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

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WM: 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.

SG: All right, my name is Stephen Gran. I was born in Detroit, Michigan on May 19, 1967.

WM: You're a long way from Detroit.

SG: Yes, we moved down here when I was six.

WM: Okay, so you've pretty much grown up here in Florida, right here in Tampa?

SG: I moved to Gainesville first and then Fort Myers.

WM: Okay. Let's see you're the Agricultural Coordinator, the liaison?

SG: My job title is Manager, Agriculture-Industry Development. I also serve as the agricultural liaison for the county.

WM: Tell me what you do? [What are] the responsibilities and duties of your job?

SG: In most basic terms my job is to enhance the economic sustainability of local agriculture. We do that through a variety of functions. One would be actually helping the individual farmers with issues they're facing, whether it's with county government or just issues in general, with their business. [Such as,] permitting issues, regulatory issues, marketing—trying to identify financial resources and that sort of thing. That's kind of our “hand-holding” process.

Then we also recommend policies, to the board of County Commissioners on agricultural related issues, as they come up. Or, proactively trying to make recommendations for new

policies or new programs within the county that'll, again, encourage the economic sustainability of agriculture in the county.

A lot of what we do is in the area of land use planning.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: Land use regulations, to have an impact on agriculture, since it is a large, probably the largest landholder in the county. Probably about 30 percent of all the land in the county is held by farmers. Land use regulations have a dramatic impact on their ability to use their property.

Then, also, we work in the area of streamlining regulations. The broad scale, like I said, making recommendations to the County Commissioners and also trying to influence changes at the regional and state level, that will meet the intent of the regulation, while having a minimal impact on the [farmer's] bottom line, in terms of their profitability.

WM: Could you explain that a bit more? You said, "Meet the intent of the regulations, but having minimal impact?"

SG: There's ways of streamlining, maybe "bundling" regulations, a group of regulations together so that they, in terms of—We had developed an example of that [which] is a whole farm plan, a process that we went through when I first started with the county.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: We tried to bundle all of the environmental regulations for a given farm into a plan, a whole farm plan. Basically what it meant was, if you were operating according to that plan, the various regulatory agencies would agree that you are, in fact, in compliance with their regulations. Without having to go through the individual permitting process, with each individual regulatory agency you had one document that you had to [follow]. Then you were deemed to be in compliance.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: That process never fully made it through to completion. Now we're working through a program with "Best Management Practices" that have been developed at the state level, the State Department of Agriculture. We're implementing those now at the local level. If you're operating according to these Best Management Practices, then you are—ah—in fact, in compliance with the water quality regulations that the state imposes.

WM: So—

SC: Basically the regulation is for, BMPs [Best Management Practices] are directed towards water quality. In the traditional sense the agency would come out and test the

water. See what the water quality was. If you were out of compliance you'd have to do something to correct that.

With the Best Management Practices Program, if you're implementing the Best Management Practices, that are developed using the best science available, it's agreed that by implementing those [BMPs] the water quality will be in compliance. So it's a different way of approaching the regulation itself.

WM: Would you consider yourself as an advocate for the farmer?

SC: Well, my job is to do what's best for the county. And we see the continuation of agriculture to be in the best interests of the county.

WM: That's been one of the struggles I've read about, is that as the city grows out and encroaches on agricultural areas, there's, I guess some sort of conflict between people wanting to develop the land and farmers wanting to maintain it.

SC: I don't see that conflict as much, because there is always—the property rights issue. No one forces a farmer to sell for development. It's an economic decision that they make. When the price being offered, for a piece of property, is multiples of what the property is worth, in its current agricultural use, then many times the decision is pretty easy—to sell.

But—to me, I don't see much conflict between development itself and farming. Where the conflict happens, is with new regulations that may come into place, when people are closer to where our agricultural products are produced. It's not necessarily new regulations, it's just a lot more oversight. The farmer can be operating according to every rule and regulation out there. But, because the new residents in an area don't understand what agricultural production is all about, they'll call their county government. They'll call their state representatives and so forth, to make complaints that typically aren't—ah—I don't want to use the word justified, but they are not legitimate complaints. Because the farmer is operating the way they're supposed to.

But, when those types of issues come up, the regulatory agency, they have to respond. So they have to contact that farmer. The farmer has to respond. You know, it takes time out of their schedule to deal with it. Typically, in order to make sure that situation doesn't happen again, even though they were within their rights [with] what they were doing, many times [the farmer] will adjust the way they produce their crop. It may not be the most economically efficient way to do it and that impacts their bottom line. So, there's an unintended consequence of having that high-density population base close to some of these agricultural uses.

WM: Uh-huh.

SC: There are a lot of agricultural uses that almost have a symbiotic relationship between them and development. You know [with] a lot of our crops we're transitioning from a lower intensity type agriculture to a higher intensity agriculture. We've gone from mainly pasture and open-space type agriculture to more of the [denser crops, such as]

strawberries, ornamental plants and vegetable production, some of that has to do with the value of the land. When the value of the land increases that give the farmer to ability to borrow more money in order to plant a more profitable type of commodity. Recently we've seen a lot of transition from citrus into row crop, vegetable or strawberry production. That's directly related to the underlying value of the land.

WM: What I had read is—Now you know far more about this than I do, so feel free to interrupt to correct and clarify [what I say] but it is to the municipality's advantage to annex more land to increase its tax base.

SC: Yeah, although annexation is typically applied for by the landowner. There has been quite a bit of that here in Hillsborough County, but it is usually related to where the services—you know—who the service provider can be for a given development.

WM: Uh-huh.

SC: That's why the city of Tampa has annexed some land up in the north part of the county. That's kind of the way they've been growing, even with their services, so that landowners see that as maybe an easier way to get more density for their piece of property, to then develop.

WM: And that brings to mind another question. When I was talking to Mr. Carlton [See Dennis Carlton interview with Bill Mansfield 6-27-06] he was talking about, you know, zoning density. [He said] you could zone a place for higher density—that meant you could sell more lots.

SG: Right. On a given piece of property if you're able to get more density then you have more lots available. When homeowners are buying property they're not necessarily buying acreage. They're thinking about a place to put a house. So the—ah—the price per lot is almost constant, no matter if it is a quarter-acre lot or a half-acre lot. If the landowner is able to get more lots on a given piece of property that adds to their—ah—profitability and also the efficiency of the development.

If some of our land, within what's called the urban service area in the county, were able to develop at the rate that the comprehensive land use plan indicates, we would actually have less pressure on the agricultural land to convert to other uses. Because, right now, our land within the urban service area, when someone applies for a rezoning, the underlying land use may be six units per acre, but when they apply for the rezoning, many times they are not getting that six units. They may get four or five [units] per acre.

That comes down to a political decision. Many times the adjacent landowners don't want the higher density near them. Even though it's within what the comp plan recommends, in order to appease the neighbors the developer will ratchet down how many units they are asking for.

WM: Is it the developer that makes the decision to “ratchet down,” or would it be the county commissioners?

SG: Well, it ultimately comes to the county commissioners. You know, they may not approve a development at the density that was in the comp plan. And it’s based on when we have these public hearings, the public comes in and voices their concerns. Then the county commission weighs those concerns, versus the applicant’s proposal and it comes down to some give and take.

WM: And how do you play into these decisions concerning agriculture?

SG: When it’s those individual land use decisions, we don’t play a role. Certainly we will make recommendations, in terms of annexation; if we feel that will encourage the conversion from agriculture use to other uses, we may state that opinion. But on an individual applicant’s proposal, we don’t. We have not made any recommendation.

What we do, in terms of the overall policy of the board, the comp plan itself—we’ve made dramatic changes within the comp plan, about what is allowed for agriculture, in terms of it being the preferred use in the rural parts of the county. Outside the urban service area we were able to insert a policy that says, “Agriculture and support-uses are the preferred uses.”

So—ah—based on that policy is the understanding that when you move out to the rural area, you should expect agriculture to exist. Whether it’s today or twenty years from now, you may be living right next to an orange grove, or a vegetable field. You’re going to have to expect them to be plowing. Or early in the morning there’s going to be noise. There’s going to be odors. There are going to be pesticides and fertilizers used. Those are things you should expect in the rural area.

That has actually gone a long way to assisting local growers in addressing some of these conflicts, these perceived conflicts between the local residents and agriculture.

WM: That brings me to my next question. What are the common problems, or perhaps the most common problem that you have to deal with, in advocating for the farmer?

SG: Ah—like I said, I do service [as the] Ag-liaison and typically a lot of the residential complaints do come through us. They’ll maybe first go to a county commissioner or another department and then come to us, to see what the issue is. Many times, it’s noise.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: Surface water, impacts.

WM: Could you elaborate on that, surface water impacts?

SG: Ah—it could be flooding, water coming off an agricultural piece property impacting another landowner. Sometimes that's a situation where a farmer has changed crops and the field may not have been planned according to the specifications.

Typically when a piece of property is cleared or you put in a row crop, like vegetables or strawberries, or actually even citrus groves—you go through a process with the Water Management District, in order to get a surface water exemption through their office. [It] says that if you are farming according to certain specifications and other certain set-backs (You know there are certain ways the field should be laid out.) then you're exempt from their regulations. But the exemption is based on the fact that you're not going to impact your adjacent landowners. So, if somebody goes through that process they should not have an impact on the adjacent landowners. Then the Water Management District typically takes corrective action.

Mostly the cases I've dealt with on that, have been—ah—more related to our weather. I mean there are some parts of the county where if we're going to have a twenty-year rain event [that land] is going to flood, no matter who their neighbor is, whether it's a farm or, you know, another house. So, many times it's beyond the farmers' control or their responsibility. But, people see the direction the water's coming [from] and they feel that is it the fault of the person up-stream.

But, you know we deal with that a lot and like I said— noise, and also odors. There's some of the cattle ranches used recycled chicken manure as a fertilizer, a soil amendment. As long as they are applying it according to the recommended fertilizer rate, then everything should be okay. There should be minimal odor issues. It's actually a good thing to do, both for the grass and as a waste management tool.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: So—ah—I've dealt with that several times and we've alleviated all those issues, when they came up.

WM: I'm just trying to get a better understanding of how this operates. The farmer comes to you with this complaint or the adjacent residential landowner?

SG: Sometimes it's a landowner [that] would come directly to me. But, sometimes it can come from all directions.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: Sometimes the agency that's involved will call me to get a better feel for what the agricultural practices [are], to see if it's a legitimate, or a generally accepted agricultural practice. Or the farmer could come to me, if they've been cited for something that they feel they shouldn't be cited for. So it can come from all angles.

One aspect, with these types of nuisance complaints is that farmers are really protected by the state's right to farm law.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: Basically that law says if a farm is operating according to generally accepted agricultural practices, then you're not subject to nuisance lawsuits or complaints. Our regulatory agencies understand that so, when there are perceived problems they contact me and we'll go out and take a look and see if it's a generally accepted practice. And that term is what's used in the state law. That is different from Best Management Practices.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: I guess there is some technicalities there, about what the differences are. A generally accepted practice is, you know, what is typical in the industry. Best Management Practice is more about efficiency and efficiency in use of natural resources. So it's a little bit different, so they both apply.

The—ah—I lost my train of thought.

WM: That's okay. My train of thought is often derailed or shows up late at the depot.

SG: (laughs)

WM: You've talked about the state plans and, I guess, what you call the state growth management plan?

SG: Well the—ah—there is a State Growth Management Act, where our local Comprehensive Land Use Plan fits into the state Growth Management Plan. We've had recommendations that go into that, the county plan. That's where we've done these things to make agriculture the preferred use. We allow agriculture to continue in the urban part of the county also, as long as it wishes to continue. We try not to have negative impact on their ability to continue. Although there are always those potential, perceived conflicts between land uses.

WM: When the city grows out, around the farm, how does that change the farmer's practices?

SC: By the way the law is set up, they really shouldn't have to change anything. But, in order to be a good neighbor and not have to deal with—ah—having to address these issues that they shouldn't have to address, but they end up having to address them.

They typically do change the way they do business. They may have a buffer area between them and their neighbors and [waste] hours of operation and trying to keep the noise down. Maybe not spraying what they normally would have sprayed. They'll use something that's less—maybe doesn't have the same odor, but also may not have the

same effectiveness. Typically it will add costs to them and also, potentially reduce their production ability. That's what causes some of the farmers in those areas to go out of business.

A lot of folks out in the Valrico, Brandon area (there are [some] scattered strawberry farms still in those areas) they'll say how much they love having that strawberry farm across the street because it provides an open space and gives them a good view. But as soon as the farmer goes out there and ploughs the field to put down their cover crop in the summer and it causes all of this dust, then they'll call the county and try to make [the farmer] stop.

Well, you know the farmer is only doing what he needs to do, to keep the soil in place for the summer and also work that stuff back into the soil to add organic matter. So it is what they are supposed to be doing but sometimes the residents don't understand that. It's those types of complaints that [makes] the farmer feel like he is not wanted in that area. It's valuable land and they'll sell it and [then] buy twice the acreage someplace else.

WM: One of the things I've read is that the state growth management plan, some people think it is a good idea, some people think it doesn't work. How would you categorize it?

SG: I think by the measures we've put in place in Hillsborough County, it has worked. Most of our development is going into the urban service area, where it should [go]. I don't have the exact percentages but I think up to 90 percent of our population growth is in the urban service area, where the rest is outside the urban service area. We've tried to set up three different levels of—ah—lifestyles. You can have the urban lifestyle, where it is highly, dense type of development; suburban [lifestyle] which is maybe four units per acre and then we allow for the rural. Rural type lifestyle is one to five acre lots. In our comp plan, in our land development code is structured in a way that we want those three types of lifestyle to be—ah—perpetual. We don't expect the rural lifestyle to go away at some point in the future. We expect there to always be that option in the county, to have a rural type lifestyle, where agriculture typically fits into that.

In the mid-seventies, thirty years ago now, the first comp plan was drawn up for the county. It proposed, or it projected that by the year 2000 that our population would be about a million and that agriculture would no longer exist. I guess that plan didn't work so well, because our population did hit a million, but in the year 2000 we had about 240,000 acres of agriculture. So we were able to hold onto the agricultural use. I expect that to continue. We're declining; there is no doubt about that. But we're also maintaining our higher intensity uses while the lower intensity uses are converting to—ah—development.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: You know, it's those low intensity uses that provide most of the open space and maybe more of the wildlife habitat and so forth. [Losing it] isn't good thing. I certainly

wish we could hold on to it. But in terms of economic decisions, it is the most likely to convert [to non-agricultural use].

WM: Uh-huh. Well, the article that I read talked about people who were supporters of the management plan and people who were detractors of the management plan. Who would you say are the people that you think are most supportive of the management plan? The individuals and groups?

SG: I don't know if anyone would really come out—any specific group. They're both sides. Whether it's an environmental group that will be on both sides of it sometimes. Agricultural groups are on both sides and the development groups are on both sides. It depends on the issue.

WM: If it aggravates everybody, then it must be correct.

SG: It really is. There are many times where—ah—the agricultural and environmental groups are on the same side of an issue, but there are many times when they are on the opposite side.

There is a new law that the governor just signed. It's the Agricultural Enclave Bill. It says that if a piece of agricultural land is surrounded on 75 percent of its perimeter by development and it is outside the urban service area that they are then able to apply for the comp plan change, in order for them to be included in the urban service area and get comparable density, as their adjacent land owners.

Well the environmental groups seem to think that would encourage urban sprawl. The agricultural groups say that it will actually prevent urban sprawl because it would be a continuous land use pattern. If the agricultural landowner is able to apply for the same density that his neighbors get, that's the continuation of the same land use pattern, rather than maybe a "hopscotch." Where someone is able to apply further out and then leave these pockets of undeveloped areas that could be developed. Services could be brought in at a less expensive rate. So that is one situation where agricultural and environmental folks are on the opposite side.

And in other terms, we're talking about holding on to agriculture. My program is really aimed at supporting the economic sustainability.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: We've promoted the property rights, the current property rights of the landowners. That has had an impact on their ability to stay in business. So the environmental groups have agreed with us.

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

SG: Basically and partly because they understand that agriculture, even if there are some things they may not like, such as pesticide use or the amount of water—that sort of thing. They do understand that agriculture provides the open space and wildlife habitat that they enjoy. So there is—ah—it really depends on the issues, where folks team up and collaborate and where they fall on whether the growth management plan is working or not.

WM: One thing I'm not sure of, you've talked about if the farm is surrounded by development.

SG: Yeah?

WM: And the farmer applies to have the same density?

SG: They're able to apply for a comp plan change that would give them the same density as their neighbors.

WM: Well, when you say that I take it to mean that they could put as many houses on that farmland as the surrounding development. Is that right?

SG: Right, right. I don't—in our county I don't think that particular bill is ever going to have an impact.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: Maybe in other counties, where—ah—they may not look—ah—I think when our comp plan changes are made they look at all those types of issues. They wouldn't want to leave an empty in-fill area. Our urban service area as it has changed it has seemed to be in an orderly manner. We're not prematurely developing any agricultural land or rural land while we're not skipping over property that is prime, or should be prime for development.

WM: I guess the question I have is; if you can have the same density on the farmland as you can on the adjacent development, wouldn't that raise the tax value of the farmer's land?

SG: It would—ah—with “greenbelt” if they were still farming they would be under the Green Belt law. But if they weren't able to farm, for whatever economic reasons, or if they decide to sell, then—yeah—it would be taxed according to the value, which would increase if there was more density.

WM: Okay. That clarifies it. One of the farmers I interviewed said that they wanted to be able to have the same density on their land as the developments around them. So, when it came time to sell it would have comparable value.

SG: Although, typically, a comp plan doesn't happen, unless you're at that point, to sell.

A lot of times it's not the farmer that applies for that. It's the developer. Sometimes the developer would apply for—you know—would make a—have a contract on the piece of property subject to a comp plan change.

Right now, most of our—the farmland in Hillsborough County that's converting to other uses is already in the urban service area. So this wouldn't give those people any more rights than they already have. Within the urban service area our lowest category is forty units per acre.

Whether they—ah—if they are currently zoned [for agriculture] they have every right to apply for re-zoning to whatever is currently allowed under the comp plan. That new law wouldn't change that at all. It would only apply to those people currently outside the urban service area. Then again, they'd have to be surrounded on 75 percent of their property line, by basically the urban service area.

I don't see that even occurring. When we change our boundary we don't do it in, like peninsular fashion. We'll do it in a broad brush, where the line moves out a mile, or however far they end up moving it—incorporate a whole area into the urban service area.

WM: Okay. Urban service area is a term you've used several times. When the future researcher comes along to use this [interview], maybe it would be worthwhile for you to explain that, for their benefit.

SG: Oh yeah. The urban service area is the boundary in the county where we expect most of the development to occur in a twenty-year period and where we expect to provide services, in that same period. And when I talk about services I mean roads, sewer and water.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: Of course there are other services. There's police, and law enforcement and fire protection, but that's provided countywide, even though there is a different level of service in the urban part of the county and the rural part of the county. There's different response times and that sort of thing.

WM: Would the urban service area, that would be within the city limits?

SG: No. It's into the county and—it's hard to explain it. I have a map, but that won't help here. (laughs)

WM: (laughs)

SG: But it certainly includes all of the cities. You know we have three cities [in Hillsborough County], Tampa, Temple Terrace and Plant City. But it also includes a portion of the unincorporated county. All of Brandon and it goes all the way down into

Ruskin, part of Wimauma and even all the way out to Valrico, past Brandon. So everything outside of those areas are considered the rural service area.

WM: Okay and is there a tax difference between the rural area and the urban service area?

SG: Well the only difference would be in terms of the values on the properties. The millage rate is the same. Now there would be some difference if you if—the county millage. There are other millages that we pay based on which of the river basins you're in, because those—ah—as sub-districts of the Water Management District, they also have taxing authority and so forth. So there are differences there, but the county millage is the same.

WM: That's one of the things this project has opened my eyes to is the complexity of county government. I guess people take it for granted and it doesn't get the attention that state and national government gets.

One of the men I interviewed said that the actions of the county commissioner effects him more than the representatives in Tallahassee.

SG: I can see that. It's more local and of course as more government pushed down to the local level, [there's] more responsibility to the local level. That probably happens more and more.

WM: Moving away from the general to the specific, but how did you get into government planning?

SG: I got my degree at the University of Florida's college of agriculture in food and resource economics. A lot of colleges call that agricultural economics. At UF it's called food and resource economics. When I was in my master's program I was working mainly in community development—economic impact issues having to do with agriculture. There was an opportunity to get a minor in urban and regional planning. They offered a series of courses that could give you that designation. I went through that program.

Initially, when I got my masters' degree I went to work for Sarasota County Extension Service, as an extension agent. Kind of like—I did a lot of the same things with—You know, extension agents, their main purpose is to help farmers. But it was more on production or a management aspect rather than overall government policy.

My current position was initiated by a group in the county. The County Commissioners formed an agricultural task force.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: They went out and—and first they “took a snapshot” of the industry. You know where it was today [and] what the impact was. They did economic impact study of the

industry and then moved into what some of [agriculture's] impediments were. One of them had to do with regulation and governmental relations. They proposed that a program be set up in the county government, within the Economic Development Department to assist on those issues. That's where this program was first initiated.

I found out about it through a friend and thought that my educational background and other experiences matched up well. I was brought into this position eight years ago.

It's kind of a unique position in that there is only one other in the state of Florida that is similar to ours. That's in Dade County. That was only started about a year ago. They modeled their program after ours.

WM: How do you think your education prepared you for this [work]?

SG: (laughs) I need to say something good in case my [professor reads this].

WM: Should I put this on pause while you're thinking about it?

SG: I think it was problem solving. That's what I do in this job. It's all about problem solving and communication. Even though you learn certain technical things in the University; my masters thesis and so forth that technical education may not apply to everything I do. But it's the overall experience of learning how to solve a problem and communicating your ideas and negotiating with other folks about issues. So that's what it comes down to.

WM: Seems like that's just about everybody's experience. What you learn in school helps you learn what you need to know when you get on the job.

SG: Right.

WM: You talked about communications. When I talked with Mr. Carlton yesterday he said one of the great things you did was you were able to translate, or absorb the myriad regulations and translate that so that the agricultural people could understand what they meant. Tell me about that.

SG: I haven't gone and—I didn't write a summary or anything like that, of particular regulations. But when you read land development code language, or comp plan language it's all in the "legalese" type language. It's very hard to understand. What I've done is I've taken that and gone out to different seminars, ore even one-on-one and just explain [the regulations] in simple terms what [they mean].

It's not something formalized that I've done. But when working with Dennis [Carlton], he's been on the Ag-Economical Development Council since it was formed, the first thing we did was tackle the whole comprehensive land use plan issue. We pulled out the agriculture section of the comp plan and took a look at it; it didn't make a whole lot of sense. And there was some conflicting language in there. We were able to boil it down to

a few issues that we wanted to address and write it in simple terms so that it couldn't be interpreted differently, because a lot of things do come down to interpretation.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: —Ah—that's what we've been able to accomplish through that process. But the—I've seen it and I've done the same kind of things in other areas. Whether working with computers, or other technology, trying to boil it down to simple language that everyone can understand.

WM: Translating it into layman's terms?

SG: Right. You know I do that when individual farmers contact me for help. They'll have either a citation or regulation in hand and they just don't understand what it means. It doesn't matter how much education you have. Those regulations are very hard to understand.

WM: Right. I can agree with you on that. I've stared at them blankly myself.

SG: (laughs)

WM: Tell me about the Ag-Economic Development Council.

SG: What I mentioned to you earlier, the agriculture task force, you know the recommendation to form the—ah— ag-program, which I'm manager of, they also proposed to have an ongoing council, basically an advisory council. The title is called the Agricultural Economic Development Council. [It] would provide direction for my program, but also provide recommendations to the County Commissioners. That has been very successful. Every issue that we've gone to [the] board [of County Commissioners] with, through the council, has received unanimous [support].

So they have really chosen the issues to work on very carefully, so that they have the most impact, for what they do. The council itself is unique because it's made up mainly of the commodity groups that are represented in the county.

Nine of the seats are occupied by major commodity groups in the county. Some of these groups have associations and many times it might be the executive director of that association. Other times it is an individual farmer that has been selected to be part of the council. In addition to the ag-commodity groups we have at-large representatives, who are really activists in the community. Sometimes they're environmental. Sometimes they are ag-law (there's one attorney on the group).

And by having some of those types of folks on the group we get some interaction and also get some credibility [for what we're trying to do] with those other organizations. They may have an inside man on agriculture, so they can have some input and we can get that "buy-in" from those organizations. There're thirteen voting members of the group. In

addition, we bring in all of the agricultural related agencies and staff people of other county agencies: Planning and Growth Management Department or our Environmental Protection Commission. We bring in folks from the Florida Department of Agriculture, [the Southwest Florida] Water Management District, DEP [Department of Environmental Protection], the Tampa Bay Estuary Program is part of it. When we have issues where we need technical expertise from some of those groups, its helpful to have those people involved.

WM: You said that several issues have come before the County Commissioners from the Ag- Economical Development Council, tell me about those.

SG: A recent one is about farm worker housing. There was an issue brought forth, probably about two years ago. You know we have a shortage of farm worker housing in the county. One reason that I've been able to identify is the difficulty in getting a permit for farmer worker housing.

Typically you'd want your farm worker housing closer to your production fields. It's out in the rural part of the county where the development potential is maybe one unit per acre or one unit per five acres. A farm worker housing permit allows you to go above that. Although it's only on a given piece of property, it's not like you're subdividing that property, but [at that time you were] allowed to put twelve units per acre, for farm, worker housing.

The process to get that approved involved a public hearing. [As] with any other land use decision, many times it becomes a political decision. Even if you get it approved there is no end to the appeals process, where adjacent landowners can appeal the decision.

So there is no certainty from the farmer that they're ever going to get the farm worker housing that they applied for.

In the first seven years I was in this job we only had about seven or eight applications for farm worker housing. So we saw that as a problem. In addition to having no new farm worker housing approved, for a lot of our older stuff was beginning to deteriorate. So people saw low quality farm worker housing out there but there was no new farm worker housing coming out to replace it.

So the planning and growth management department actually started the process with a task force, identifying the issues and this is one of the issues that we identified. The ag-council came forward with recommendations to make it easier [to get permits for farm worker housing]. As long as the projects met certain performance criteria, [the criteria includes:] setbacks and what type of housing and density and so forth—all that is incorporated. But, if it met those criteria and was in the rural part of the county, [the permit] could be approved by staff.

That actually made the process easier. We were able to get nine applications in, in the last six months when we'd only had seven or eight in the previous seven years. These are new

units that are going to be [of a] higher quality than the older units. So we will actually have an increase in higher quality units by making it an easier process than it had been previously. That seems to be—if something is easier you'd think you'd have [housing units of a lesser] quality. But that's what's happened if you've had an [increase] of higher quality housing. We'll see a lot of that lower quality housing [replaced by] higher quality. We'll have a positive impact on the provisions of farm worker housing in the county.

That was a specific recommendation that came out of the Ag-council. The Ag-council helped write the language itself, that was implemented into the land development code.

Another project was the Gulf Coast Research and Education Center. That's an arm of the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. The research center was located in Bradenton. Several years ago it was proposed to be closed. Just outright closed and property sold. Well, the ag-community (this is not directly related to the Ag-council) but the ag-community itself fought to have [the center] remain open. Actually they decided to keep it open and in the meanwhile look to relocate. The land itself, where [the center] was located was pretty valuable.

When the members of the Ag-council found out [the ag-community was looking for another piece property and rolling that money into a new research center] through our real estate department we were able to identify a piece of property that the county owned. We owned a 475 acre orange grove down in the south part of the county, that was serving as part of a purchase that was a buffer to our landfill. But this particular piece of property wasn't [serving as a buffer]. So the county had this surplus piece of property [and] the Ag-council came forward with the recommendation that we donate this property to the University of Florida [as a] site for that research center. And the County Commissioners approved that recommendation and also put money into the "pot" to [induce] the University to locate that center here. They chose our site over another site in Manatee County.

It's up and running now, helping local farmers with their production problems.

WM: That's great. Now have there been any issues that you brought before the County Commissioners that didn't "fly"?

SG: They've all "flown." Every recommendation has [been approved]. Now there are things that we don't bring [before the County Commissioners].

WM: (laughs) So the ones that won't work [you don't bring forward]?

SG: Yeah. There are things that are not fully mature—developed—that won't come forward. An example of that is one we just got approved a couple of weeks ago.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: It's a plan, a concept where, we realize as a community, that agricultural land provides [more] than just a place to grow crops. It provides open space, wildlife habitat, aquifer recharge, wetland, you know—all of these wonderful things. Well the farmer has been providing all those benefits to the community, since the “beginning of time.”

But they've been bearing the cost of providing those themselves, and there is a cost there. While we, as a community have been the ones to benefits. There is a concept where you pay the farmer for providing those benefits. This is a concept we thought of eight years ago, when the program first got started. It's called an agricultural conservation lease. Where instead of buying a conservation easement you're basically leasing a conservation easement.

This was a concept we thought of eight years ago, although it never gained traction. It wasn't the right time to bring it forward. But just recently the County Commissioners asked for new recommendations to protect agricultural land. So we brought that concept back out and updated it and fine-tuned it a little bit more. And just a couple of weeks ago the County Commissioners approved the program where the farmer would enter into a ten-year agreement to not develop their land. In return they would receive what's called a stewardship payment on an annual basis for that ten-year period.

If we would've brought it forward eight years ago, it might not have gotten approved. But we waited for the right time and it was approved.

WM: I've heard other people talk about—I don't know if subsidize is the right word use (in some places that's a cuss word)—but compensating the farmer for the services he provides.

SG: Right. And that's the way I see it, a compensation for services.

WM: Uh-huh. You talked about buying conservation easement, or leasing it as opposed to buying it. Could you explain the difference? I mean I know the difference between buying and leasing—

SG: A typical conservation easement is perpetual. The amount of the payment is based on the difference between the market value and the value [of the land when it's] in production.

It depends on what you're growing, but on average, probably about five thousand [dollars] an acre is about what ag-land is worth [when it is in agriculture]. Now the market value [as real estate] the value could be twenty thousand, forty thousand [dollars] an acre, so a conservation easement would be the difference. If the market value were forty thousand and the ag-value was five [thousand] it would be a thirty-five thousand dollar payment per acre for a conservation easement.

It would prevent the farmer from ever developing the property. The farmer would still have ownership of the property and still be able to use it for agriculture, but that would be the only use allowed—agriculture.

Now the lease is a little different, where it is much cheaper to accomplish this, though it's only a ten-year period that we're looking at. We're looking at it in a way to enhance the economics of the situation.

If the farmer is able to be competitive, in terms of profits they are more likely to stay in business, and you don't have to purchase the conservation easements. It's just like the difference between leasing a car and buying a car. You're only paying for the service during the period that you're receiving the service. It's a pretty economical way to achieve the same results.

WM: I'm not going to keep you a whole lot longer, because you've already burned up about an hour's worth of your time.

SG: (laughs)

WM: You talked about the planning and growth management—who would be a good person to talk to in there about working to plan the growth of the county and the activities of that office?

SG: I think you'd probably want to start with Bruce McClendon, the director.

WM: Uh-huh.

SG: There are two arms there. The Planning and Growth Management Department kind of handles the—ah—individual landowner, rezoning land development code issues. Now our Planning Commission handles comp plans. Probably the best person there would be Ray Chiaramonte. I can give you their phone numbers.

WM: Okay, great. And you're going to have to spell their names for me.

SG: I don't know if I can spell it (laughs)

WM: Okay. But if you give me the phone numbers and an approximation [of their names] that will get me there.

SG: Okay.

WM: When I was talking to Mr. Carlton he also mentioned there was a home builder person I should talk to about their works. He couldn't pronounce his name.

SG: Narcowitz. Joe Narcowitz. I don't have his phone number, to tell you the truth, but he is with the Tampa Bay Builders Association.

WM: Okay.

SG: We could probably look it up pretty quick. I'm sure they have a Web site.

WM: I'd be surprised if they didn't. Well, I've been throwing questions at you for about the past hour (Recorder is paused as Mr. Gran takes a phone call.)

WM: But anyhow, is there anything you want to comment on that I haven't asked about?

SG: Just that, in terms of agriculture, when people approach me it is always about the demise of agriculture and that agriculture is going to be gone. I would just say that the reports of our demise have been greatly exaggerated.

WM: That's what Mark Twain said.

SG: I believe that there is always going to be agriculture in the county. It may just look different than it does today. If you look at the crops that we grow and the ones that are able to maintain themselves—

Tape 1 ends; tape 2 begins.

SG: —versus urbanization, look at aquaculture, which is tropical fish, ornamental plants, blueberries, strawberries and vegetables, they make up about 20 percent of the [county's] acreage but they make up about eighty percent of the dollar value. So even if we were to lose the lower intensity type agriculture, we would still have a huge economic contributor to our economy.

WM: So we shouldn't write off the farmer just yet?

SG: Shouldn't write off the farmers just yet.

WM: Well I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me. And I always want to remind folks that the information you've shared with me will be deposited in the Special Collections of the University of South Florida's library and we need your permission for researchers to have access to this.

SG: Okay. Sure.

WM: I've got a release form I have to ask you to sign and I've been photographing everybody I interview. So can I take your picture?

SG: That's fine.

WM: Well, some people have declined, so you have that option.

SG: (laughs)

WM: But you also said you could get the phone number for Narcowitz and those others?

SG: Okay.

WM: Well let me shut this thing off.

end of interview