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

Interview with: Ms. Jan Platt  
Interviewed by: William Mansfield  
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**WM:** I always put a label on the disc by saying: This is Bill Mansfield from the Patel Center for Global Solutions and the University of South Florida's Special Collections talking to Ms. Jan Platt in the Tampa Public Library on September 1, 2006.

Ms. Platt we always get folks to start off by having them state their name and telling us when they were born and where they were born.

**JP:** I'm Jan Platt. I was born in St. Petersburg, Florida in 1936. So that means I will be seventy years old, this month.

WM: What month and day?

JP: September 27<sup>th</sup>.

WM: You've got a birthday coming up.

JP: I do.

WM: Let's see—what's your current occupation?

JP: I'm retired.

WM: Good for you. But you served on the County Board of Commissioners?

JP: I was a county commissioner for twenty-four years and a member of the Tampa City Council for four years.

WM: Uh-huh. And what years were you with the Tampa City Council?

JP: From 1974 to 1978.

WM: And the Board of [County] Commissioners?

JP: From '78 to '94. Then I was out of office for two years due to term limits, Then from '96 to 2004.

WM: That's a pretty good [record]. How many years was that?

JP: Twenty-four years.

WM: Wow! That's a long time to serve.

JP: Only one other person has [served longer], historically. (laughs) He beat me by one year.

WM: (laughs) Well, twenty-four years is still a record to be proud of. To have served for that long, you must have been doing something right.

But what we're interested in [for this project] is land use policy in Hillsborough County. How would you say it's changed in the years that you've been on the Board of County Commissioners?

JP: How long is this interview? (laughs) I'm kidding because it's changed dramatically.

WM: Okay.

JP: —Um—when I was initially in elected office—well in '74 I was in the City Council then, and County Commissioner in '78. The planning commission was the main planning agency for both the city and the county. It had been created in 1958 as a result of voting scandals on the City Council. The sponsor of the bill, who created it, was Sam Gibbons, who ultimately was elected to Congress. But it was the main planning agency for both the city and the county. —Um—when I was elected to the County Commission it was the lone planning agency.

If you ever read the history of our county, the Board that I was elected to—several of its members were arrested, indicted and convicted of zoning scandals. Some of them, at one time wanted to—ah—eliminate the Planning Commission, because zoning is where a lot of power is in a high-growth county. They would make inroads, trying to cut the budget of the Planning Commission, fire the director. Even though the Planning Commission was completely independent of the County Commission, other than funding, and that's a key source.

During the time that the ultimately corrupt commissioners were in office they voted to cut \$200,000 from the Planning Commissions budget, transfer it to the County's budget and create a planning department in the county; in order to have some of the planning functions closer to them and under their control.

That was a major shift in land use planning. Up until that point elected bodies had been reliant, solely on the Planning Commission for zoning recommendations.

So (chuckles) one of the um—(pauses)—one of the contributions to our county’s history is that some of the corrupt commissioners are responsible [for] the formation of our Planning Department under the county [government], which is now called Planning and Growth Management. [See Paula Harvey interview with Bill Mansfield 8-25-06.]

At the same time that that was occurring, Guy Spicola who was a senator (pause) was able to have the legislative delegation pass a Zoning Hearing Master Law for the county, that would require that a Zoning Hearing Master would hear zoning [requests] and could make the final decision. [The Circuit Court] threw that law out. [The judge] opined that [zoning] was a function of county government that could not be delegated to someone else.

I took it upon myself to re-write that law and to modify it so that it would meet the court’s objections. Again, ironically—it was when the corrupt board was still seated.

Our zoning [hearings] would start at noon and would go till—ah—one and two and three o’clock [in the morning.] They would make bets on how long the meetings would last. Because, back in those days, the sitting commissioners would hear the entire case. Prior to the Zoning Hearing Master, the halls would be filled with lawyers and developers, advocating for their zoning, prior to the meetings. Which was perfectly legal. The poor citizens didn’t have a chance. So that—often times [in some instances] the zoning meetings were very cut-and-dried, because the—um—of all the lobbying that had gone on before hand. Well, the Zoning Hearing Master ended all that.

I tend to be academic. My major was political science and public administration. I’ve spent my life trying to get government to run by the book. I’ve always read all of the [background material]. I don’t know how I ever got elected, because I was always—um—I tend to be academic. I’d read all of the back up [material]. I tried to make the system work. So that’s why the Zoning Hearing Master—I was really pleased that I was able to get it changed and get the legislature to pass it in its new form. It has stood the test of law, so that it is still in existence.

What it requires is that there be a Zoning Hearing Master who hears the zoning [request]. The citizens have an opportunity to speak. The advocates (for the zoning) speak. Everything is on the record. There is a verbatim [transcript] of the entire record. The Commissioners are relegated to sticking with the record. There is to be no ex parte communication, with either citizen, or developers.

WM: Ex parte communications means “off-the-record”?

JP: It means talking in their offices off-the-record.

WM: Okay.

JP: There can be no [off-the-record] conversations period about the zonings!

The Commissioners are limited to what is on-the-record, what is in those [transcripts] verbatim; the staff recommendations are in black and white. The Zoning Hearing Master makes a recommendation, as does the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission makes a recommendation—all of the recommendations are made at the Zoning Hearing Master level.

The Planning Commission makes a recommendation based on whether the zoning complies with the land use plan. That's their role, is the comprehensive plan. They are the guardians, they are custodians, they are the advocates, they are the ones who develop it. Their recommendation deals with whether [or not] the zoning complies with the plan.

The Planning and Growth Management group—umm—takes into account issues such as: “Is there a wetland on that piece of property? Is there water available? Are there sewer lines available?” They deal with the nitty-gritty of infrastructure issues. They compile all of the various departmental—um—reports regarding the parcel [of land]. They make a recommendation, based on that. But again, their recommendation is [given] before the Hearing Master, not before the County Commissioners.

So—when it comes before the Board, there is a very tight-knit legal framework upon which they can act. If they stray, they can be [taken to] court. (chuckles) So—

That was a dramatic change and we've been very fortunate in this county to have as Hearing Masters former executive directors of the Planning Commission. John Crislip and Martin—ah—Smith, have served as Hearing Masters, since, I think, the beginning of the process. Then there are several others that have come along too.

WM: Well let me ask a question right quick. The Hearing Masters are appointed?

JP: Yes.

WM: Okay.

JP: And they are paid by the County Commission.

WM: Okay, and that's all they do? I mean it's not the kind of thing—

JP: It's part-time.

WM: But you said they were both—John Crislip and Martin Smith are were both—

JP: They're both former directors of the Planning Commission.

WM: Okay.

JP: But there are some others now who are also [serving as Hearing Masters]—because we have so many zonings that they are now [serving as] Hearing Masters. But they are hired by the County Commission. They are contracted and paid a set salary.

WM: And the qualifications to be a Hearing Master?

JP: I'm not going to try to guess that.

WM: Okay. But I mean, if Crislip and Smith had been on the planning commission — correct?

JP: Uh-huh.

WM: So they had an idea of—the whole land-use and planning process?

JP: Yes. Yes.

WM: Okay. You said Spicola, and I take it he was a state senator?

JP: Uh-huh.

WM: He introduced that law, but it was thrown out. When did you re-introduce it.

JP: As soon as it was thrown out (pause) and after I had a chance to re-write it. That would have been—in the early eighties, because it was before the commissioners were arrested. They opposed my bill. (chuckles) They were against it being passed.

WM: That—

JP: And see, another reform which relates to land-use, and yet it doesn't. It's after they were arrested I also introduced a measure that required we have electronic voting [on the Board of County Commissioners].

Now—why is that important?

Because, say with zonings, if you vote by [a show of hands] you can be slow in putting up your hand and you can see what the votes are going to be, to get something passed.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: If it's electronic, it's going to happen all at once. Especially with a Hearing Master where you're not supposed to hear from anybody outside and there's not supposed to be any ex parte. Supposedly, there is no way that you're going to have anybody telling you how somebody else is going to vote.

But one of the things that the corrupt commissioners did was they could tell who was going to vote and how, if you slowly put up your hand. The very zoning that they were arrested on, one of them voted against it.

I voted for it. It had the approval of everybody. Because of the lack of a clear concise—voting [system] they were able to play games.

And what is very surprising to me is that the City of Tampa has never adopted this process.

WM: They haven't adopted it yet?

JP: No, they have not. They've not even considered it. (sighs) You know, I think you have to protect politicians from themselves. (chuckles) And with growth, as rampant as it is in our area, and [for] high-stakes [as well], I just think anything we can do to make sure that it's objective. The more we can do to make sure that it is [objective] the better it is for everybody.

WM: I guess he voted against the [issue] he was actually for, so he could [go] on record as voting against it? And he voted against it because he knew it would pass?

JP: Yeah, he knew it would pass and he got money for voting. He had taken money (laughs). That's how wacky it is. But that tells you how wacky it is. If there are people out there willing to be corrupt, there are all kinds of schemes.

WM: They'll find someone to help them be corrupt?

JP: Yes.

WM: Well I guess the big question of the politics of zoning and land-use planning—There are two interested parties, or sometimes more, I suppose.

So that's a big question. Could you talk to me about that? Tell me who [are] the different parties in the politics of land use? Or different groups, I won't say parties.

JP: Well when you run for office, you're interviewed by the Tampa Board of Realtors, the Home Builders Association, a group called NAIOP [National Association of Industrial and Office Properties] and they are the primary groups that attempt to get commitments from candidates on broad issues when they're interviewed.

Then their members—um—have a great deal of money at their individual disposal. Then they contribute tens of thousands of dollars to their candidates.

(Laughs) I've never been endorsed by those groups. One time the board of realtors endorsed me, because I've always made the practice—I've never made promises to

anybody. Because what sounds good may not be so good when you hear the other side of the question.

But—if you look at campaign contributions, and I think this is true throughout the state of Florida, that the primary contributors of big money are connected with the construction and the development business.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: And that's unfortunate in a way because that puts "John Q. Citizen" at a disadvantage, when they have to try to appear against—you know—state their cause against one of those heavy hitters.

WM: Right quick, you said NAIOP. What is NAIOP? What does it stand for?

JP: (sighs) National Association of—[Industrial and Office Parks]. I don't know you'd have to ask somebody.

WM: But it is N-A-P-O.

JP: No. It's N-A-I-O-P.

WM: Okay. I'll see if I can't find that out. But the construction and development organizations are big contributors to county commissioner's campaigns?

JP: And City [Council]. And the City [Council] too.

WM: They—this is a naïve question— but [do] they tend to support the people who are in favor of development and [reducing] regulation?

JP: You'd have to ask them. (pause) This is just an observation, that the people who do receive a large amount of contributions from them are, in many instances—um—less prone to support increases in impact fees.

For instance, when the impact fees were first passed in 1985—um—they were passed by the Board of County Commissioners that were appointed, basically, by the governor after the arrests of the corrupt group. That was when the first impact fee ordinance was passed by this county. There was a provision in there that the impact fees would be reviewed on a routine basis and that they would be increased as needed, as a result of that review.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: Well every time a review was conducted it would indicate that we needed more impact fees, but I was always on the losing side for increasing those impact fees. They have not been increased. Well, I think the Board did vote to increase the school impact



fees, recently. But there has been a reluctance [by] Commissioners to—increase impact fees.

Now why is that? Because we've needed more money for schools. We need it for roads. We need it for a variety of things, especially roads. And we have probably one of the lowest impact fees in the whole state. Now I'd say that was something that deals with the development support, because they are very much against increasing impact fees.

WM: For the record, tell us what impact fees are.

JP: Impact fees are fees that are placed upon new construction that are supposed to relate to the extent of the impact that that new construction will have on the infrastructure.

So that—say for roads, when I left the County Commission, the impact fee was only 17% of the true impact of the new house. Which is abysmal! But the Commissioners would never increase it.

Schools—um—that impact fee has been limited to, I think, purchase of land, not to [the cost of] construction. [What's] ironic about the school system, the school board, over the years has not requested that that impact fee be increased. And they are the ones who should be requesting that it be increased. Now finally, this year, they did ask for it to be increased. But they had gotten a lot of flak from the media about how low it was and they, basically got shamed into doing it.

I think the homebuilder views impact fees as—an additional cost for a house. They always say, “You're really charging the homeowner, who is going to have to pay for the impact fee, over the years, through their mortgage, or whatever. Well—I'm not going to argue that. The developers could make less profit too, if they were community minded. Other counties, in our area charge, charge higher impact fees than our county does.

WM: So the builders and the developers oppose impact fees because it—does it discourage growth or just lessen their [profit]?

JP: It doesn't discourage growth! People are going to come to Florida regardless [of impact fees]. They're going to come!

(laughs) I've said that, but now that since all of these hurricanes and all of the increased insurance, that may not—it may slow it down. And that may not be all bad. But—um—I think that they view it—they just don't want it.

WM: (clears throat) Excuse me. So they lobby against increasing the impact fees but the county commissioners, and most of the people on the Board of the County Commissioners support keeping impact fees low?

JP: Yes. Now the planning commission has taken tough stands, urging that [the impact fees] be increased. They've been very independent, in saying, over the years that they

should be increased. That's what's good about the planning commission, they have a degree of independence from the County Commissioners, other than that funding. And sometimes that can get sticky. But, over the years, they have encouraged that they be increased.

Then there are large areas in the county that a majority of the Board has voted to waive impact fees all together and even have the county pay for the water and sewer hook-up!

If you talk about encouraging growth and having a handout, that is the ultimate. Ugh!  
(laughs)

WM: (laughs) Well I don't want to put words in your mouth but you seem kind of appalled by that.

JP: I am! I am appalled by it. You know—I'm not for handouts for anybody who is able (chuckles) and has got the money—and you know—doesn't need [a handout]! And why would we encourage growth in an area that has a lack of infrastructure? [That] has lousy roads, doesn't have the schools; and yet that's exactly what—the Board of County of County Commissioners has done, by a majority.

WM: You said that you never received an endorsement from these people. I guess that's because of your stance on regulating growth, or controlling it?

JP: Well I don't make promises. I guess you'd have to ask them why they [decline to endorse me]. I'm pretty independent.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: I'm independent.

WM: How has that opposition manifested itself? If they don't endorse you—

JP: They give a lot of money to my opponents. I seldom have much [campaign] money at all. I don't think I've ever raised \$100,000. I usually raise about \$70,000 when I'm running for office.

So the way it manifests itself is I've had very little money to run for office and my opponents have had hundreds of thousands of dollars. (laughs)

WM: (laughs) Well you must be doing something right to have been re-elected so consistently. How would you account for that?

JP: Well, [it's] because I've grown up here and people know that I'm honest and fair. That if a development is creditable and meets all of the standards, I'll vote for it. I mean I don't vote "No" on every single one. But I think people just know that I'm fair and honest. I don't need the job and I guess that's it.

WM: (chuckles) Well I guess if you can run on your record that's a lot better than trying to run from your record.

JP: (laughs) I guess so.

WM: So that says a lot right then and there. Now you were talking about that law where people had been buying land [for preservation], tell me about that.

JP: Well, I'm a native of Florida and—um—I've been labeled an environmentalist, but I don't know if that would be [accurate]. I'm a sentimentalist. While I've been in office I've seen so much land—

*Tape 1, side 1 ends; side 2 begins.*

—beautiful land that had cypress trees, or mangroves destroyed by bulldozers. And—I'd—it just kills me—ah—to see our state, basically, laid to waste for the sake of development.

It's just an observation of mine that the only way to make sure that—um—special areas in our state are not leveled by bulldozers—is for the government to own them and set them aside. So in 1987, I suggested—I proposed—that the county start an environmentally sensitive land program, purchasing and setting aside lands and that a tax be levied for that purpose.

The initial vote was for [land purchases of ] twenty million dollars. I used as the centerpiece the Cockroach Bay Islands which are a beautiful set of mangrove islands in the south [of Hillsborough] County. Um—it was my suggestion that we use the money to purchase those lands as starters.

What was so great—the islands are so beautiful— was the media was able to take the pictures and show the value of those islands. So the voters, by about a 71 percent [majority] vote, approved that referendum. So we did have the money then to begin a purchase program. Several years latter—um—we expanded the program to one hundred million dollars and put it back on the ballot.

The first program was a pay-as-you-go and the second was a bond-issue. So that was approved, I think it was in 1990. I may be wrong. But the voters, again, by a large majority—I think it was about 71 percent voted to tax themselves to purchase lands.

To date we have purchased about forty thousand acres of land and set them aside. One of the things we said with that program is that we'd use that money as seed money, to match it with other governmental funds that were available. We have successfully done that. Initially [it was] with the CARL Program, which is no longer in existence, which was a state land-buying program.

WM: Now CARL [what's that]?

JP: [spells] C-A-R-L, I can't remember what that stands for.

WM: Okay.

JP: Then we used it with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, has had funds to purchase land. We've partnered with them, we've partnered with the Forever Florida Program [and] various other groups, to purchase [land]. So that—um—a fraction of our money has been spent while we've been able to parlay it and expand it through the use of other funds.

Our program has been used as a model, throughout the state, for land purchases. Again, when I was first elected to office there was no program like that; there were no wetlands' rule, there were no wetlands' setbacks. It was—ah—wide open as to what developers could do.

When I first got into office I saw the bulldozers bulldozing down cypress trees and building houses and banks in what had been cypress swamps. Again, being a native [of Florida] I knew what was going to happen. I got sad.

I've always believed that a "no" vote can be as positive as a "yes" vote if you articulate it well. I'd made an effort to do that when I voted "no," so I would, basically be sounding an alarm when I'd say that.

But anyway—because of my "no's" and my articulation of the problems, we finally did have a wetland rule that (pauses) prohibits construction and clearing of cypress heads and has a set back.

But any way, back to the land use planning—the land use program. It's citizen based. A citizens committee reviews possible sites. Anybody can nominate a site, and they do not have to own it. Now, the owner has to—to be a willing owner, a willing seller so that there is no condemnation involved with it.

But really in a way it's a win-win situation for the development community because it gives them the opportunity. If they have a large, large parcel and they've got a cypress head, the government may buy that and set it aside; rather than having them just have it sit there. Then there is the assurance to the public that, that [land] will always be set-aside.

Um—One of the classic examples of having to have a willing buyer—one of the major controversies. Again, when I was first in office, was on Cockroach Bay. Tampa Electric owned a major piece of land abutting that bay. They were going to put a power plant on that site. A lot of us opposed it, [and] articulated why that wasn't a good idea. Ultimately they did not put that plant there. But that land has—um—and a staff member, on the

Agency on Bay Management, which I chaired at the time, he nominated it to be purchased by ELAPP. [Environmental Land Acquisitions and Protection Program]

Now we didn't have a willing seller, because Tampa Electric didn't want to sell it. But—um—they never built the power plant there. And one of the—to me one of—my crowning victories, internally, was before I got out of office is TECO [Tampa Electric Company] said, “Yes, we'll sell the land.” The county bought it, for (I think) \$5,000,000.

WM: (laughs)

JP: (chuckles) So it went full circle.

WM: Wow, Five million dollars still sounds like a big change.

JP: Well it is but it was a big piece of land that they could have done something [to] that would have been very detrimental to the Bay. Had they been able to proceed.

WM: And can you tell me what ELAPP stands for?

JP: Environmentally—um—[Environmental Land Acquisitions and Protection Program] I'm not good on that (laughs). You're going to have to ask someone else.

WM: Okay I just wanted to make sure it was an acronym and not a real word.

JP: It isn't. It is E-L-A-P-P. [You should] ask somebody else. (laughs)

WM: It's like when you talked about the CARL purchasing—I didn't know if you meant coral reefs or an acronym for something.

JP: It's C-A-R-L.

WM: An acronym for something else?

JP: Uh-huh.

WM: Now once land is purchased and set-aside is it used as a park or as—does it just sit there?

JP: Passive uses. It can have trails and it may have controlled burns that sort of thing. But the whole theory is that they are not supposed to have ballparks or that kind of thing [there], because that's development.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: Now with some of the land, in some instances we've been placed in a position, in order to buy the environmental land, we also had to buy maybe some adjacent farmland,

or something else that's part of the whole parcel [of land]. So then what will happen is—um—we may lease out that other piece to continue in farming, or we may sell it off.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: Sometimes that has happened. You need to really talk to [Pete Fowler and] John Brill with the Parks and Recreation Department. He has been the staff member for that program, he and—um—Curt Grimley. Curt has been the, he's been the staffer who's done a lot of the purchasing of that land.

WM: (Writing down names) Okay. And talking about the politics of land use, though, you said there is the Builders Association and the Board of Realtors and these organize industry groups, what about—I guess just call it the opposition to that. I suppose that would be environmentalists, or people with other ideas about how the land should be used.

JP: There are environmental groups, such as the Sierra [Club] and [the] Audubon [Society]. Then there are neighborhood associations and neighbors, so they are the groups that usually form the opposition.

WM: It seems that [the neighborhood associations] would be at somewhat of a disadvantage, because they wouldn't have the resources or the connections.

JP: They are at a disadvantage. That's why the Zoning Hearing Master sort of creates a more level playing field. Because they oftentimes don't have the attorneys. It's some that have an attorney that lives in the neighborhood, its—

But—you know, I've been very proud of the neighborhood groups. They've mustered up a crowd and they'll get some spokesperson who will articulate their issues. Some of them have become very—um—educated in the process and have used it well.

But you know, one of my observations is, sometimes the citizens get involved too late. If I would—give any advice to citizens, I would say get involved early in the process. The legal framework is such that if all the T's are crossed and I's dotted, even if the Board of County Commissioners votes "No," it can be overturned in court very easily. To me the critical area, where citizens need to get involved is when that comprehensive plan is drafted. I don't see many citizens groups doing that. That's where the densities are determined.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: That's where the real critical issues are determined, is in the development of the comprehensive plan. A zoning has to conform with that plan. If it does, then even if the commission votes "No," it's going to be overturned in court.

WM: How can citizens—

JP: They need to find out when that comprehensive plan is going to be revised and participate in that process. There are public hearings. That's a well-established process. I know the developers are very attuned to it. (chuckles) They know! They follow it and they participate. Citizens' groups—they don't realize, in a large part, the extent of the power of that plan.

WM: I [understand]. I come home from work and have supper— maybe watch the news maybe not— and I don't want to be concerned with having to go to some meeting. It seems like—for the citizens, while the opportunity is there, they are at a disadvantage for that, just because it is outside of their everyday experience.

JP: I know. What's the saying? "Constant vigilance." I mean I live in the city of Tampa and there is constant construction. We constantly get notices about some new zoning that's going to happen. If you care you're going to have to—if you're concerned you're going to have to participate. Otherwise, you're going to be left by the wayside. That's just the price we all pay for living in a community and in a fast growing state, where growth seems to be dominant.

The population of the county has *doubled* since I've been in office as a county commissioner. Doubled!

But the City of Tampa has barely grown at all. It's growing a little bit now with these condos, but we'll see if anybody moves into them.

WM: (laughs) Is that a look of skepticism I see on your face?

JP: (laugh) Yes.

WM: Okay. But you've talked about how, in some instances, these neighborhood associations did rally to protect their interests, over the interests of development. Could you illustrate that with an example?

JP: Um—(pauses)—Well this is one I've read about in the paper, since I've been out of office. The citizens down in Ruskin have been having a fight with the County Commissioners over some zoning adjacent to the Little Manatee River and—um—on the bay. They've waged a rigorous battle. They lost it though because the County Commissioners voted to approve the zoning.

One [dispute] that the citizens won—and in this instance the developer was [the] school board, wanting to put a school in an area in Lutz. The citizens said, "If you put the school there then it will increase population, ultimately around that school." The citizens fought that and they won. The County did not approve it and the school board found another site for the school. There are numerous instances of wins and losses.

WM: Could you offer some more?

JP: I'd have to think about it.

WM: Okay, because people will talk about things but it's always good to have an example to go back to.

JP: I remember one in Sun City, where there was a request to put a high-rise [apartment building] on a golf course—a citizen researched the records and [the] original zonings. Her name is Janet Wilson— she's sort of like I am, she's a stickler for research. She looked up the original zoning for Sun City and found that there was a stipulation that there would be no high-rises, abutting the golf course, She rallied the citizens of Sun City to come down with her, with that document. [And so] there's no condo on that golf course. (chuckles)

She was able to win that. The citizens' group won that one.

Ah—I'd have to think about [any further examples].

WM: Okay. Well, if you could, you were telling me about the different environmental groups.

JP: Uh-huh.

WM: Can you think of someone I could talk to, in one of those groups, to get their perspective on land use planning?

JP: Well, someone who's just been active in Ruskin, I think her name is Mary Ella Smith. I think she's a member of [the] Sierra [Club]. But she's been an outspoken environmentalist down in that Ruskin area. You might want to talk to her.

WM: Okay.

JP: Ah—Laura Swain who lives in the Lutz area has been an outspoken critic of some of the development, from an environmental standpoint, up in the northwest [part of the county]. In fact she was a member of the Planning Commission, and did not get re-appointed.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: I cannot help but think it had something to do with her—um—outspoken and well-intended criticism of some of the growth that was being allowed.

WM: So the planning commission is appointed by the Board of County Commissioners?



JP: Four members are appointed by the Board of County Commissioners and four by the city. I think Temple Terrace appoints some, [and] Plant City, all three cities [in Hillsborough County] appoint some members.

WM: And what qualifications do they look at for someone [to be on the] planning commission?

JP: Citizens you mean?

WM: Yeah.

JP: Well—citizens apply to be on it. So it's not something commissioners or city council members propose.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: People apply who want to do it and then the commission selects from those who are listed.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: Jan Smith is someone else you may want to speak to. She was chairman of the planning commission for a number of years. She has been—a staunch supporter for planning and for controlled growth. She lives out in northwest Hillsborough [County], out on a lake. So she's been involved over the years. Ultimately she was the chairman of HARTline [Hillsborough Area Rapid Transit]. She's been a volunteer. Um—she'd be a good one to talk to.

WM: I hate to keep putting a –I don't know how to describe it. You said Laura Swain was not re-appointed to the commission because of her environmental interests?

JP: I think.

WM: Okay. But it seems like, if the Board of County Commissioners selects the people who have applied to be a member of [the planning council]; if the County commissioners are favorable to the development industry and the building industry they would choose people who would share those sympathies.

JP: (pause) Well I would think so too. And—so—but they also are wise enough to know that if there is a strong citizen, who can rally a lot of citizens, then it might be to their advantage, from a political sense, to have a couple of those on the board too.

What I've done over the years, when I was on the [County] Commission is I would always ask, "What is the recommendation of the Commission?" and "What is the recommendation of the staff?"

WM: Of the staff of the planning commission?

JP: Uh-huh. Because some times it was more important to what the staff recommended than what the board recommended.

WM: Uh-huh. Boy! Politics is such a dynamic situation. Seems like there is nothing that, nothing free from [politics]. It's everywhere!

JP: And that's what's so sad in this state. It's because it is all so pro-growth. Look at downtown Tampa, for instance. All the old buildings have been demolished. Because—ah—in our community, the builders—builders of things have the power.

My husband and I went to Montreal, I guess it was last year. [We] went to the old part of Montreal and stayed in a “boutique hotel,” that had [once] been a bank. They pride themselves in restoring old buildings into usable uses.

We went to Denver not long ago. Their main street is as it was one hundred years ago [with] the same building. But there is a Wolfgang Puck [gourmet restaurant]. There is a Chick-fil-A [fast food restaurant]. There is an up-scale women's dress store. [For] all of those, the buildings have been saved, but retrofitted for the present. It was bustling with activity.

But look what's happening in Tampa. Franklin Street is being demolished. There is a big controversy about [the old] Kress's [department store building]. That is a beautiful building. If you look at the facades.

WM: Oh yeah.

JP: But it is probably going to be one. Maas [Brother's Department Store building] just went. Because the people in control right now are builders of things. They're not restorers.

So we're not going to have any history, to any extent. Thank goodness nobody can touch the University of Tampa.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: It's a whole mindset in this state, unfortunately. And nobody's awakened to the fact [of the importance of] restoring some of this. We have so little history anyway, because we haven't been around that long. But what little we have we just let go by the [way of] the destruction table.

WM: Well, to play Devil's advocate, someone would say that building a new building will provide jobs for more people than restoring a building and [therefore] stimulate the economy. That seems like that would be the argument they would use.

JP: Well at some point you're going to come to an end of building new buildings. I don't think that's the role of government.

I don't see anything in the constitution of the state or the United States that says it's the role of government to stimulate the economy. I haven't seen one word about it. And yet that's where everything is headed, to stimulate the economy. Yet, I look out and see who's doing the work and—(sighs)—I'm not sure they are local [people].

WM: That's a good way to put it. So the economy that's being stimulated is not necessarily here?

JP: The people aren't necessarily from here.

WM: What do you see in the future?

JP: (pauses) Well, I think the state is on the verge of getting a rude awakening—as a result of an insurance crisis.

WM: Uh-huh.

JP: —And I think that's going to have some major repercussions. It will provide an opportunity for leaders in the state to do some soul searching.—And—maybe a re-direction of where we're headed. Of what our values really are and what our priorities are.

I talk to more and more people who are leaving the state and moving to Georgia and Tennessee. [People] who have always lived here but [have left] just because of insurance. I mean that insurance is major. I think that is going to cause a re-prioritization of our values. Which, in a way, is not all bad.

WM: One of the things you said that interested me was your talk about [how] being a native of Florida makes you more concerned about protecting Florida. Some of the other people I've interviewed have made similar comments. If I could ask you to comment on [something]. How do you think that— [because] there has been so many people who have moved here— how do you think that has affected land use? As opposed to people who are from here. Does that question make any sense?

JP: I think the people who have come here because of the attributes of Florida. They love to see the Roseate Spoonbills. They love to see the pelicans. They love to fish. They love the attributes of Florida.

But—the problem is, if you get too many people and you don't safeguard the bay and you don't safeguard those wetlands, you're not going to have those attributes any longer. But I believe the people have come here for the very [same] reasons I love Florida, the fishing, the birds, the weather and all of that.

*Tape 1, side 2 ends; tape 2 side 2 begins.*

But those can be destroyed very easily.

I've spent a large part of my life protecting the Bay and trying to bring it back. It was on its way to becoming a "dead-sea," very soon, if some of us had not taken some dramatic measure to turn things around for the Bay. And paradise can be spoiled very easily. If there are not the proper safeguards in place, the very reason why people come here will no longer exist.

I do believe that the people who come here come here for the very reasons that I love Florida. We just have to make sure that those attributes remain intact.

WM: Do you see Hillsborough County becoming more and more a residential area and less and less of an agricultural area?

JP: Absolutely! I do. I think the agriculture—just in my lifetime there are practically no tomato growers. I don't know if there are any to speak of. Strawberries are the main crop these days. Even the Sanwa Growers down in Wimauma. I think they have two places where they grow oriental vegetables. One was here and one is down in Homestead. They're selling that land for development.

It's just my opinion, but I think agricultural land in our county is basically being held—is in a holding pattern—until they can sell it for development. Strawberries are the main last crop. Now we've started blueberries and blackberries but those [crops] don't take much land.

A lot of the county is phosphate land. Down the line, construction on those lands will be a major issue. Not right now, but it will be. If [you] look in eastern and southern Hillsborough—um—a lot of that land is permitted for phosphate. A lot if that land is idle now, and is orange groves. Because they have to reclaim that land.

But then down the line, the question will be what kind of construction can be allowed on that land in terms of radon [gas] and other possible remainders from phosphate mining?

A large percentage of the county is phosphate, people don't realize that is the case. And one of the things you might want to do—and I don't [have] the statistics with me right now— but you can get the statistics of how much land is permitted for phosphate mining in the county.

But I was amazed when I was in office. That's the problem in this county, so many people are centered on the City of Tampa, which they should not be, because two-thirds of the people live out in unincorporated Hillsborough [County]. The complexion of unincorporated Hillsborough is changing on a daily basis. It's really mind-boggling.

WM: Changing in what way? Just people moving out there ?

JP: Oh yeah. The homes, the shopping centers, the community centers, a whole new world.

WM: Just driving north [in the county] going up towards Wesley Chapel, the growth is just phenomenal. And these homes—who are they being built for?

JP: I don't know. It would be interesting for someone to do an analysis of who those [homes] are being built for and who these condos are being built for, in downtown Tampa.

I don't know. Nobody is asking that question. Ah! Nobody's asking the questions. Ah!

I don't think they want to ask the question because—it—may be hurtful to find out the answer. (chuckles)

WM: (laughs) Well, I've been throwing questions at you for the past hour or so, is there anything you want to comment on that I haven't asked about?

JP: Let me think. (pause)

Well the main thing I would say is, I think the citizens who are here have a responsibility in shaping the future of this county. If they have any sense of responsibility and accountability, I would urge them to take part in the legal processes that exist in—shaping our county's future. Participate in the update of the comprehensive plan. Participate in zonings of land in your immediate area. And participate in the political process. Volunteer to help somebody who you think is honest and is going to do the right thing.

One good thing about a democracy is we all have a role to play. If we don't play our part then we're the ones who are going to be responsible for it not going in a positive direction. So the future is in our hands. I would just encourage everybody to be an active participant in every possible political process. Because otherwise there are those who are going to make a great deal of money at our expense. That's not to fault anyone. They are doing what they legally have the right to do, but we have the legal responsibility to be active participants in the process.

WM: You said that citizens have the future in their hands. Do you see that as a bright future—are you optimistic or pessimistic about the way things will turn out?

JP: (pause) Well I'm always an optimist and I do think that this soul searching that is going to come because of this insurance crisis. I think in the next two years there is going to be a lot of soul searching about the future and priorities for the state.

I'm always an optimist. I never would have gotten involved [in] government if I had not been an optimist. (chuckles) We've got to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. (laughs)

WM: (laughs) That's what my mother always says, hope for the best, prepare for the worst and take what comes along.

JP: (laughs) That's been my motto too.

WM: Well this seems like a good place to conclude then.

JP: Okay.

WM: I want to thank you for taking the time to talk with me and remind you again that this information will be deposited in the University of South Florida's Special Collections [Library], and we need your permission to use it. I have a release form for you to sign.

JP: Okay.

WM: Also, I've been photographing everybody I interview. Can I take your picture?

JP: Sure.

WM: Okay, great. Let me stop this thing.

JP: What time do you have?

*end of interview*