

The grassroots are on fire in Manatee County. Politicians should feel the heat

From the animal shelter to the Comprehensive Plan, local residents are proving that organized citizens can still change the course of local government — just in time for another election.

MARC R. MASFERRER

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If you want to know who's running Manatee County these days, don't just look at the six county commissioners presiding over their meetings.

Look at the people, from neighborhoods from Bradenton to Myakka City, and in between, filling the seats in front of them and waiting for

their chance to speak.

They are demanding a new animal shelter.

They are demanding they put the brakes on development of precious farmland.

They are demanding the county reopen their long-shuttered community center.

Something has changed in Manatee County.

Residents aren't just showing up to complain anymore. They're organizing. They're reading agenda packets and public records. They're packing commission chambers, writing letters, sharing information online and refusing to let controversial decisions quietly become a done deal.

They are refusing to be ignored.

Most importantly, they're winning.

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Issue after issue that appeared settled, decided, in many cases, behind the closed doors, has been reopened because ordinary citizens refused to take “no” for an answer.

The political shift began in 2024.

Grassroots-backed candidates Carol Felts, Robert McCann and Tal Siddique won seats on the county commission. George Kruse, long viewed as the commission’s most independent voice and a frequent critic of business-as-usual government, won another term.

Their opponents, bankrolled by developers and other monied members of the political establishment, lost decisively.

Commissioners learned voters were paying attention and were willing to replace candidates they believed had become too comfortable with the status quo, who had become too comfortable ignoring demands for change from the public.

This year, Amanda Ballard and Mike Rahn — two GOP commissioners often criticized by neighborhood activists as being too closely aligned with the development community and who voted for fewer protection of wetlands — face vigorous challenges from fellow Republican candidates. Similar grassroots-versus-establishment contests are underway for two other commission seats, including the District 1 seat left vacant by Felts’ death.

It’s not clear if the same enthusiasm for change that drove the 2024 results is present today. But who wins on Aug. 18 or in November is almost beside the point.

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The public started winning

Every elected official understands controversial votes look different in an election year.

Consider what's happened just in recent weeks.

After months of criticism over the county's handling of the Bishop Animal Shelter, commissioners rejected Ballard's proposal for a special property tax to build a new facility. Instead, they directed staff to study whether the county should replace the controversial modular kennel buildings with a permanent shelter.



Manatee commissioners reject special property tax for animal services

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Manatee County commissioners reject \$1.42 million for Bishop Animal Shelter

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Not long ago, county leaders defended those modular buildings.

Now they're studying whether to replace them.

Residents forced that conversation. And that conversion.

The same thing happened with the county's proposed Comprehensive Plan.



Public feedback postpones vote on new Manatee County comprehensive plan

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Commissioners postponed a vote on transmitting the sweeping rewrite to the state after residents argued the process lacked transparency and the public had too little time to review a 1,000-page document that will shape Manatee County for decades.

Hopefully, they will wait until after the general election, when at least two and maybe as many as four new commissioners are seated.

Then there was [the proposed indoor ice sports complex in Lakewood Ranch](#).

Residents challenged the location, questioned the process and convinced commissioners to reconsider a project that once appeared headed toward approval.

Large-load data centers followed a similar path.



Manatee County moves toward moratorium on large-load data centers

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Residents, encouraged by similar fights elsewhere in Florida, warned about water consumption, electric demand, noise and neighborhood impacts. Commissioners responded by moving toward a moratorium while staff develops regulations governing where those facilities can be built.

The next chapter may involve [short-term vacation rentals](#).

Residents, several of whom shared their personal horror stories at last week's commission meeting, say homes are being turned into revolving-door party houses that change the character of established neighborhoods. County officials are already considering new regulations.



Power is shifting

Taken individually, these stories don't have much in common.

Taken together, they tell us something important.

Power in Manatee County has shifted.

Previously, the conventional wisdom was simple.

If the development industry wanted something badly enough, it usually got it. Residents were out of luck.

Maybe not every time.

But often enough that many residents stopped believing they could make a difference.

That's what makes this moment different.

The commission isn't hearing only from developers anymore.

It's hearing from neighborhoods.

And, at least lately, neighborhoods are winning.

That doesn't mean the grassroots are always right. Reasonable people can disagree about the Comprehensive Plan, the animal shelter, data centers, vacation rentals or an ice sports complex.

But for years, too many residents believed speaking for three minutes at a county commission meeting was little more than political theater.

That assumption suddenly looks a lot less certain.

The lesson for residents is obvious.

Participation works.

Citizens delayed a vote on the Comprehensive Plan.

They forced commissioners to reconsider the future of the animal shelter.

They slowed the proposed ice sports complex.

They pushed the county toward a moratorium on large-load data centers.

Vacation rentals could be next.

That's an impressive record for people without paid lobbyists, political consultants or deep-pocketed political action committees.

The lesson for elected officials is equally obvious.

Don't mistake a quiet room for a satisfied public.

Residents are paying attention. They're reading the backup materials. They're organizing neighbors. Most importantly, they're remembering who voted for what.

Maybe commissioners have reconsidered these issues because they concluded residents were right.

Maybe they're worried about facing an energized electorate.

Most likely, it's both.

Either way, citizens are shaping county policy in ways they haven't for years.

The real story isn't about animal shelters, data centers, vacation rentals, sports complexes or even the Comprehensive Plan.

It's about power.

For a long time, many residents believed they had lost theirs.

Now they're taking it back.

County commissioners would be wise to remember that the next time they're tempted to dismiss a room full of frustrated residents as just another noisy crowd.

They're not.

They're voters.

And voters have a habit of showing up twice.

First at the microphone.

Then at the ballot box.

Marc R. Masferrer, a journalist for more than three decades, including 20 years in Bradenton, has received multiple awards for his writing, including for commentary writing from the Florida Press Club for work published in [The Bradenton Journal](#). You can reach him at Marc.R.Masferrer@gmail.com. You can also like [The Bradenton Journal on Facebook](#).

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