said "this" and the manager said "No" because the commissioner got to him.

We've crossed our lines of government in this county. [According to our charter, just like our Constitution] we're supposed to have three levels of checks and balances of power.

Our executive, legislative and judicial branch.

In our charter, because nobody is paying attention and we keep voting as, “Oh that sounds good citizens.” We have put our administrator directly under the power of our County Commission. It says in the charter, she is separate. But our commission hires and fires her. So how separate do you think she is going to be?

Our county attorney, directly under the control of our commission. Now how independent and objective is she going to be for the good of the populace, when her paycheck and her job depends upon the County Commission?

We have an internal auditor, [who] answers only to the BOCC [Board of County Commissioners]. So we’ve now got a built-in ex-hatchet job person to the whim of the county commissioners. And people wonder why everything is falling apart?

We’re not paying attention. We only have two of the three balances of power in this county right now. It’s the County Commission and our courts.

That’s why you saw the county mayor initiative happen. We need that third part of our government back to balance. We don’t have it and until we get that balance, land use taxes—name the issue—it’s all going to be personal gain, private agenda, money organized. It’s just that simple.

I’m not going to say that all, 100 percent of the commissioners [are corrupt, just] the majority.

We have a couple of good ones and that’s just about it. (laughs)

WM: Would you want to comment on the good ones? I don’t want you to go on record saying anything want [to say]. But I was thinking—

DL: Well all I can tell you is what I see and I see Rose Ferlita and Mark Sharpe fighting to the death to try and do what is right and what common sense dictates. They can’t—they are two against five. There is a block of four votes now, all the time.

You can’t get past that block. It’s a very bad block. It’s not in the public interest. It’s a private interest block.

At one point I was calling them the “Jock Block.” But it has expanded beyond the Jock Block.

WM: The Jock Block?

DL: Think of the three athlete commissioners. The three that have got athletics involved, some kind of sports. That’s all I’m going to say. (laughs)

You can figure it out, if you think about it and see who they are.

WM: But you were telling me that you ran for office growth issues. So tell me about that.

DL: [In] 2002 I ran in District 2, which is just a small district (small district, there's no such thing in Hillsborough County), but it was basically the northern part of Hillsborough County. I lost to Ken Hagen.

WM: And you were running for?

DL: County Commission.

WM: Okay.

DL: I lost to Ken Hagen. His machine was in place. His daddy's a realtor and he got US Homes and everybody in everybody's family. [Somebody like me that doesn't have a lot of money] I just could not compete. I didn't win. I was just determined. That's fine. I'm going to get my growth platform out. I'm just going to live it. I'm just going to keep pushing it from the way I can do it.

I was asked again to run in 2004, this time county wide; which I did. I ran against Mark Sharpe. Mark beat me by 30,000 votes. Joe Redner was in that race as an independent, or no party, I think he was no party back then. And he took 40,000 votes. [You] do the math. Joe didn't steal the Republican vote, Joe stole the Democrat vote.

Mark Sharpe and I have become—I won't say great friends, because we're not great friends but we talk to each other. He listens to my perspective.

And you know what? I've told him, that's all I'm asking out of any commissioner. Any of them! Just listen. You don't always have to agree but listen to what we have to say. Weigh it. Don't go to any meeting with your mind already made up. The public hearings are there for you to listen to the public and weigh your vote, before you go in. Just do it.

I can tell you, Mark has done that. So far I've seen Rose do it. I can't say the other five have. So I told Mark, "You be a good commissioner and I'm not going to run against you." And I've kept my word.

This last election he was up for re-election. He called me, "Denise?" [I replied] "I'm not running against you Mark. You're doing a good job. You're getting a little stronger out there, but you're doing fine. Keep going on the right [track]. Protect the public. Protect the public." And that's what he is doing.

And that's what every commissioner should be doing, is protecting the public interest. And as a board, they're not doing that right now. As a collective board our County Commission is not protecting the public's interests.

They are weakening our land use laws. They are weakening—they tore out the livable community—a whole element. Here we are at the state level, the County Commission.

The County Commission has instructed, years ago, we need to clarify in our comp plan. We need to really let the development community see what it is communities want. So let's put it together where the big picture shows up, okay?

The planning commission spends three years, gets 3,000 peoples' input and we put together what's called "the livable community element" of the comprehensive plan. We pulled out the sidewalks stuff, out of that part of the plan. We pulled out the road part. SO it's—everything is one place in the comp plan to show you how to create quality of life communities.

Developers didn't want anything to do with that. (mocking an irate developer) "Oh my God! You're going to make me put sidewalks in? Oh! This is going to cost a lot of money. Oh my God! Oh my God!" (gasps)

[There was] no public hearing! In a workshop the Board of County Commissioners stripped it out with no public comment. And that's it. It's gone.

They're shopping the comp plan around and we can't put the element back in, 'cause the Commission said they don't want it. But the public [wasn't] engaged. They didn't let us have a public hearing on it.

So, again, the land use stuff, right here in Hillsborough County, our whole quality of life is under attack. It's under political attack by personal self-interest; Commissioners sitting on that board. Ten years ago I would have pointed the City Council of Tampa and said (in a scolding voice): "Bad! Bad! Bad! Look at what these Bad bad guys [did]!"

They are wonderful compared to this bunch. I mean the City Council is finally doing public [service]. I mean, getting a grip and doing the right thing, to get to the solutions we need. Nobody is right and nobody is wrong, but you've got to start engaging all of us and talking this stuff out.

That's why, when I lost the election in 2004, I had a lot of people say, "Denise, you just know this growth management stuff. You get it and know the process. You've got answers. Please don't stop."

All right, I'm in Tallahassee. I'm watching all the developers on this side of the committee room. All the environmentalists and people on this of the room. [They] don't talk to each other. Do not—**do not** talk to each other, in Tallahassee.

You know what? I decided I'm going to put together a group that's got developers on it , environmentalists, community leaders and business leaders.

I set up a virtual organization called "Coalition For Responsible Growth." You can look on the Website. (I don't know if I gave it to you. www.c4rg.com).

We reply all. For example, on Friday I sent and e-mail to my board and I said, "Do you

want Coalition for Responsible Growth to get involved with this Environmental Protection Commission? Them getting rid of the wetlands division?”

I knew I had developers on there. They'd all been quiet about this, except for a hand-full. They're all disappearing on this issue. So I threw it out there and said “Developers, I especially want to hear from you.” They've all said, “Go for it.”

And that's what I'm doing. I'm going for it.

But what we do is haggle out the stuff. When I'm in Tallahassee I'm hearing the developers, “This, this and this,” on an issue. I'm hearing the environmentalist saying, “This, this and this.”

I'm bringing this stuff back to my board and I'm saying, “Discuss this. Tell me, how do we bring some kind of solution forward? How do we offer some kind of something, other than grid-lock?” That's what I'm seeing up in Tallahassee. And that's what we've been doing. If you look at the papers we have written, they are very common sense, matter of fact, not aggressive activist in-your-face-kind of activism. [We're] solution oriented.

So I bought all of the warring factions together to talk about the warring issues that we're dealing with in the real world. Trying to help get some solutions and that's where we are today.

WM: Let me ask a little bit about your campaign. You said you ran on responsible growth issues?

DL: No, I mean growth management, control—I mean just understanding the growth issues and knowing some of the things we need to do to start moving forward.

And we have not moved forward in Hillsborough County in over ten years.

WM: Tell what were some of the things that you felt they needed to do.

DL: Transportation! They've been piddling around with [that] for ten years. They've ignored transportation. They stopped the Committee of '99 recommendations. They stopped two referendums [that were] trying to ask taxpayers what they want.

They won't even let any of these issues get to the taxpayer. Ten years they have stalled out the transportation issue. We're now paying dearly for it. We have got failed roads everywhere. And it's coming back to bite the development community in the butt, right now. Because we now have very strong concurrency laws that say, “You will not pull another permit on a failed road. You cannot do it!”

We've got [more than] 75 failed roads in this county. Developers can't pull permits on those roads. We're talking roads, like Highway 60, Highway 301, Kennedy, Dale Mabry. They're failed roads.

WM: When you say failed roads, you mean roads that can't handle their traffic?

DL: [Roads that] can't handle any more capacity. Roads that are beyond—way beyond what they are capable of handling. When we did the growth management law in 2005, we put seven amendments on that as the Coalition for Responsible Growth. It was perfectly clear. If [the road] is failed, no permit.

Right now, what we have in Hillsborough County, is a moratorium on 75 roads. How they're getting around it is the County Commission is saying, "Throw millions in to the road system. You pay for it and we'll let you have your development."

That's one way of doing it. They should have been doing that all along. It's called impact fees. So now what they are doing is getting blackmailed by the board. "If you want your development you're going to put \$22 million into the road and the improvements and [everything] to get your development."

You know it would be a lot easier not to blackmail the development and say, "You will pay 'X' amount of dollars because the real cost of that house going in is 'X' amount." Ant they know what that cost is.

Bill, they know what the costs are. They refuse to put it out there. They refuse to listen. They don't want it out there because then they are going to have to react to it. Do you know two years ago Kathy Castor, when she was sitting on the County Commission, asked the planning commission, "We've got a comp plan that shows densities and supposedly a vision for 20 years. Build it out. I want to see what this county looks like if we actually took that comp plan and built it out.

Bob Hunter had it ready a year ago. Jim Norman has refused to allow it in front of the Board of County Commissioners for over a year now; absolutely refused to allow it on the agenda. 'Cause what you're going to see is there is a [deficit of] six thousand dollars per house, on transportation alone. We need to increase the transportation impact fees.

The real cost of a house is in the twenty thousands versus the ten thousand we're charging them. So every time the developer [doesn't] make that growth pay for itself, you and I are paying for it in our taxes. That's what happened now.

The inequity of the cost of new growth coming in, and them paying their fair share (nobody is asking them to pay more). They've now created the inequity where we have to subsidize all the new growth. (Thumps table for emphasis.) We have now, as tax payers, subsidized all of the new growth. Because we don't have elected officials that will make them pay impact fees.

I don't know if blackmail is the right word, that's [calling it] illegal, but I mean, the basically put them on the spot at re-zonings. I see them.

“You need to pay for this intersection. New lights, new sidewalks, add a lane. Do this. Do that. Do, do, do, do, do, do.” Ten million dollars later [it’s], “Okay, now you can have your subdivision.” That’s the wrong way to go about this.

Yes, they should be paying their fair share. But what they’re being forced to do now, is not only pay their fair share, but they’re paying for all the past bad decisions. Having to fix problems that were not fixed to begin with.

So now we have this inequity in “What is the fair share for the development community?” They created the problem, yet this particular landowner, right here, didn’t. He just happens to have a representative that’s part of the bigger problem. It’s a mess.

We have created a taxed subsidized mess in growth in this state.

WM: The tax subsidies are subsidizing the developers?

DL: It’s subsidizing the development, okay?

And when the developers aren’t paying the fees and the shares to go in, what does that mean? It means it adds to their profit.

My friend, when I found out that developers were making 40 percent profit—**40 percent profit!** I went ballistic. I don’t want to hear [that] the numbers don’t work.

The numbers don’t work Mr. Developer because it’s your profit they’re cutting into. They work. Everybody else gets an 8-10 percent profit margin. You get below forty [percent] and you scream the economics don’t work. That’s truly what’s been going on. It’s the greed I’m talking about.

It’s not all of them, okay? It is a handful, a big handful.

WM: It’s enough of them.

DL: It’s enough of them so that they make the biggest impact. Unfortunately it’s the big projects.

WM: Okay. Well, tell me about the Committee for Responsible Growth.

DL: Coalition.

WM: Okay, the coalition.

DL: I know, we almost called ourselves a committee.

What about it?

WM: Tell me how it got started. You talked earlier about linking up environmentalists and development people, but tell me about that, because it sounds like an interesting proposition. You've talked around it, but not addressed it directly.

DL: Uhm. We want—the bottom line is—you should see my board. When I say developers, the “for” stands for a lot of things. But I have got extremely conservative Republicans sitting on my board and I've got your “tree-hugging, tie themselves to a bulldozer” liberals sitting there too.

We don't meet very often, okay? Not face to face.

WM: [Chuckles]

DL: I know, don't laugh. You can imagine, there is no way I want to handle that.

DL: Collectively, [they're] very smart people. I picked them because they not only represent those four, they also come from Plant City—all the jurisdictions in Hillsborough County. You've got people from “south” county, Thonotosassa, Town and Country, Keystone, City of Tampa, Ruskin, Wimauma, They are coming from all different perspectives. [They come] from different neighborhood perspectives, community perspectives and business perspectives. They are a micro cosmism of what is truly going in front of elected bodies, whether it is at the state level or the local level.

So what I found is; since we can't get people up in Tallahassee to talk to one another and if you look down here [you'll see] that the developers and the Sierra Club ain't exactly kissing buddies right now.

The hope is to hash this out through virtual conversations on e-mail and come up with something everybody can live with. And believe it or not—Oh Lord to be a fly on the wall at some of these conversations—(Mocking outraged board members) “This nasty developers—Well these stupid ass activists!” Blah-Blah-Blah.

They don't insult each other directly but they do get into it every once and a while. Ultimately they well say, “Okay, we want you to do this Denise. Here's the position we want you to take.” And it sounds very responsible, it's not crazy, it's doable.

It's all suggestions on how to go forward. I personally think we were very successful with the school impact fee issue that came up last year. We got right out in front on that issue. Go look at the paper I wrote on the suggestions on how to do the school impact fee, the various things to do. Then go look at what they did. [It's] almost verbatim. Almost verbatim.

So they are listening. People out there are listening.

WM: Okay. The future historian who accesses this interview, where can they find the paper you wrote?

DL: It's on my website. I keep all papers, they just go into the little archive. You just go in and click on anything I've ever put out there in public. It's on the Web site, www.c4rg.com

WM: Okay. And can you site other examples of where you've brought two disparate groups together?

DL: Oh, in Tallahassee all of the time.

WM: Okay.

DL: All the time. I mean, we are on wetland issues, environmental issues, growth management issues. For example, not this session but the session before, a bill trying to create statewide impact fees. Not all counties have impact fees, it's on a county by county basis. They wanted a standard, across the board state impact fee.

My paper originally said we would support something so you can go from one county to the other and know what you're going to pay. There is a formula there and you're not playing with each political body. But then we started looking at it and realized it wasn't going to work this way.

What's going to happen is if it is a state mandated fee, the state is going to get the money. Now we've got [to] fight every jurisdiction to get their percentage of money from the state. You don't want to go there either.

I went to the developers. There are a lot of times I'll be up in Tallahassee and I'll be listening to the development lobbyist up there, saying one thing. I'll come down here and call two or three of the developers on my board and say, "I need to know what the industry down here thinks. I need to know what you're doing and why you're doing it. And they will tell me. A lot of times I don't share it with the whole big, big group like that because they are giving me industry secrets. But it helps me understand what the bigger issues [are].

It's not that they're giving secrets, they're just helping me understand where the mentality of the industry is, so I know how to deal with them in Tallahassee. 'Cause it is the same. It is all connected. And we've worked very well on issues like that. They've helped guide me. "No we don't want you to do this."

Actually, on the statewide impact fee, everybody on my board agreed, kill it. "No that is not in the best interest of anybody. Kill it." I killed it.

I didn't do it alone. That was our position and we were just one of many that helped kill it.

But that is the kind of stuff we do. We get a consensus. I might [ask] them, “Do you want me to go out in front on an issue and get on the media and just ‘rah, rah, rah,’ on an issue? And they’ll go, “Well we liked the issue and we want you in there, but why don’t you tone it [down].” They’ll get to where they all can agree.

And believe it or not, through all of the e-mails and all the discussions, somehow, every time, we’ve managed to find a common ground, where we can move forward on responsible growth.

Sometimes it’s [a] baby step on moving forward. Sometimes it’s a radical new approach on something we know will work.

WM: It would be interesting to see the environmentalists and the developers—

DL: Interesting e-mails.

WM: I can imagine.

DL: I spent a lot of time just going (gasps in mock surprise), “Don’t respond to that please.” (laughs) It’s real. I can’t tell some of these environmentalists not [to] feel that the developers are out of control. I can’t tell them how to feel and that feeling is real. And it’s real in Tallahassee and it’s real downtown.

Now is this the truth? Is it a total reality? It’s a piece of it. Okay, some of the development community is out of control. They’re not always right, they’re not always wrong. That’s what I’ve found; there are two sides to this.

And from a business perspective there are things the development community is asking for [that are] pure business reasons. And absolutely, they’re right. Then they take that and sometimes run way too far with it. That’s where—we will support something to a point.

Again, I’m supporting “one stop shopping” permitting. How stupid are we to keep asking these guys to go to four [different] places? That’s insanity.

But do I support the way they are doing it? Absolutely not.

So we the people of Hillsborough County will have to take back our county, if we want it. And we’re going to find out, in the next months how badly we the people want and care about this county. ‘Cause if we do not stop the board from doing what it is doing, with environmental protection, shutting out our voices, going against process [and] not looking for the public interest; (Actually going against public interest) we’ve lost.

If we let them get away with this we will never be able to control this board again. And we’ve got [a] year of hell ahead of us.

WM: You said something earlier about, and if you want to comment on this you can, but with the coming election that people feel there is going to be more public involvement in government?

DL: Hopefully. We're hoping to raise—the issues, how they are acting now, people don't tune in until it hits them at home. Whether it's their pocket book, whether it's their backyard, their street; if it touches their lives, they come alive.

We haven't had any issues. Growth management is this vague thing. The newspapers, like I said the media, they don't talk about the success stories. They don't go into the hundreds of hours we spend defending the community on a positive basis.

Let that one little development, where the guy's a jerk and we're having to fight it. Honey, that will be all over the newspaper. So every time you see my name in the paper it's fighting against something. I spend 90 percent of my time fighting for things, in a positive way. But that's the perception.

What I learned as a candidate is that only 10 percent of the people who vote have actually read a newspaper, [learned something from] TV, gone to a meeting [or can] remotely tell you who the commissioners are or what's going on. That means you have 90 percent of the voters blindly going into the polls. Blindly!

I think the tax issue this year, people will not be happy. People are not happy. The solution they've offered is not an acceptable solution to people. You're already hearing it and you haven't seen anything yet.

Put that together with trying to tear up our environmental protections and our planning protections, I think you'll have enough people waking up in the next few months that you might actually get a "throw the bums out" mentality going for the election this year.

This commission is playing with dynamite. They're just so arrogant about it, they just don't even care. I mean they don't care. It's very sad.

WM: It is kind of frightening.

DL: It's a dark day in our history for your archives my friend. We need to come back in about a year after the next election and see what we do. (laughs)

WM: Okay. Well we've been talking for about the past hour and a half. Is there anything you want to comment on that I haven't asked you about?

DL: I guess—you know I've thrown a lot of negative [information] at you. It's not hopeless, Bill. I think for the purposes of your research and your paper—the public stopped engaging itself years ago. We did it.

It's taken years for it to happen. But when we took civics out of our schools, when we

stopped teaching our kids civic pride, the American government; why you should vote, why you should engage. They're never taught that anymore. So why do we expect this, or any other generation to be running to the polls when all they see and read in the newspaper is corruption. The negative, the awful. I'm hoping the public will get mad enough to pay attention. (First you need their attention.) And then we have to educate them over the next few months.

You can make a difference. One person can make a difference, a huge difference. I've seen it for years.

Good old Margaret Mead, in her little saying, "Don't ever think that one person can't make a difference. Throughout history that's the only thing that ever really has."— something like that.

It's true, very true. Here I am just a little nobody, minding my own business in Lutz. [I] signed a petition and went to a meeting [and now] I'm lobbying in Tallahassee on behalf of a corporation for growth management.

So I guess God's calling is part of my thing. It is part of my calling, I believe that.

There are reasons I lost both elections, besides political reasons. But God's got a bigger purpose and I have not stopped for ten years and I think that's the drive that I've got. In my heart I know what I'm seeing is wrong. I know there are solutions and I'm trying to find like-minded people, good people who want to change for the right reasons and not for personal gain. It's going to take time to do that, but it is building. It's going to happen. So stay tuned.

WM: Okay. Well that sounds like a good place to conclude. And Ms. Layne, let me thank you for taking the time to talk with me and remind you again that the information you've shared with me in this interview will be deposited in the Special Collections of the University of South Florida's library. There it will be available for researchers to use in studying land use issues in the Hillsborough County area.

DL: Well thank you. I am really honored to be asked. I don't know if I'm considered an expert or just an "in-the-trenches worker," but either way, thank you for asking my opinion.

WM: Well you're welcome and I wish you luck in your struggle for what is right.

End of Interview