

### Preservation Task Force to seek ways to save historic places

The 15-member panel is intended to give the county and municipal governments some say in the fate of historic structures within their jurisdiction.

By LESTER R. DAILEY

PINELLAS COUNTY – If there's a lesson to be learned from the ongoing debate over whether the historic 1897 Belleview Biltmore Resort and Spa should be saved or razed for condos it's that the county and municipal governments are virtually powerless to prevent privately owned historic structures from demolition.

And, being on the National Register of Historic places, as the Biltmore has been since 1979, is no protection.

To rectify the situation, County Commissioner Ronnie Duncan persuaded his colleagues on the commission to create a 15-member Historic Preservation Task Force.

"This won't be just an advisory board," Duncan said. "The board will have some teeth in it so it can help frame long-term preservation policy in Pinellas County."

The task force will have its first meeting on Wednesday, Aug. 24, at 9 a.m. in the county Planning Department's conference room on the seventh floor of the Bank of America Building at 600 Cleveland Street, Clearwater. It will be a freewheeling brainstorming session, with Duncan as chairman.

"I'm trying not to have any preconceived notions," Duncan said. "We have some very talented people, and I'm anxious to hear their suggestions."

The panel members, who are not paid for attending the meetings that probably will be monthly, include historic preservation architects and staffers from the cities of Clearwater and St. Petersburg.

"We went out and sought folks who were in the preservation business, and we've got a pretty broad-based group," Duncan said. "They're very passionate about historic preservation."

The group will study models used in other communities to decide which ideas would work best in Pinellas. The options range from restrictive measures, such as tightening up current land use codes and ordinances, so they must take the age and history of buildings into consideration, and passing new restrictions on the demolition of historic structures, to granting tax breaks and other incentives to owners who preserve their historic structures and perhaps make them available for tours, seminars or other public uses at least once a year.

"As someone in the real estate business, I've always preferred the carrot to the stick," said Duncan, a commercial real estate broker. "We've got to make people aware of history and give them the tools in the toolbox to preserve and maintain it."

Sometimes it won't be possible to save the entire structure, he said, but saving the façade and allowing the rest of the structure to be rebuilt for modern uses is better than nothing.

The task force is a county entity, but cities can participate through interlocal agreements with the county. Duncan hopes cities such as Safety Harbor with a great deal of history and no effective means of protecting it, will sign on.

"Despite the animosity between the county and some of the cities in the past, we're hopeful the cities will participate," he said. "This wasn't created as a direct response to the Belleview Biltmore situation; we're trying to look at it from a bigger, countywide picture ... But if the Belleview Biltmore were in the unincorporated area, we'd have some means of addressing that."

Duncan said the task force will be "one more part of the checklist that developers must consider," and he's anxious to get it rolling.

"We've got to be greater stewards of our heritage," he said. "I'm excited about the opportunity to move this forward."

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