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William Mansfield: This is Bill Mansfield from the Patel Center for Global Solutions and the University of South Florida's Library's Special Collections and we're talking to Mr. Ed Ruttencutter on October 12, 2006 in the kitchen of the Gulf Beaches Historical Museum here in St. Pete Beach. Mr. Ruttencutter 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.

Ed Ruttencutter: My name is Edward A. Ruttencutter. I was born on 12 August 1949 in Summit County, Ohio.

WM: Okay. What's your current occupation?

ER: I'm a retired electrical engineer and I'm also currently a city commissioner for the city of St. Pete Beach.

WM: Okay. When did you come to St. Pete Beach?

ER: When did I move here?

WM: Um-huh.

ER: I arrived here, probably the first week of February, as I recall, in 1988.

WM: What is it that brought you to St. Pete Beach? What about the area appealed to you?

ER: The beach.

WM: The beach?

ER: I was interviewing for a job with a company in St. Petersburg. I was not interested in this area at all. They put me in the Alden Resort for the night and I woke up the next morning and I walked the beach and decided this job, I didn't want, kinda wanted, 'cause I wanted to live here. And it was downhill from there.

WM: So, you really, tell me more about what attracted you to this area. What was the community like when you got here in eighty-eight [1988]?

ER: I had no idea (laughs).

WM: Okay. You had no idea when you got here.

ER: I was an outsider. I met a neighbor next door who was very nice to me. He still lives in the same house. He got me to know a little more about the city and what was going on and where is what and when, and who happened to rent the house before, that I was in prior to my renting it.

I later purchased a duplex in the same neighborhood. Really didn't have much interest in renting the other side of it, right away. I got a phone call from the previous tenant, of the other place that I had rented. I knew so much about him I let him move in right away. We've had a very friendly relationship ever since, with the gentleman. He still lives in the neighborhood, he doesn't live in my duplex anymore. But he lives next door the house we had each rented originally. Now so—

WM: But what about the St. Pete Beach community appealed to you? You mentioned the beaches but—

ER: The small town feel. The fairly laid-back atmosphere. Originally, I had been totally opposed to living in Pinellas County, from short stints of visiting St. Petersburg and Pinellas Park. Which back then I thought was also St. Petersburg also. I lumped the whole county as St. Petersburg, back then, when I was visiting. I used to live in Brevard County. I lived in Brevard County for eight years. Then I lived in Maryland for four years, between Brevard County and Pinellas County.

But visiting from Brevard County I didn't see anything good about Pinellas County. It was crowded, it was overcrowded, congested and you know—just too big a city. When I took the job interview, I didn't really think I wanted the job. I wasn't sure why I was coming to talk to them.

Like I said, they stuck me in the Alden overnight and I discovered that this was not the Atlantic Beach. The Gulf Beach was something different and I wanted to live on the Gulf Beach. Realtors tried very hard to sell me on Treasure Island and Madeira Beach. I kept telling them St. Pete Beach. Eventually we found a waterfront property that I could purchase. I owned two sailboats at the time so I needed some level of waterfront.

But you know my insistence was always St. Pete Beach. I'd looked at these other towns and I liked St. Pete Beach. It was a nice, laid-back. They kept the city cleaner than Treasure Island or Madeira Beach did back then. Just the whole feel of the city was nicer.

As I said, eventually they found a home for me on the water; in the same neighborhood that I was renting in. Accidentally this property had a contract on it. The contract fell through. That day, the realtor that was working with me discovered the contract fell through, I had a contract on it the next day. We closed in seven days, to purchase that home. I don't usually make snap decisions but I've never been sorry on that one.

WM: Well that's good to know.

ER: It has been a wonderful city and a wonderful community and I'm hoping to keep it that way.

WM: I'd like for you to talk about that a little bit more. You said it had a small-town feel to it and was laid-back. Could you kind of describe what you mean by that?

ER: I'll give you a couple of examples of the small-town feel. About thirteen or fourteen years I did rent-out the other side of my duplex. I had a very difficult time with almost

every tenant in there, convincing them to lock their doors. Because the community was so safe and so crime free. I still have trouble reminding people to lock their car doors at night. People leave their windows open.

We are a very nice community. We do need to use our locks because people in other communities, who have bad intentions, know that we don't lock our doors. We have to be careful now. But the people in the neighborhood—I'm not—back then I was not very outgoing, but I thought I was very much welcomed into the neighborhood. Each of the people that I talked to was friendly.

At the time that I moved here the house next-door, which is where my first tenant now lives, that house was being rented by one of only two black families who lived in St. Pete Beach at that time. That one-of-two was confirmed by the 1990 census. I found out that I knew 50 percent of the black families.

Extremely nice people. I took them sailing on my boat a couple of them. I kept in contact with them. They moved to somewhere else in the same neighborhood later, they were renting. I kept in contact with them for quite a few years. They came over and introduced themselves. It was like there was no—we were just people, you know? I liked that feel. It was just—I wasn't—having lived up north many, many years; I never caught that immediate openness anywhere else I had lived. So I liked that. I liked, at the time, I could walk to the grocery store. Gulf Boulevard was a safe place to walk. I could ride my bicycle although I didn't ride it often enough. Gulf Boulevard was not completely safe back then but it was not extremely hazardous.

WM: When you say safe, safe from what?

ER: From traffic accidents and this sort of thing. You know—the congestion wasn't high except during the tourist season and so on.

WM: Okay, so you were more concerned about getting run over than mugged say?

ER: There was never any concern about getting mugged. I don't know if you realize it, I'm a pretty big person and getting mugged almost never enters my mind. (laughs)

WM: Right but a safe street, people can interpret that in different ways.

ER: I also had a lot of other things that I was involved with, from other areas that I've lived, that I could access and do here in St. Pete Beach. My employment with the company in St. Petersburg lasted approximately one year. Then I retired and I'm still living in St. Pete Beach. I have no intention of moving and no intention of trying to find a new job outside the area. This is where I live now.

WM: Okay. I just want to make sure I understand you, the small-town feel is sort of the openness of the people and the convenience of amenities, like the grocery store?

ER: The lack of congestion. I think things were much more laid back, than now. They still haven't gotten too out of hand yet, but—things change and all of Florida is getting more congested, of course.

WM: When did you start seeing the change, that threatened the community that you knew?

ER: Well, threatened the community is a pretty strong term.

WM: Right, well, presented change?

ER: The first time that I got involved paying close attention to city issues, was back in about 2001, when the city proposed—formally, or more formally codifying their land development regulations. Prior to that it had just been a collection of assorted ordinances and rules and regulations, but it had never been all put together in one compact document, as like a structured code. When this happened I started reading about a lot of problems with changes being put in it and the public being told that nothing was changing; that they were writing it differently.

I had noticed that the city had gone through some arguments over some growth issues, but really hadn't paid that much attention. I noticed the streets were getting a little more crowded, that tourist season was lasting much longer than it used to—well not that the tourist season but the intense occupation of the resorts was becoming almost year 'round. That's to their credit. They were marketing to Europe and such and trying to fill in their gaps. But, you know, it changes the feel. Now, instead of a couple of months of heavy traffic and lots of strangers on the street, you've got, you know not a continuous but a more continuous heavy intensity.

It changes the whole feel of the community. Some of the stores and restaurants that you

used to feel only put up with the crowds and the sold-out inventory a couple of months of the year, now we have to worry about it year 'round. Not necessarily year 'round but much more of the year than we used to. That's a good thing for the businesses, but it changes the feel a little bit.

Then this land development regulation change came and there were some issues in there where the city said they weren't changing things and they were—in a couple of cases they had, accidentally they claimed, increased the intensities in some of the areas and they'd also snuck in a change to the heights of the buildings. Other people had caught this. There were concerns about the sewer infrastructure. The city had done a study, unrelated to capacity, that pretty much defined why we do have limited capacity. That study is still being acted upon today, to try and cure some of those ills.

I told the sewer study people, this past weekend we had another presentation from the same consultant, and I told them that I'm probably only one of five or six people in the city that's ever actually read their entire original study, from back in 2001 or 2002. With an engineering background, I understood it. It wasn't even boring to me, like it was to most people. (WM laughs) I can quote parts of our sewer system that surprises people. It's just from having read that stuff and knowing how it works.

So, you know. Things were changing and I was hearing and reading and people were talking about these issues. I got to know them a little bit more. I had always felt that there were some advantages being given to certain developers. Whether that was real or imagined. You know, people talk about it and we all spread our thoughts and so on. Back then I had started paying much closer attention to what was going on. I had a very nice elderly neighbor lady who kept saying I should run for the Commission. I didn't ignore her but had not gone along with it for several years but finally in 2002 I decided to take a shot at.

WM: Before we get to you running for office, you said that noticed the changes; primarily more people her for longer periods of time. From that, how did you get to paying attention to—

ER: Well, I'll point out some other changes, when I moved here, there was a section up there by Upham Beach,

WM: By what beach?

ER: Upham Beach, it's the northern most beach part of St. Pete Beach. Not the northern

most part of the city but the beach stops at Blind Pass. But in the Upham Beach area, which is a city park you can see it located on a map, between that park and what at the time was the Colonial Inn Motel, which is now called the Travel Lodge, the property was pretty much a vacant lot. It was where the old aquarium existed. The aquarium was gone before I moved here, so I didn't really know anything about it. I learned most of what I know about it from photographs here at the museum in fact. But that was all a vacant lot and now it's several hundred condominiums know as Silver Sands—three very large buildings. Okay?

When I moved her until fairly recently, behind the Dolphin Village Shopping Center on Gulf Boulevard, there was no development at all. There had been an old motel there that had been torn down years earlier. Then all along 46th Avenue, along the waterfront, there was nothing but water views. You know, nice open space. You could park behind the shopping center and go fishing and so on. Now it's a condo or town-home complex, I don't know what to call it, Mirabella. Plus there are multi-million dollar homes all along 46th Avenue in that area.

So, you know, the increase there was very evident. I'm trying to think—what's now known as Captiva Cay, on the north end of town, on the Blind Pass Road, was an old marina. No residences there. A nice waterfront area owned I believe by a boat builder. It would have been a nice waterfront dock area it had protected water. It's now hundreds of—I'm saying hundreds, I'm guessing—I know it's over a hundred, probably, condominiums and townhouses. There are similar areas around the city that went from being no residential to very intense residential. All of this starts to change the feel of community. When I moved here, I know we had some very large condominiums but I felt like I was in a mostly single family home neighborhood. Whether that was real or just perceived (phone rings)—the city felt like single-family homes.

So seeing all of this growth, all of this increase—I lost my beautiful water view behind the shopping center. But I understand. I didn't own the property so something was going to happen some day. But you see all of these changes and you sort of wonder what's going on. Then you read that there were some construction problems and difficulties in the Mirabella project, because the city had probably not paid close enough attention to—and the buyers hadn't. That concerned me. It's like, “Are the developers really being careful? Or are they just here to make money and then get out?” It turned out that it's a local developer that had done that project, but it's like things are going wrong and I couldn't see that was enough being looked at or done.

WM: Could you expand upon that, when you say “things are going wrong”?

ER: The expansion of the development, the increase of the intensity. Taking a marina and

turning it into condominiums. Taking what I thought, I'm not sure—but I thought was a commercial property and turning it into more condominiums. The city being accused and actually sued at one time over improper inspections of projects and so on.

Which I've learned since then that cities get sued about everything. You make anybody mad and they'll sue you. Whether or not they can win is a totally different argument. The filing of a lawsuit doesn't bother me anymore. There were some other issues I had with the previous city manager, in that I would tell him problems in the city and nothing would be done it.

One of the excellent examples give is that when they built the wooden beach crossovers, which now I think they have plastic decking on the bottom, but originally they were wood. The one at the end of—I think it's 2nd Avenue, down here in Pass-A-Grille. I used to drive down here during the day, go out and look at the beach, or come down in the evening and look at the sunset. I noticed some of the nails were coming up, one of them almost a full inch. As the boards wiggle, as people walk on them, the nails creep out.

I told the city manager that they needed to go pull the nails and use deck screws. They wouldn't back out. Or at least pound the nails down, people walk these things barefoot. Granted the nail was over by the railing, but when you stop on the crossover you tend to step towards the railing, if you wanted to look to the south. Somebody could possibly get hurt. It was months before somebody went down there with a hammer and pounded those nails in. I had reported it several times. There were similar incidents of the city just—you'd tell them about a problem and it would take them forever to get it solved. We, hopefully, don't have that problem today, because I get much better response out of our current city manager.

But it was issues like this. I would try to talk to our mayor back then. I guess he was commissioner back then, he's currently the mayor. I'd try to say, “This is my input on something going on with the city” and I'd get an argument trying to convince me of what he wanted the city to do instead of hearing what a resident wanted to say. He didn't have to listen to me. But to take public input and then argue with it, to me, is not taking public input. He and I used to get into some pretty heated discussions. We always look like we get along, even today, but we probably don't think a whole lot of each other right now. You can print that. He's aware of it and I'm aware of it. Every time I run for election his entire family campaigns against me.

WM: You talked about this place having a small-town feel.

ER: That's part of a small-town too.

WM: Right, but I mean, access to local government is—

ER: It's excellent I think and I'm trying to make sure it remains excellent. I have residents who request to speak to the city manager now and if they will try to accommodate them. If they want to talk to me I always try to accommodate them. I've had different feedback on some of the other ones right now, but it's always been fairly good.

I represent between seventeen and eighteen hundred people in my district that elected me. It's pretty easy, not easy it's possible to respond to all of their requests, at least get them an answer. Sometimes the answer is no but at least they hear back from me. When I was not a commissioner that was one of my complaints. I would call and talk to my commissioner and never get a response. No action, no response, that's not a favorable condition. But, once again, small-town politics is small-town politics. Regardless of how we try to look like a big town we still squabble like we're a little town. (laughs) And in a way, that's a good thing. I have no problem with that.

WM: Democracy is messy like that.

ER: Oh yeah. I had to point out to some people on Monday that it's also expensive. Don't tell me how to run your government based on keeping the cost down, when it deals with letting you be represented. You know there are a lot of other things we can get our costs down on. But when it's hearing from the public and keeping the public involved I think every cent we spend is worth it. So I don't know if I've answered your question.

WM: It answers part of it. But I just want to recap what you said to make sure I understand. You talked about seeing the changes coming on and things—the city not functioning and that—what really inspired you to get involved in local politics? Was it the changes or the sort of dysfunction?

ER: The pressures from the neighbors and the squabbles and when I started, one neighbor in particular, I mentioned and when I started paying attention to some of this stuff I had to agree that the elected officials were being responsive to them. I knew they were not very responsive when I had tried to contact them. You know—I had not been in daily contact with them. It was every once in a while.

A lot of times I would get the impression that since I wasn't making money off of this town, I wasn't important. That was the feel a lot of other people had. It's the dissatisfied

citizen approach. It's common. A lot of times you get candidates who are upset because they didn't get their way. I didn't really have a way.

I did things like—I tried to talk to the mayor and my commissioner when they proposed the landscaped medians in the middle of Gulf Boulevard. I discussed that they were going to be a hazard. They were not a good idea. They were going to cause some traffic back-ups. They were putting trees in them, on a forty-mile-an-hour street. I thought that was a very bad idea.

I really wasn't listened to. They put them in anyway. The only thing that changed them was that the Department of Transportation required them to make them smaller and to move them to be less of a problem. But today I still get complaints from some areas that the people trying to turn left back-up because that gets in the way. Almost immediately after they were installed, there were two trees in each one, we had five of the trees wiped out by automobiles. Within the first six months or less. Which was exactly what I said, “Why are you putting trees in the middle of a forty-mile and hour street?”

What they were trying to do was duplicate what was available up in the north beach in the Redington somewhere. They've got these really huge landscaped medians but the street in that area is the equivalent of seven lanes wide. They've got two lanes of parking; two lanes of traffic and then a left turn lane. And they don't have any of the commercial activity that we have here. They have a lot less traffic as a result and it sort of works up there. Plus their street was really wide.

Our is five lanes wide. We don't have the two lanes of parking on either side. We have a lot more traffic. I'm not sure what the speed limit was up there. I think it was thirty-five but I may not be remembering that correctly. Gulf Boulevard is thirty-five everywhere now, except for a short stretch on Blind Pass Road there. But it was like—I had tried to tell them as a citizen, I didn't think this was a good idea and these are the problems you're going to have. They build them and then they have these problems. You know?

And they're still replacing trees on those things. They keep getting hit. It's a type of palm tree that's getting very hard to find. But that's what DOT approved, because they snap off very quickly. I don't think anybody has actually gotten hurt hitting the trees, because DOT, the Department of Transportation, required us to put a specific type of tree that does snap off.

WM: A crash friendly tree?

ER: Yeah, basically. I think it's called a Foxtail Palm and when you hit them they snap off rather quickly.

WM: I guess that's good. But I did some reading in the *St. Pete Times* and it seemed like one of the issues that in the city council races were people who wanted to make St. Pete Beach more friendly for tourism and development and people who wanted to maintain the status quo. It might have been you but somebody saying that, "If St. Pete Beach is a good place to live then it will be a good place to visit."

ER: That's my quote, yeah.

WM: So tell me—

ER: If you search on my name in the *St. Pete Times*, you'll find articles back all the way to 2001, maybe earlier, about letters I've written city issues and thinks like that. They've got a lot on me. A lot of people use the terminology "tourist friendly." They use that as a disguise for their other intentions, sometimes. Terminology is like a lot of things, you can say the words and make them mean anything you want them to mean, whether they mean that or not. We have a lot of promotion for development that would be pedestrian friendly. That was a nice way of saying we want the people to be able to develop right up to the sidewalk. I call that pedestrian terrifying.

Back then, when we had a forty-five mile an hour street, if a car jumped the curb, the pedestrian had nowhere to go, when we built like that. I'll give some examples of some existing areas on Gulf Boulevard that are built that close to the street, so that people understand what they are talking about. So I felt the term "pedestrian friendly" was a disguise for they intended doing something else. You can move it back a little bit and landscape it and still be pedestrian friendly.

So to say "tourist friendly?" I think we're very "tourist friendly." We have some traffic issues. We have some tourists that are used to jaywalking across a very busy street and occasionally one of them does get hurt. We try to address that and make it a little safer. But in most cases, had they been a little more cautious or had walked just a very, very short additional distance they could have crossed at a traffic light or a crosswalk. That's not to say that their injury is justifiable, it's just that in some respects it was a little bit self-inflicted.

We look like a resort community and people think laid-back, slow traffic, wander around, Key West kind of thing, you can step in the street. Everybody is kind of creeping a long at

five-miles an hour in Key West and you're probably not going to get hit and if you do you're probably not even going to be bruised. Well, we're not quite like that and I don't see us getting more like that as we get more intense.

WM: But there were the people who wanted to make—like I said, from reading the newspaper I got the idea that there were two camps: people who wanted St. Pete Beach more tourist friendly and those who wanted to maintain the quality of life here. Is that—

ER: They're not mutually exclusive.

WM: Well, I understand that, but just in reading the newspaper I got the notion that those were two forces.

ER: In recent times there are probably two forces. I keep trying to tell people that there is only one force out there and that's what we each think is best for our community, hopefully, as residents. As the outsiders coming, that's different. But as far as quality of life, I think, is on every resident's mind, or should be on every resident's mind. Tourist friendliness does not have to, necessarily, severely impact the quality of life. And pursuing quality of life does not mean tourist unfriendly.

There's been a lot of rhetoric lately about either you support the development proposals that are bad. I'm trying not to express a bias on any of these, or you don't. And if you support them you're in favor of hotels and if you don't support them you're in favor of condos. I usually try to be very diplomatic when I say things but I have gotten tired of explaining that one and I'll use the term that's an outright lie.

You know, supporting or not supporting the redevelopment that we're going through is not a choice between condos and hotels, you know non-tourist and tourist. I believe we've come to the conclusion—we've had agreement for many, many years and the city seems to keeps asking the question over again. But the general resident response is, "The tourist being here is okay. We just don't want them to cost us any more than they currently do." And this cost is not necessarily in dollars; it's in the quality of life thing. I've said at Commission meetings, there is a price to pay to redevelop the hotels. Once again, the price is not in dollars it's in lifestyle and so on. This price is directly tied to how big the hotels are, how tall, how many rooms? How much traffic are they to cause? What is the impact going to be on everything?

The residents, in my opinion feel as long as the price, in all respects, not just money, is acceptable and reasonable, we'll agree to it. But once that price exceeds what we're

willing to pay, in impact to our life, then we're going to say, "Build your condos." It's like if you ask for too much we're finally going to say no. That's been a lot of the debate lately, are they asking for too much? There's been an opinion of a lot of the public, I think it's evidenced by some of the issues before us right now, that their commission did not listen to them.

When all of these plans were being made, in many respects I have to agree, there were members on the commission that were not particularly friendly and receptive to public input. At least one of those is no longer on the commission. I always tried, as best I could as a commissioner, to remain completely open-minded. I listened to everyone. I've promoted different views always. There was only one resident that I was probably unfair to, whenever he came to speak to us. Sometime later I realized I had done this to him several times. I apologized to him at a commission meeting. I apologized to him publicly. I apologized to him at his neighborhood association meeting, when he was there. I was out of line and acting like the ones, like the commissioners who were not listening to public input and treating him like that. That if anyone could point out any other person I had treated that way I'd apologize to them. That was not the way I should have been acting.

WM: Okay. Now let me ask you a question. You said that the commission was not listening to what the public said. Can you succinctly, tell me what the public was saying?

ER: The public was saying they were concerned with the proposed intensity on our land development changes. They were concerned with the proposed building heights. When the original land development changes were proposed, back in February of 2005, the original plan called for hotels to be built as tall as twenty stories and condominiums, in certain areas, as tall as ten stories. The current height regulation in St. Pete Beach, for the areas the tallest buildings only allows the building to be fifty feet above the FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Act] based flood elevation. Which usually amounts to a maximum of a six-story building.

One story is in the flood elevation area, that's usually used as a parking garage. Then, with eight-foot ceilings, you can get five stories above that. If you want to go higher ceilings and different designs, you've got to go less. In addition you've got to get another ten feet to hide your elevator shaft and your air conditioners. You can even put non-livable amenities and decorations above the building. Most of the people were okay with that. I think they all expected the proposed hotels to be a little higher. A little higher could be maybe an additional five stories, for a maximum of ten, over all including the parking level. When they saw twenty, in the original proposal and nobody—not nobody—a majority of the people, who talked to me, did not want the condominiums to be taller. They don't like condominiums.

They see so many go up and they sit there unoccupied. They take up space, they block the view and their owners are not supporting our businesses, our stores and so on. They're just like buying shares of stock. You buy a condominium, sit on it for five years and sell it for a big profit. To the citizens, there is no point in it being there, other than it pays property taxes. But it comes along with other expenses and burdens and so on.

So when they proposed the big height increases they also proposed a new code and proposed some large increases in the hotel room amounts that they could build. If the land codes increased with conditions the number of condominiums you could build in a project. The people saw all of this and this is not what a lot of them wanted. We'll find out on November 7th if a majority of them felt that way. A lot of people came to the commission and said, "We don't want this." To me, those commission meetings were embarrassing because certain members of the commission would sit there and argue with them and tell them they didn't understand. It was too complicated. They weren't intelligent enough to realize why we were doing this and why it was important and how wonderful it was going to be if we developed it, much more intensely, taller—

There were some other proposals in the code where we would take an awful lot of what is now zoned commercial and allow residential units to be built above the first floor of the commercial property. Basically add more condos above our commercial property. It probably wouldn't be every commercial property, but it would greatly increase where condos could be. Right now we don't allow residential to be built on a commercially zoned property. People were upset about that. They saw that as more condominiums. I've made statements during my campaigns and very seldom got any objection from the people. You got to understand what it says and not what it sounds like it says. We do not need one more condominium in St. Pete Beach. There's plenty out there. There're plenty of places to live; plenty of congestion.

That doesn't mean that I can stop them or want to stop them. Property owners have rights. But from the standpoint of the community we don't need any more. They are just there. Most of the condos in the area, if you contact the people who live in there and ask them, "What's the percentage of units occupied year 'round?" "It's about 30 percent." The registered voter address list that I had bears that out for most of the complexes. So that's two-thirds of the condos are probably empty a large part of the year. Some of them are never occupied.

That happens with single-family homes too. I've got a home next door to me owned by a family up in Connecticut. They spent three or four weeks a year in it. Sits there empty the rest of the time. It's their share of stock. So it's not just the condos that do this, but they do it even more. These were the types of things that people didn't like. They talked to the commission. They could argue with the—they actually, sometimes, got insulted, yelled at,

for opposing this wonderful land development plan that some had envisioned. You know—I didn't like that. I voiced that I didn't like that. I didn't get a lot of support on it.

The citizens then took toward informal petitions. They would walk around their neighborhoods with questions. Sometimes the questions were not unbiased. But, you know they got their point across. Things like, “Do you want taller buildings?” And the neighbors would sign it if they felt they didn't want it—or however it was worded. They'd come and present these to the Commission. “This is the opinion poll, basically, of the people in my neighborhood.” This many people signed it, out of this many people in the neighborhood.” Commissioners discarded that. “Oh those mean nothing. They're not official. They don't do anything.”

So the next step, they organized a group, a political action committee. They filed legally supportable petitions to require citizen votes on certain land development issues. They latter followed up with legally supportable petitions to overturn some of the decisions the commission had made. A lot of times it was because they felt that when they came up with the informal opinion polls, they were being picked on and laughed at, picked on and told that it didn't matter. There were actually opinion polls being taken that never got turned in, 'cause I know some of the people that were collecting signatures, they didn't bother to turn them in because they were being ignored. So they were immediately ready to sign the official ones. The commission continued to say, “These are just a couple of malcontents. They're lying to everybody that signs the petition.” And so on.

You know it takes about 780, 790 signatures on the petitions, city wide, to put an issue on the ballot. They were, in some cases able to achieve that very quickly. In sometimes it took a little longer. A lot of times, and I tried to point this out to certain commissioners at the meetings, that when you speak here at the commission, you're putting signatures on the petitions. “You're making people mad with some of the things you're saying.” You know, it's pretty much confirmed why I stayed in communication with the group that was circulating the petitions. A lot of people thought I was a member of that group. But no I wasn't. I 'd just known the guy that was doing for quite awhile. You don't abandon a friendship over something like this. As a result, I always knew, mostly, what they were doing before anyone else did, because he would tell me.

He wouldn't tell the rest of them because they wouldn't talk to him. He probably would have told them if they'd talk to him. So there was a lot of backlash. Once again, 780 signatures is 10 percent of the registered voters. That is not necessarily a majority, but if you have ever tried to run a—doors and do a campaign and get people to be home—in this case, with the petitions, the people had to come to them, to sign the things. It's a difficult thing to do, to get people out there like that. That they achieved signatures, I think, in a reasonable length of time that showed there was a lot of sentiment out there for wanting to address these. If we had been more careful in the beginning none of these

petitions would have existed.

WM: Just from what you've said I get the impression that—tell me if I correctly understand you correctly. The council was unresponsive to the people who were concerned about—

ER: The height, the density, infrastructure—

WM: Right, sort of—development issues.

ER: Those are probably the big three.

WM: So you ran for office to give—

ER: I was already in office when this started.

WM: Okay. But so how did you use your position on the City Council to address these issues?

ER: I tried to get the other commissioners to listen. I expressed strong views. I negotiated in the land development codes and got an awful lot of changes finally made. I got, kind of, a reputation for being very technical on them. I find all of their mistakes. I point out all of their mistakes, even when they benefit the other side more than me. Because I think these things when written, need to be correct because there are people who will take advantage of our mistakes. You know? And once they are written into the code, regardless of what you intended, that's what the law says.

WM: You said you expressed strong views, could you explain that a little bit?

ER: I tried, very, very hard to get the heights limits down. Because the people were telling me that was a trigger issue. When they were originally proposed I knew it was a trigger issue. I've lived here for quite a few years and I knew that height was a very intense concern of most of the long time residents. They don't want to live in a city where they are surrounded by tall buildings. The reference they usually give is to North Sand Key.

I don't know if you're familiar with the condos, they're like—I think— the tallest one somebody told me is like twenty-two stories. There are several of them but I believe twenty, eighteen somewhere in that area. You go up there and you're driving up Gulf Boulevard and it's all condos, big tall buildings, on the beachside. There are some areas between here and there that are still single-family homes and stuff. But the north end of it, there's a huge I believe it's a Sheraton up there, a pretty tall building and then a lot of different other things. It's actually been used in one of the advertisements for one of the groups; there is a photograph of North Sand Key.

So, I knew height was a trigger point for a lot of the people. The Commission and the staff, when they proposed the twenty-story hotels, ten-story condos, they hit a trigger point and it was going to be argued. I tried to—I got the ten down to seven. Regardless of whether anybody agrees that I did it, if you go back and listen to the commission meetings at the time, I was the only one arguing to lower these heights. Eventually, with public input, got the twenty down to fifteen. I think it's still too tall. A lot of the other people think it's still too tall. I think it's still too tall from the standpoint that I don't think the public will support fifteen.

I've never told anybody what I would like to see St. Pete Beach look like. I'm trying to represent the feel I get from other people. So, you know, you know, it's just—had we listened to them and worked with them when they came and said, “Don't go this high, go this high instead.” Had tried to reach an agreement, I think we would have gotten farther along. But like I said, if you listen to some of those workshops, when we discussed these, they were pretty lively. When the public came up to speak, they were, I think, treated very unfairly.

When the developer came up to express his view, he was treated with courtesy. They listened to his views. They let him talk as long as he wanted. But they would cut off the public input. There were even meetings where the public was not allowed to provide input, but they let a developer come up from the audience and express his view on some other issues and they made every change he asked for. And I thought that was unfair. Whether his requests were reasonable or not the way the way they were handling it was wrong. They should be listening to the residents, not a lawyer from Sarasota that comes here to represent somebody who is thinking about buying a piece of property here. It was—just, you know, very frustrating, both to me and the public.

I also got them to move a little farther back from the sidewalk. I couldn't get as far as I wanted. So, you know, a lot of times I got them to lower some of the intensities in the way they were doing things. I could not get them to remove the residentials from commercial properties. I could get some minor concessions, but right off the top of my head I can't think of what they are. But I got a lot of compromises that got toward—

maybe being something we could live with, but still not quite what the public was going to support.

WM: So you felt like the town council was not responsive to the public or they weren't responsive to portion of the public that you represented in the town council?

ER: Yes. They were responsive to some of the public, but not the portion of the public that opposed what they wanted to do. The rest of the commissioners, I believe, had this idea of what they wanted to do. Anyone who opposed that they were less than courteous with. Anyone who supported that, they were very gracious too. It's human nature to be like that, but we're not supposed to be like that when we're trying to serve the public.

WM: So you were representing the people who wanted to control the development and regulate growth to—

ER: I was representing the people that would talk to me. I was representing people trying to come up with a view of what they would, basically, all mutually support. During the height of all of this I went through two out of three of my three campaigns, while a lot of this was going on—the two that I had won.

So I had spoken with an awful lot of the people and heard their views. Some members of the commission were unopposed, because no one came forward to run against them. They got on the commission without having to talk to the public, without having to hear the individual views. Had they heard the views and responded the way they did as commissioners and had an opponent, I'm not sure they would have gotten elected, because if the way they treated people. That was important.

When I was in the campaign a majority of the opinion that was expressed to me—and I knocked on every single door of a family home that had a registered voter in it in my district. If they were home I heard from them. If they weren't home I always left my phone number with some information. This last time I even gave them little refrigerator magnets with my phone number on it, so they could contact me. Some of them are still on the refrigerator. (inaudible) I think I gave the Museum a couple, but they're probably not there. My phone number has always been in the phone book. To their credit, all of the other commissioners are also in it. There might be one that isn't, but I'm not sure.

WM: So if these commissioners weren't responsive to the people who were they responsive to?

ER: I would think their own interests, for one reason or another. One of the commissioner's families owns the second largest resorts in St. Pete Beach and has owned it for many, many years. The one commissioner that was most abusive is a land development attorney and they actually found that she had representation, hopefully of a minor nature, to one of the property owners. Actually, was a land speculator, who briefly owned a piece of property on the beach. There were a lot of accusations that she had gotten to know him too well, whether as a professional relationship or casual.

One of the commissioners owns a business down here and—it's not really sure who she is responding to. Sometimes people aren't really sure what her response is. Then the mayor has been involved with various levels of developers, throughout the city for quite a few years. It's no secret that he's been involved in a group that has tried to control the city for years. I think they are still trying to push their influence. I don't know what his connection is with them other than a friend, or whatever. But there are a lot of concerns, when things would be brought up.

And, like I said, when I was not a commissioner and would approach him as a citizen, if I was expressing a view, other than what he was trying to achieve, he would argue with me. Try to convince me of his way of thinking. I thought that was no way to take citizen input. Citizens' input, you can ignore it once you hear it, but you shouldn't ignore it while you're hearing it. That was the response I was getting from him. We had some pretty contentious conversations sometimes. Always professionals, but still, I didn't think it was the way to represent people by not listening to them. Back then I was probably not an influential person and he may not have thought I was worth listening to. So, hopefully that's changed.

WM: Well what do you foresee in the future for St. Pete Beach?

ER: The future is going to be after November 7th [2006]. The future is going to be, basically controlled, or influenced by the result of the result of the six referendum issues we have. I believe every single one of them effects development, or redevelopment, in someway. There is a lot of arguing, there are a lot of views expressed. We actually have the mayor and one of the commissioners coming out and telling the people to vote against them all. I mean they are personally saying this. They are actually spending, I believe, city money to promote voting against. They deny that the bias is there, but you can read the articles and see what you think of it. I think that's improper. I've said, at the commission many, many times and I've said to the public. Elected officials should not be telling the people how to vote. If you read Mr. Troxler in his column today basically stated that much more eloquently than I ever did and with more emphasis than I ever did. Elected officials are supposed to listen to what the people want, not tell them to vote yes or vote no on issues.

Mr. Troxler's column is written relative to the county charter changes, not the St. Pete Beach referendum specifically, but the sentiment still applies. St. Pete Beach is one of the cities that contributed to the campaign to oppose the charter amendments that Mr. Troxler references in his article. I am the only commissioner, I believe, who voted against our financial participation. I told them I would support it if the money was spent to educate the public strictly what the charter changes were and what they meant. I was told the campaign was going to be to tell the people to vote no. I voted against the campaign because I felt we shouldn't be telling the people how to vote. It's on the record of the commission minutes. So I agree with Mr. Troxler.

The cities that are participating in this—it's like twenty-one or twenty-two of the twenty-four cities in Pinellas County contributed to that campaign, the Vote No campaign. I don't think that public money should be spent telling the public to vote no or vote yes. The county has contributed—the number I heard was a 150,000 or something—I don't recall if that is the right number—to support a Vote Yes campaign on these issues. So we've got public money telling you vote no, public money telling you to vote yes on the county issues. I think that's improper. I think it's just as improper for the city of St. Pete Beach to be spending their money on publications that basically present a biased view of how the city should vote. This is published by the city at city expense. And here is a copy of the first part of Mr. Troxler's column.

WM: Okay. Are these for me?

ER: You can have them.

WM: Okay, great.

ER: They are all public record. I sent a copy of the first thing there to the clerk. All I did was the first portion of his article that said, and “Public Officials should not be spending public money telling the public how to vote.” I include the credits of the newspaper it came from.

WM: Well, briefly, if you can, tell me about the referendum. When I was driving over here I saw signs that said, “Vote no, save our cities.” And “Vote yes, save our beaches.” So, as succinctly as you can, tell me about the referendum.

ER: There are six of them are city referendums. I point out to people there are some

equally important county and state referendums on there so the “vote yes” or “vote no” is going to confuse a lot of people. The six cities ones, four of them are proposed charter changes; two of them are referendums to repeal ordinances previously passed by the city commission. All six of them were brought about as a result of the citizen petition efforts. Whether you support the citizen petition efforts or not, they followed the rules. They got enough signatures and the signatures are verified. The city challenged the constitutionality, they claim, of the issues in court. In all but one case, one had to go to an appeal, the final ruling on all but one of them, is that they needed to go to a vote before the people.

The one we've not had a ruling on yet, it is my understanding that the judge involved has been ill and not able to issue his ruling. Previously he said that he would probably do, I'm paraphrasing, but roughly in line with whatever the District Court of Appeals ruled. And the District Court of Appeals ruled that the four before them should go to a vote. So he has the fifth one. The sixth one was authorized to be challenged in court, but the city never filed the challenge, because it was so similar to the rest of them and there was no point in filing them until we got the answer on the other ones. To see whether or not the city would win or lose on them. If it looked like we were going to lose, there was no point in spending the money filing and hopefully that was the approach we took. The four charter referendums, the first one is that any comprehensive plan change proposed by the city has to first be approved by the voters, before it can be adopted by the city commission.

What this means is, if you're familiar with this Florida Growth Management Act, the city has to have a comprehensive plan that has to be approved by the state. It regulated the intensity of development throughout the city. It regulates and represents goals, objectives and policies of the city to achieve, basically, a planned future of the city. The state because we're on a barrier island is very concerned in the intensity that we propose developing, the number of residential units, the number of transient units, the amount of commercial floor space that we will allow to be built throughout the city. The plan defines where these types of things will be allowed. The plan defines how much pervious surface we will require in any area. That means how much water can actually percolate down through the ground, because it is not paved. It regulates things like this that deal with how the city will be developed, or how it will be redeveloped or how we will let things happen. If you tear down a house today you've got to make sure that whatever you build there conforms to the approved comprehensive plan.

The city submitted one of these, got approved by the state, passed it by ordinance. We'll get into that a little later. The people objected to it. They decided they wanted to have input in it, before the city could adopt it by ordinance. Approval by the state comes before the city adopts it by ordinance. What this would do is require that after we propose it, submit it to the state. We also have to submit it to the county. Once they approve it and make changes, whatever they decide needs adjusting, before the city can then adopt it, to

actually put it in place and use it, it would have to go to a referendum with the voters. The voters would have to agree, “Yes, this is what we want in our comprehensive plan for the city.” A very simple question. The referendum issue says, “Do you want to change the charter or not?” “Yes” means change the charter and require that voters to approve.

People have tried to say that the city would never be able to amend a comprehensive plan if this passed. That's not true! It just changes the steps, adds an additional step, adds a little bit of additional delay depending upon the state approval. If the state approval is received in time to put it on an up-coming election that's going to take place anyway, there is only the delay of the submission of the ballot time to the actual election. The longer that is before an election, the longer it might delay it. We normally have elections in March, and November. In September, if there is a primary. It could be scheduled into any one of those.

Or the city could, if the supervisor of elections could handle it, schedule a special election. People say special elections are expensive, I think in the budget of elections, citywide, we put somewhere around 10,00 or less in the budget. People say spending 10,000 of the city's money. My response is democracy is expensive. This is a democratic issue, if you want the vote, don't worry about what it is going to cost. You need to decide the issue. Do you want approval process or do you want to let the commission approve.

WM: It sounds like that would give the people more voice in changes.

ER: It would give them—yes, because, I argue the commission should not and hopefully would not, submit a comprehensive plan change to the state unless they were pretty sure that the people were going to approve it.

WM: Okay.

ER: It definitely says you've got to listen a little more. Like I said, there are good things and there are bad things and I don't take a stand on this. The second item has to do with small comprehensive plan changes, five parcels or less. This is a statement in the city—or in the state laws—statute concerning comprehensive plans. It specifically states that any plan change affecting five or fewer parcels cannot be put to a public referendum.

I don't think anybody knows why they singled out the small plan change as opposed to—there's no mention in the state's statutes about any changes larger than five parcels. So what the referendum says is that if the city is proposing a small comprehensive plan change with five parcels or less, would normally mean it's one project. Okay? The

commission would have to have unanimous approval of the ordinance adopting that small plan change. This would be after the county approves and after the state approves it. The small plan changes are kind of—they are sort of like a high-speed way to adjust your comprehensive plan. They have minimum impact on the overall comprehensive plan. That's why the state provides this separation—the small versus the large.

A unanimous commission vote, one argument is that's a single commissioner veto. Fine, that's true. But the other thing is if the small plan change affects five or fewer parcels it's probably all in one district. To me that says, as a side line, or as a benefit that the commissioner representing that particular district, if his district doesn't want it, or he feels they don't want it, then the other representatives do want it, he can stop the impact to his district. I'll give you an example. If somebody over here wanted to rezone five parcels to build a chicken farm—okay? It only affects one district, it's a small plan change. It's a ridiculous thing but you know? Theoretically, if the state would approve it we could do it, you know?

The commissioner in that district could stop it, because I'm assuming that the residents in that district aren't going to want it. That's an assumption of mine. The same respect, maybe the people in that district do want that change. Maybe it's not a chicken farm; maybe it's some other thing. Negative is a commissioner from another district can also stop it, if he doesn't want it. Even if the district that it is in wants it.

So it has its good and bad. I don't recommend anybody voting for or against it, you got to decide is the benefit worth the lack of benefit. Those are the only examples I've come up with so far on that issue. Third charter referendum change has to do with community redevelopment plans. A community redevelopment agency can be established by a government organization (phone rings)—if I hit the button it shuts it off—to redevelop a certain area of the city that is declared as blighted, or needs redevelopment. There are several of these in St. Petersburg. There are several in Clearwater. There are a couple of them I think three in Largo, four or five in St. Pete and I'm just guessing at these numbers, from what I've read in the newspaper. There's never been one that I've known about, in St. Pete Beach.

We have proposed in our large resort district and commercial area to institute a community redevelopment plan. Why would you do this? The biggest benefit is if you get an area declared as part of a community redevelopment area you can then apply to the county, that as a result of any redevelopment that increases the property tax value of the property that is redeveloped within that area, you can get the county to kick back to you part of their increased property tax collection. Because the appraisal of the redeveloped property went up you can get some of the county's increase sent back to the city. The city then has to spend it within that redevelopment area to add to the improvement of that area.

It's an urban renewal technique. Like I said there are several of them in St. Petersburg. St. Petersburg is a huge city, the biggest land area city in Pinellas County. They've got different areas in the city. We've never had one. This is probably the only one we'll ever have. If we have another one its going to be an awful long time before we have one. But it gives the people the right to decide whether or not we want to have one there. A lot of the concern was eminent domain related. A community redevelopment area gives the city—could've given the city some additional powers of eminent domain, to buy property, a la *Kelo v. New Haven*. Sell it back to the developer. The state took that away from us that issue is gone. I keep pointing out to people that issue is again on the ballot as a state constitutional amendment, to make it permanent. Don't vote (phone rings) yes or no just because you think the state took it away from us. This was step two, but you know—that's an aside.

The other thing a lot of the citizens didn't like is to be able to achieve this you had to declare this area blighted and a lot of people didn't like that terminology. If they owned properties or their home was in that area, they didn't like being called blighted, even though properties in that area met all of the definition of. There are certain definitions, the condition of the property, the number of police calls that come there. It's like a handful of things in the state statutes to qualify for this.

So because the people did not like some of things that came with this, they wanted to have a voice in it. It can be a good thing, could be a bad thing. If the community redevelopment areas approved it goes forward. If it's not it either gets adjusted or it's given up. I don't know which way it will go. But this is petition, this charter change was to give the people the right to say, “Yes we want you to go forward with this.” Or, “No, we don't.”

I don't see that as a problem. There is no such thing as an emergency community redevelopment area that I can think of. So we can wait until the next general election, or election cycle if we're planning one of these to get approval. It does not slow us down that much. We've been trying to do this CRA [community redevelopment area] for two years, probably over a year. The first one we've ever done. It may be the last one we ever do. We're not big like St. Petersburg, where we've got a lot of areas that we need to redevelop. The fourth charter change has to do with the heights of the buildings, this is the one that there's been a lot of “tall tales” told over.

It basically says, that if it's approved the city wants to change the zoning code effecting heights of buildings in any part of the city. That change to the zoning code has to be approved by a public referendum. So this says that if we want to take, for example, Pass-A-Grille, which may come up here in the future, and say that we're going to let the

buildings on 8th Avenue get redeveloped, taller than the thirty-five foot limit that's allowed there right now.

Okay, maybe give them forty feet. The people would have to vote on that. If we wanted to give them 100 feet, the people would have to vote on that. I tell people I've lived here eighteen years and mistakenly I stated that I didn't think the height limit had been changed the whole time that I was here. Somebody pointed out to me that there was a three foot change to the code made down here in Pass-A-Grille some years ago, that I had forgotten about.

One time in eighteen years, they've changed the height code. There are proposals that will change it. Probably with the new redevelopment plan, if we go forward with it, if the comprehensive plan changes it, then they'll be a proposal, probably, to change it in Pass-A-Grille, because of the 8th Avenue issue. Whether or not the people support either one of them, I'm not sure. But the people would have the right to vote on them.

Height was a trigger issue in the opposition to the comp-plan changes. The comprehensive plan does not regulate height, only the zoning code does. There's been a lot of misinformation spread saying that the people will have to vote on every site plan that came to the city. No building could be built above fifty feet, which is the current rate, fifty feet above base flood without a vote of the people. That's not what this says!

This says if you change the zoning regulations the people vote on it. The people cannot vote on site plans. I don't think that legally we can let them vote on site plans. You know? Other things that have been said, "Oh you'll be voting every month on some building." That's not going to happen. So all of this is hype. That's our four charter changes. The two ordinance changes, we've talked about the one that's the comprehensive plan. It would repeal the new comprehensive plan changes.

What's the impact? We would get busy right away, adjust what people didn't like about it. We'd try to resubmit it. If the adjustments are small and don't increase the intensity, the state reviews should not take very long, because they are mostly worried about increases in intensity. The people seem to be worried that, you know, they want to get less intense, so the state is probably going to, very quickly, give us a response. If the charter change happens, where we have to put it to a vote, I would like to think that if we worked fast enough and the differences between what the people want in the comp-plan and what they don't like in the proposed comp-plan, I don't think they are that great.

We can work out the differences, re-submit the to the state, get approved, have the thing on the ballot by March, if the charter change requiring approval passes. The charter

change requiring approval doesn't pass and the ordinance is repealed, we still adjust the comp-plan. We still run it through the state. But then we wouldn't need the voter approval.

It's, you know, that could go two different ways if it doesn't pass. A yes repeals the ordinance and gets us back to working with the plan. A no doesn't repeal the ordinance, so the plan would then go forward. People on one side keep saying that, "This will kill the hotels." They make statements that imply that we'll never be able to have a comprehensive plan change again. That's not true. It just says that we've got to work on this one a little more and we may or may not put it to a vote.

WM: Okay, simply stated the people who say, "This will kill the hotels," are they the people who are for it?

ER: That's the vote-no people.

WM: All right.

ER: Like I said, those are the ones that are saying, "Yes" means condos, "No" means hotels." Which I said was an outright lie and I'm tired of answering that one, 'cause they won't stop saying it.

WM: Okay. I won't ask that question.

ER: The sixth one is another ordinance repeal and that is shortly after the petition stopped the movement of the comprehensive plan. The one that I just discussed. The petition that stopped implementing it, by challenging the ordinance that implementing it. The city turned around and proposed what was referred to as a Plan Development District. PDD or some cities call it PUD, Plan Unit Development.

It's a zoning category that is used in a lot of different areas, where if someone comes in and wants to do something out of the ordinary that doesn't quite fit in to the current zoning but does fit in with the current comprehensive plan. And it has enough advantages to the community, you know, in the city and so on, and we can take in a—or redefine that area as a special zoning district and say, "Okay with what you're proposing and we approve every part of this, and there's all kind of conditions on this, then we will let you develop within the limits of the comprehensive plan, but beyond the limits of the current allowed zoning." The comprehensive plan is the maximum we can do. The zoning is

what we're going to allow underneath that maximum. You know, up to but not exceeding the maximum. In almost every case right now our zoning does not allow the maximum. It doesn't even allow some things that the comprehensive plan allows.

So this was proposed shortly after the comp-plan petition was approved by the supervisor of elections. It stopped the implement of the comprehensive plan. So, immediately it looks like a backdoor to get around what the stopping of the comp-plan change did. Okay. And I will not express whether or not that was the intent of the city. I opposed this, not because it was not a good zoning category. I think it's a very good zoning category. I opposed it because the community was not ready for it yet, and they were going to respond negatively to it, at this time, because they saw it as ignoring their opinion, ignoring the fact they'd stopped redevelopment while they think about it. And now we're going to go around them and make it happen anyway. The commission passed it. It was four to one. I voted against it. I made it very clear that I voted against it because the public was not supporting this right now. I think if we had waited a couple of months and explained it better we could have gotten the public support of it. But this was a slap in the face of the people that signed the petition.

So it went forward. We had one project apply for it while the petitions were being signed. It got—the application got turned in before the signatures were verified so we've got one project going forward under this planned development district, but no other projects can go forward now because of the petitions to repeal the ordinance, which made it happen. That's the sixth item on there.

I'll point out a couple of things about the two ordinances. I voted in favor of the comprehensive plan ordinance and the first reading, every ordinance requires two readings. Because I thought, and still do, think the comprehensive plan changes can be worked with. Okay? I voted against the second reading of the comprehensive plan because the first set of petitions had been turned in. I felt that this is not the time to ignore what's going on out there. So, one vote yes, one vote no, on the comprehensive plan.

When the ordinances to do the plan development district came forward I voted against it both times because it was not the time to do this, given the backlash we were going to get out of the citizens. I still think if we had waited several months, explained what we were doing and why and not made it look like the backdoor that it appears to have been, we could have gotten enough support where it would not have been challenged. Some of these projects would have been able to go forward.

The controls within the plan development-zoning category are so wonderful that, basically the commission can turn it down for any reason. Because it's our choice whether or not we let this developer do this. We do not take away his development rights. He still

has all the rights he had, under the current zoning; it's just our choice whether or not we give him these additional possibilities. We have a development at the east end of Corey Avenue right now that's gone through, probably six months of changes and adjustments and it's the most unusual developer I've ever dealt with. Because everything I've ever asked for—even suggested to him, he's given us. He's turned us down on almost nothing! He's dedicating a part of his development to be granted to us as an easement for a park, on the waterfront down there, in exchange for—apparently in exchange for vacating a street that will pretty much go now where after his development. It does affect one property owner and there is some contention over that. But he's made concessions to accommodate this one property owner.

But the project, everything I've asked for he's done. He's given us, by easement, his entire waterfront, if he can develop, you know, back from the water. It's just amazing what he's agreed to. And that's under that planned development category because he knows he can't get approval unless he gets three commissioners to support it. It's hard to deal with a developer that gives you everything. You know?

WM: Actually isn't easier to deal?

ER: No, no, I mean that it's just that you keep looking for “what am I not seeing?”
(laughs) It's great.

WM: You were speaking facetiously?

ER: Facetiously! Yes! Oh yeah. I'm being facetious because I'd never run into this before. It's like we're his customer. (laughs)

WM: Okay. I heard you say that the ordinances, voting no will reduce citizen input in controlling development.

ER: No, it won't reduce it. It will leave it the way it is right now.

WM: Okay, right. But voting yes will increase it?

ER: Increase it, yes.

WM: Okay, so if you can, succinctly, tell me—briefly tell me, what will happen—what do you see the future of St. Pete Beach? You can say what you see happening if they vote yes. You can say what you see happening if they vote no.

ER: A lot of it depends on the commission that we have once this is all over with. If the commission reacts to a no vote, meaning they have approval to do everything they are going to do I think we're going to see a lot more lawsuits, a lot more concern. If the commission accepts a no vote as authorization to go forward, but we really need to be a little bit more careful and make some changes to our implementation, then I think we can work out what the citizens are concerned about. But we've got to listen to them and respond to them and not just the hotel developers.

If they vote yes life goes on. It's just a couple of more steps in how we do business. If they vote yes to repeal the comprehensive plan, it's going to delay it a little longer. Until we get the kinks worked out, getting approval via the state and then determine whether or not we need an approval by the voters, based on the one referendum. And add that additional delay. But it will still happen. It has to happen. We have to do some changes to let the hotels redevelop. Economically everybody knows they can't redevelop within the limits that they currently have. The economy just won't support a hotel to be built at thirty units per acre right now, and that's what the current code is. We know that won't work because they haven't been developed at thirty units per acre in quite awhile.

If we raise that density—and the question is how much—we hopefully can get some of the hotels, the older ones that have not been properly cared for to be torn down and rebuilt. We've got one that's actually shut down, because it's in such bad shape that they can't operate it's been that way for over a year. So we know something has to happen there. If we can't work any of this thing out, they can still build fifteen condos per acre, but on the beach side we'd like to avoid that. Both sides, the yes and the no, support the hotels. They just support it in different fashions. So, you know, it changes a little of the rules. If the Division 43 gets repealed, well then this one project is the only one that's gone forward under it. Hopefully once we change the comprehensive plan to something agreeable to the people and adjust the implementation to be agreeable, these same areas that Division 43 wants to work under, can still redevelop.

Division 43 was patterned, quite a bit, after what was proposed for the new zoning regulations anyway. So it turns out they can get less under Division 43 in some areas. They can get more under Division 43 in some areas. So to the actual property owners, they win if they get the comp-plan and not development, Division 43. They'll win if they get Division 43 not repealed. A no works for them in either direction. A yes just slows it down a little bit.

Eventually we have to change the comprehensive plan. We know that. I think all parties agree to it. The disagreement is how we change it and to what levels. The height thing a lot of the people for many, many years, never wanted the fifty-foot over base flood to change—ever! A lot of the input is, “Okay, if that's what it takes to build the hotel, we'll go a little bit higher.” But hotels can be built in five-story buildings. You know?

So it is an issue of who would support what. The people will feel they have a little more control, and they will have, more control over how vertical the community becomes. A lot of people argue that you can't see over a one-story building, so what's the matter if the building's twenty stories? Well—I'd say you can't see over our dune-line right now, which is a good thing. You still got to walk out to the beach to see it. But what is the general feel of the community? I can drive up through some of the beach communities, or even our community now, and you don't feel overwhelmed and down below something as you drive the street. You drive up to some of the northern communities that have the really tall buildings and you start to feel like you're, you know in a city.

I don't think anybody—I don't think hardly any of the residents want us to be what downtown St. Petersburg is coming to. That's a different city. That's a different part of their city and they've segregated their tall buildings to their downtown area. If you look at their codes, their height codes are as strict or stricter than ours, for the rest of their city. We don't want that—a majority of us. When I say “we” I'm using the generalization of the opinion that the residents of this city have had for years. I told you back in 2001 one of the things in the proposed land development regulations that upset people is they'd snuck a height change in there. They bumped from fifty to I think seventy-five feet, in some of the areas.

People got all upset. They took it out. You can go through the museum here, and it's been pointed out to me by a couple of the docents who've done the research, that every five or six years somebody would mumble raising the height limit and the commission would be told, “No way.” And then the commission would back down and not raise it. This is the first time they haven't really listened to the opposition of raising the height limits. Does that mean they think the opposition is as strong now? I don't know. It's there. In my neighborhood it was just as strong. Some people in the neighborhood, say, you know, “Yeah, let them be as tall as they want, or let them be taller, or whatever.” But the majority of the people the height is an issue. It's a general feel of the community. It's an aesthetic thing.

The counter argument is taller buildings can be narrower, so you'll have less of a wall of concrete between the street and the beach. But in our codes we haven't really implemented it that way. We said we have, but we haven't. We've brought them in some, but not as much as we promised. Another issue is that, “Well, if we go taller we could put the parking in, could put the parking in structured parking so that it is not out there on the

ground. We'll have more landscaping.” I fought like crazy to get them to increase the pervious surface ratio on those properties that they are promising more landscaping and they wouldn't do it! So there is no guarantee of more landscaping. It's still going to be just as much concrete and asphalt as before if you don't change that number. That number is in the comprehensive plan, by the way.

So, you know that's where we go. There is good and bad, if it goes one way, life will go on. If it goes the other way, life will go on. Either way, hopefully, we're going to end up with some new hotels and we're going to end up with some new businesses and some areas that look bad being turned good. There's still going to be a lot of blighted areas, because property owners buy up these properties and sit on them for the land appreciation. They're not going to develop as long as they think the city is redeveloping and their little parcel of land is going to go up in value. You know, it's like a share of stock.

The previous commissioner, who's no longer on the commission, one time suggested that perhaps the state should lower the tax rate on vacant properties so they wouldn't be taxed as hard because they don't cost the taxpayers as much to manage. There's less demand on the city as far as services for a vacant lot. I told her that was the dumbest idea I've ever heard. That's going to clear major parts of the city and we'll have vacant lots everywhere, like shares of stock. Because you don't have the tax incentive losing money, to encourage you to put that land to work. You know? And we've got some properties that have been vacant lots for many years there. They've tried several proposals on them and none of them have, you know they've gotten the plans approved but none of them have really gone forward. This would make it worse I'm afraid. So, that's my opinion.

WM: Well that sounds like a good place to conclude.

ER: Okay.

WM: Is there anything you want to comment on that I haven't asked about?

ER: No. This was your show.

WM: Okay I want to thank you for taking the time—

ER: I did want to chuckle, when you asked for a brief answer, I don't think I ever have brief answers.

WM: I'd about come to that conclusion. That might be the briefest answer you've given this morning. You're right about that. But anyhow, thanks for taking the time to talk with me. I'll remind you that this information will be deposited in the Special Collections of the University of South Florida to be available for future research.

ER: Okay.

WM: And in order for us to have access—in order for people to have access to this interview I need to get you to sign a release form.

ER: That's fine. And keep in mind that these are my views and my opinions. They're not necessarily the views and opinions of the city government, or the other commissioners. You are interviewing me. You're not interviewing me in an official capacity, I don't feel. If this were an official capacity we would have done this at city hall.

WM: Right.

ER: So keep in mind I am not speaking in behalf of any other commissioner or even any other person. Okay?

WM: Okay, well that's what I understand. We wanted to talk to Ed Ruttencutter and hear what Ed Ruttencutter has to say.

ER: These are my ideas and my answers aren't short because I try to look at all sides of it. Sometimes I forget a side, but there are no simple answers when you see—when you try to see the pros and cons of everything.

WM: Okay. Well, let me shut this thing off.

end of interview