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West Park makes a comeback

BY CYNTHIA ROBY,

WEST PARK – After struggling to survive in its early years amid dire predictions of failure, the multigenerational bedroom community of West Park is booming.

With a state-of-the-art fire station opening this month, the transfer of property from the Florida Department of Transportation, and plans to annex the 14-acre McTyre Park from its neighbor, Pembroke Park, the debt-free city is more than surviving.

“Our financial status now is excellent,” West Park City Administrator Russell Benford said during a recent interview with the South Florida Times. “If you look at our past few audits, you’ll see that we are well ahead of where we thought we would be four years ago.”

In addition to having no debt, Benford said, the city also has a strong fund balance and nearly five months of operating reserves in the bank. “Cities view their financial health by the level of reserves and the level of debt,” he said. “A good target for most cities is three months of reserves, so now we are ahead of that.”

Benford said that some people looked at West Park as a city that was socio-economically not viable, “but our budget is close to \$12 million for an area that’s 2.2 square miles. I think people really did not sharpen their pencils and look at the vibrancy of the community.”

The city of West Park, incorporated in 2005, comprises the residential subdivisions of Carver Ranches, Twin Lakes, Utopia, Lake Forest and Miami Gardens. The city is home to 14,000 people.

Before the city’s incorporation, Benford said, there was some discussion about annexing the area into the city of Hollywood, “but the residents in the area got together and decided they wanted to incorporate into their own city.”

Flawed feasibility study

The city got off to a rough start. The Broward State Attorney’s Office in 2007 determined that a financial feasibility study used to convince voters to form the city was seriously flawed. But the State Attorney’s Office also determined that no criminal activity was involved in drafting the study.

The study grossly underestimated costs for fire, police and other services by millions of dollars, and overestimated the city’s tax base, according to the State Attorney’s Office. After nearly two years of questioning city, county and state officials and scrutinizing thousands of documents,

state prosecutors said they would file no charges related to the study or the city's incorporation process.

Since, then, Benford said, West Park has succeeded in garnering several grants from local, federal, government and private foundations. "Well over \$8 million in three and a half years," he said. "So we are ahead of where we thought we would be at this point."

West Park has also negotiated a contract with the Broward Sheriff's Office that allows both Pembroke Park and West Park to share BSO's police and fire departments.

"We share police and fire chiefs, fire trucks," Benford said. "It's a shared cost. Instead of going after police and fire departments for each community, we went to BSO together to look at shared services, as we only have one geographic area. We were able to save a lot of money."

There is no duplication of services, Benford said. "Having the contract has put West Park in a strong financial standing," he said.

West Park also contracts its planning and engineering staff, and public works department. "That allows us to control some of the fixed costs," Benford said.

The city has a total of 107 employees; 93 percent of them are contract employees, Benford said. He said that in West Park's last fiscal year [ending Oct. 1] the city had \$1 million in revenue over expenditures.

"That's an area of property tax reform," he said. "We did not have a tax increase." In fact, Benford said, West Park decreased its fire fees, maintained the same tax rates, and still had a sizeable surplus. "And that million dollars represents eight to nine percent of our budget, so we're talking about expenditures being 90 percent of the revenues, which is extremely healthy."

Dania Beach job

Despite his assurances that the city of West Park is financially stable, Benford put his hat into the ring to run another city. He was one of five finalists for the job of city manager in Dania Beach. Dania Beach commissioners this month selected Lake Worth City Manager Robert Baldwin as their next city manager.

Benford said he is happy in West Park, and offered no clear reason as to why he went through the application process in Dania Beach. He said he is not disappointed that he did not get the job.

Since the city of West Park was incorporated, the state of Florida has begun a reconstruction project, resulting in the widening of State Road 7 (also known as State Road 441). Part of the project runs along West Park's city limits, which has resulted in a part of the city's – and its tax base – land being sacrificed.

State Road 7 serves as the division between West Park to the east and Miramar to the west. “We were facing some difficult issues because the Florida Department of Transportation had to demolish buildings along 441 in order to accommodate the new roadway,” Benford said. “That was a big concern because it would shrink our tax base. No city wants to see viable commercial property demolished.”

According to Benford, West Park was able to engage in talks with FDOT about potentially reclaiming the 4-acre parcel of land. The four acres are located east of 441 between County Line Road and Hallandale Beach Boulevard. Portions of the land are needed for the roadway, and three large parcels purchased by FDOT are marked for retention ponds.

West Park is currently in negotiations with FDOT to transfer the land back to the city. “We’ve gotten about a half million dollars this year in grant funds from the state of Florida and the South Florida Water Management District to go in and redo some of those ponds,” said Benford. The city’s plan is to build a series of underground storage vaults for the water, he added.

“The water will still be on that site, but we will build concrete vaults or PVC vaults underground,” he said. “We can still build parking lots on top of that and a building. There will be new retail and commercial buildings on that site; the retention pond will be underneath the parking lot.”

Benford said the city will be able to accommodate FDOT’s need for storm water and will be able to reclaim and redevelop the property. “It will be developed into a more valuable tax base than what was there before.”

West Park officials plan to take ownership of the property this year, Benford said. “Before summer, hopefully. Once we take over, would like to see more dollars coming in.”

McTyre Park

West Park is growing. According to Benford, the city submitted a bill to the Legislature to annex the 14-acre McTyre Park, now located in Pembroke Park. McTyre is currently operated by Broward County. It serves West Park’s Miami Gardens subdivision and the area south of Hallandale Beach Boulevard. The property is located on Southwest 56th Avenue between County Line Road and Hallandale Beach Boulevard.

“Last year, the county said they would no longer provide services in that park because it is totally surrounded by municipalities,” said Benford. “We decided to step up and provide services there. We staffed it on October 1, and submitted a local bill to annex the property from Pembroke Park and bring it into West Park.”

Construction on the new fire station, located at Southwest 40th Avenue and 23rd Street in West Park, will be completed by the end of February, Benford estimated, and will service both the Pembroke Park and West Park communities. The station was a part of the city’s negotiations with Broward County. “They [Broward County] provided us the facility, are building the facility, and own both the facility and the land,” Benford offered. “BSO will operate and staff it.”