

Inquiring Minds topic – 23 January 2015

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I saw it in the paper

DISCLAIMER: This paper is a surface look at but a few issues alive in southwest, Florida. It should not be used to form an opinion on those issues, but rather to examine why we might be advised to act locally.

The recession, they say, is over. Or ending at the least.

Florida is recovering better and faster than any of the 50 states. The biggest Sunshine State economic gains are coming in Naples. The Fort Myers-Cape Coral area is Number Four. This is the place to live.

That's locally, folks. Where we live and thrive. Or merely exist. It depends on how we deal with things. It is our neighborhood; our little place on a great big planet; a planet that is in near constant strife, strife that kills people, starves people, enslaves people, denigrates anyone who is different or worships a God by another name or is a friend of an enemy.

We can do little about that; we can speak out, we can vote, we can pray, we can support the causes that lead to peace, justice and, beyond just peace, loving brotherhood.

The people who do that represent a cacophony of opinions, rants, raves and, occasionally, wisdom. Our voices, wise or no, are almost inconsequential.

But we can do much more here at home. We can make things happen. And this is the year we ought to be about it.

First, some more facts on the recession, or ex-recession if you prefer.

Tourists spent \$33.3 million in Lee County in the year just ended. That's up 16 percent, a rise of historic proportions. Hertz is building its national headquarters in southern Lee County; about half of the 700 employees being transferred are settling in Lee, about half in Collier County. It's the ones with children who are going to Naples, for its superior school system.

Business growth in Lee for 2015 is predicted to be 4.3 percent; the Naples prognosis is 4.7 percent. Healthy. Chico's just completed its new headquarters building. Arthrex just got a large contract and is growing at an amazing rate. There is a new five-county job-seeking alliance for southwest Florida.

The Fort Myers downtown is in various stages of a transformation, a modern, larger convention center and a hotel to support it are being created. Downtown is already bustling. It has a busy arts and club scene at night and is a mecca for meandering families during the day.

There are more jobs; some of the present ones are paying more. But the job picture will brighten slowly. Employers are used to small staffs, and as business improves the lean and mean attitude will

reap great profits. Only competition, sure to come with better times, will cure that. Competition will urge employers to expand, to create more full time jobs and to pay competitive wages.

What to do?

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Your ideas and experience can answer that pressing question; share them in the News-Press' Mailbag or on the newspaper's Facebook page or offer a thoughtful op ed piece. The subjects being dealt with are unending. Some examples:

With all the tourists and new residents, what do we do about roads ---- from I75, where adding four lanes was planned until hard times hit, to the tourist traffic jams. The roads down the spine of Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel are prime examples of gridlock. They are awful. You can spend half a day just getting from one end to the other. What to do? What to do? Are you willing to pay to improve them? Study the road situation and then share your views with local officials. The discussions are in the paper, regularly. And of course there is stop-and-go Rt. 41. Want to go to Costco, anyone?

And then there are the many neighborhood issues. Take Shell Point Blvd. Please. The housing developments planned for each side will create a traffic nightmare unless it is done right. Demand that local powers that be let us in on the planning.

How do we know when it is time to act? You can read it in the paper.

What about the building boom that is coming slowly now, but eventually will get to pre-recession proportions.

Such will once again ignite the fights between developers and conservationists. Which county commissioner candidate favors your point of view? You can find out. It'll be in the paper.

Should we build hundreds of new homes east of I75 in the Buckingham area? The commissioners just said no. How about new homes and business next to an upper income development in Estero? The commissioners just said yes. Make sure you weigh in next time.

Should we restore the 20/20 program, the tax fund set aside to buy and preserve land, that has been dipped into for the general fund because of the recession? Know what 20/20 is and how it started? If not, read the paper, where the debate will rage.

Should the county reinstate its impact fees, those taxes added onto the price of new homes to pay for such things as all that roadwork we need. Read the pros and cons in the paper.

Should we pay millions to build a baseball stadium for a third major league team. That issue is broiling in the background. Is it worth the money? The facts and such have been and will be in the paper.

My doctor says that if I get a major illness to call 1-800-UNITED and head north. That is what he thinks of local healthcare. The Lee Memorial Health System holds 95 percent of the beds in Lee County; a situation that is a counter incentive to quality. Is my doctor right? The paper will give you all the facts on both sides.

You can go to the meetings of the health system's board, which is elected by the public. Did you know that? It is in the paper often. The paper will tell you when they meet. Go to a meeting. Run for the board.

Did you know that Lee Memorial could reduce rates by 72 percent if the government programs and big insurance companies paid the true costs of service? I don't know why you didn't know; it was the subject of a major investigation in the paper.

As was the fact that Lee's fire districts are spending millions in unnecessary dollars because they refuse to consolidate. There are 17 fire districts in Lee County and they are hurting; seeking new means of taxing. Combining district will save millions in administrative costs. Write a letter to the editor.

Quality of water issues are big in Lee. They are key to tourism. The situation is complex, involving fresh water coming down the Caloosahatchee (just outside our windows) and its potential damage to the estuary, local officials, the U. S. Corps of Engineers and the big sugar companies. Know the players. Know their plays. Read the paper. Again, what do do? Read the paper.

How many of you know of Curt Clawson? He is our congressman, serving in the first year of his first full term. He is a Republican. In his short time in office he told a reporter that he was going to "check with the leadership" before voting on an important issue, told another reporter that he checked with Tea Party Types before voting on a second issue, mistook some Capital Hill employees for foreign bigwigs in public and, two weeks ago, voted for a senator for speaker of the house. The end of a first term is the best time to get rid of a congressman. Do you want to do that? Or keep him? You can follow his activities and his positions ONLY in The News-Press.

Two Sundays ago, The News-Press printed a detailed look at the Florida 2015 legislative agenda. Know the issues.

You wouldn't be at Shell Point if you weren't good at something. Do you volunteer using your main talents. Off campus opportunities abound in the paper, which publishes a full page on health, welfare and character-building agencies every Monday.

Shell Point has more than 2,200 residents and 900 employees. Two hundred people; nay, two dozen, represent an effective voting bloc. What could the 3,000 of us do if we studied the issues and fought for what is good, right, true and honest and fair? Anything we wanted. As long as there is the paper to keep us informed.

I have just touched the surface of the ways that what goes on locally directly affects you.

My career, all but two years of it in community journalism, spans 60 years. Community journalism means newspapers, usually small ones, that care more about their local community than anything else. Most towns have only one such daily newspaper. Many also have weekly newspapers. Many others have only weeklies.

There are more than 1,750 daily newspapers in America. I'd say 90 to 95 percent of them think of themselves as community newspapers. There are thousands of thousands of weeklies. I couldn't find an accurate figure; I found more than 30,000, but in the states I know they missed a good share of the papers in their count.

Community newspapers I have worked on ended a furlough system for first degree murders, reformed the Massachusetts graft-ridden welfare system, changed a corrupt form of community in an

old mill city and took up thousands of causes of individuals who were being trampled by an uncaring government. Nobody else did that. No other person, no other institution, no other media outlet.

Community journalists lead the fight for integration in the south, at great peril to the editors, ended a race riot in Akron when the editor stood as the lone white man in the midst of the ghetto and told the rioters it was time to go home, and unearthed corrupt politician after corrupt politician after corrupt politician.

Community newspapers generally will not give you great writing (except for one column a week in The News-Press Wink Wink). They will not often give you brilliant analysis on national, international, social, philosophical and medical issues. They will not give you the depth that many of us in retirement seek. They alone will not keep you up on the national and international news. They alone are not all you need.

But you ignore what they do offer --- a daily look at the quality of life right around you --- at your own peril. And your community's peril.

It is their reporting that does the job. That and their interaction with you --- you can write a letter to the editor, post on their Facebook, attend their many forums, comment online and drop by the office and be sure that some editorial staffer will talk to you.

They also will listen to your suggestions:
I'll give you a head start with two stories I read recently.

1. Last week, a sports writer wrote this paragraph:

“Rising in polls, projections and RPI after an 8-1 start that included arguably the program's best non-conference road win, the Eagles (10-6) are a reeling, turnover-prone conundrum going into the start of Atlantic Sun Conference play Saturday at home against Stetson. “

Newspaper stories are meant to be read just once, so you can get all the news in the time you have. I read that paragraph three times and still did not fully understand it. Tell the News-Press to work on it's writing.

And early this month the News-Story ran a story, taken from a news-release, saying Lee Memorial was being fined one percent of its Medicare payment for 2015 for having too many preventable complications, such things as bed sores and infections. Earlier last year, Lee Memorial was also fined for having too many readmissions and poor patient satisfaction levels.

All those hospital stories were buried on Page 4, and lacked basic reporting --- how many readmissions, how many bedsores. Do bedsores hurt? How badly? What did the high infection rates do to the patients? The real story is not about statistics, but suffering people.

Tell the editors to do better. To do that, you have to read the paper. If you don't read the paper and you don't speak up, you have forfeited your right to complain.

The best writers and editors are those who love, trust and respect their readers. That is what I have done since I was age 18. That is why I want more readers, such as yourself. I want to call you family.