

# Putting a cork in growth isn't easy

The inevitable assault on the growth cap on Pensacola Beach came both right and schedule ... and before anyone really expected it.

I say it came right on schedule because, like clockwork, everyone knew the challenge would come the minute the proposed number of allowable residential units reached the cap. Then, all of a sudden, a cap that officialdom has held up as permanent — and thus a brake against an overbuilt beach — suddenly looks to many people as flexible as a Slinky.

And I say it came before anyone expected it because I don't think anyone expected the cap to be reached this quickly.

Not that anyone on Pensacola Beach really put much faith in the cap anyway, despite brave attempts to talk as if the cap did mean something, or that the assurances from various Santa Rosa Island Authority officials — that it did mean something — could be depended on.

The only thing stronger than the tides punishing the beaches on Santa Rosa Island is the pressure of money pushing against any growth limits on the island. Especially now, when hot sales make building condominiums look like the surest way to coin money outside of the Mint. This is a huge country with a lot of people, and there is only so much beach like ours left.

Some years ago a savvy beach investor told me that the real impetus for condominium development on Pensacola Beach would not come from the expected direction.

The expected approach, of course, has always been the idea that, as we witnessed



**CARL  
WERNICKE**

in places like Orange Beach and Gulf Shores, developers would buy up multiple single-family homes and combine the lots into condominium sites. Officials always say no, that won't happen here because on Pensacola Beach we have ... zoning!

Yes, I always laugh, too, on hearing this. Most zoning maps I've ever seen end up resembling a game of Dominoes once the zoning classifications start to fall, one after another.

But no, my source said, that isn't what will happen. He said the new march of the condominiums would come from the island's commercial leases. He said that while no one talks about it much, the restaurants, motels and other commercial leases are open to conversion to condominiums. All it takes is to change the lease.

That conversation came back to me last week as I read about the owners of a motel on the beach asking to convert their lease to allow a 20-story condo tower to replace the motel. (Although interestingly enough, the condo would have fewer rooms than the motel, and should generate less traffic.)

At the moment, there is a competition among developers to see who gets the last unit under the growth cap. The develop-

ment group that is starting to suspect that it doesn't have the pull of the other group is already grouching about the cap and suggesting that maybe it needs to go up.

Meanwhile, opponents of the proposed four-laning of Via de Luna are questioning whether that project isn't really about building the infrastructure needed to support a future increase in the cap, since insufficient infrastructure is one impediment to growth. Feeding that fire is the fact that the proposal to four-lane the road, instead of just adding a middle turn lane, came in the absence of any study demonstrating that — under the current cap — it would ever be needed.

Meanwhile, the specter of another old ghost is haunting the beach — the golf course. All of a sudden people are saying they are hearing that phrase in the halls — or at least the back offices — of the county courthouse. That, too, is feeding suspicion about what might ultimately be behind the Via de Luna project.

This might all seem like paranoia, but then we have the example of Perdido Key, where a cap of 4,116 units in 1998 became 8,150 units in 2002 ... based on a "flexible" formula that lets the "cap" be determined by infrastructure. In simple terms, if you widen the road you can increase the "cap."

Hmmm. It must be one of those twist-off caps.

*Carl Wernicke is the opinion editor. Call 435-8545, or write him at P.O. Box 12710, Pensacola, FL 32591. E-mail to CarlWernicke@PensacolaNewsJournal.com.*