

BONITA

From page 1

Springs, of course, Florida's northernmost tropical town (average annual temperature of 65 degrees or above), where the Gulf of Mexico begins in the west, the western Everglades end in the east, and Collier County drops away on the town's southern boundary like an eccentric and well-fed cousin.

At least, that's where we were "before we went through this craziness we've just experienced," as 30-year resident and commercial Realtor Vickie Meyer-Manz, of Meyer-Manz Commercial Real Estate, describes the economic crash.

"The market is soft, now, no question," she adds in heroic understatement.

So soft that the many "for sale" or "for lease" signs in Bonita these days seem to be frozen in place, as common in some neighborhoods now as pedestrians. So soft that commercial real estate prices that ranged up to about \$30 a square foot in 2003 or 2004 now seem like fantasy dreams that ended abruptly with the sober dawn — vivid, but unreal. And so soft that the silence is almost deafening following the cessation of glowing adjectives and big-dollar dreams hammered out like drum rolls.

"Everything around here was based on the construction industry and real estate sales — it was based on expansion, from your restaurants to dry cleaning down to your bank account," says Ben Nelson, the town's new mayor. "So when the housing market tanked it took everybody with it."

"I don't think there was a realization that would happen. But even though you see these restaurants and others going out of business, and everything else tightening down, the strong ones do survive. There's a really solid core of businesses here."

That's where we are now.

The collision: history, ambition and recession

Lying under the struggle for survival is a town arguably as vibrant and as steadily progressive as any in Florida.

Bonita is the home of a tenacious group of business people and residents who continue to polish up their parks, preserve and expand their green spaces, encourage their artists, protect their cultural identity, and maneuver to make the town a haven for small business entrepreneurs, say those who live and work here.

It is also a place where tax rates for property owners have gone down every single year this decade, a fact that's about to change for the first time, predicts Nelson.

"We're going to have to raise the tax rate this year as our assessed values go down, so a person who paid \$200 before is still going to pay \$200 on a property," he explains. "That's if we want to maintain certain services and benefits. I always get people saying, 'You have to do this or you have to fix that,' and I'm of the opinion that if you want something, somebody else shouldn't have to pay for it — you should. I was raised that way. So it should prove a really interesting budget session in the next couple of months."

In the next couple of weeks, meanwhile, Nelson plans to meet with a cadre of experts — engineers, architects, developers, business people — who can act as a "think tank, for lack of a better word," he says.

"The first meeting will just be me, no other elected officials, so it won't be public."

In Nelson's opinion, he says, a public meeting that first time would inhibit candor.

"So I hope to get these people who



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO ROGER WILLIAMS

Longtime Bonita Springs residents Jeff Meyer and Vicki Meyer-Manz.

you have to pay anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000 to say anything, sometimes, to come in and say anything they want, without worrying about it."

For free, of course — as concerned Bonita citizens in a hard economic time.

After that, says Nelson, every meeting ever after will be public, and will include think tank ideas that might boost redevelopment in historic Bonita and elsewhere.

One of the mayor's major ambitions is to change the city's codes or permit requirements, making it quicker and easier for small businesses to get started.

"That's what we're going to try, and business people love the idea of government doing something friendly toward small business, instead of being a roadblock," Nelson explains.

"The old codes protected us from ourselves — there were good reasons for them, sometimes. But we need a commonsense approach to rules, since if we require somebody to spend \$100,000 to bring an old place up to code for a small business that will only bring in \$500 a day, or something like that, they're never going to do it. Wouldn't that be weird?"

The confluence of all these events and plans is the product of an eight-year municipal history that's collided with a recession, many say.

In the spring of 2000, what used to be "just a little fishing and farming village" (that quote can be attributed to any one of scores of residents) kicked off its operation as a city, complete with 14 city staffers. Like a surfer who'd never seen a bad wave, Bonita's fortunes rose on a roaring economic tide that put Florida, and southwest Florida in particular, at the pinnacle of good times.

Nelson, who arrived here as a 4-year-old in the late 1950s, has seen it all. A general contractor and the owner of Nelson Marine Construction, which he bought from his father (also a hardware store owner in town) in 1980, he's the only elected official who remains in city hall from those halcyon days of incorporation at the beginning of the decade, when he became a District 6 councilman.

Judged by numbers and statistics, the town has been a startling model of economic success.

City records show that between 1999 and 2003, the assessed value of properties went from \$3.51 billion to \$6.4 billion, and then more than doubled again to an astounding \$13.4 billion as of the end of 2007.

While the town's wealth increased

hugely, the tax rate declined for property owners: in 2000 they paid \$1.22 for every \$1,000 of assessed property value, and by 2007-2008 that had dropped to a mere 72.44 cents.

Now the town has a staff of about 60, a population of about 43,000 that includes roughly 20 percent Hispanics (up from 32,000 or so in 2000, according to the Census Bureau), and more than 40 square miles of incorporated land.

It has sugar-sand beaches on the Gulf of Mexico as far north as Lover's Key. It has city roads that end practically in the parking lot of the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) of 60,000 acres, all of it public land, and wild. And it even has an enviable little river, the Imperial, which slides out of the traditional eastern wetlands into Estero Bay and the Gulf like a dark silent rope, tying residences and the town center to each other, and to a larger world.

Old and new in business

Vickie Meyer-Manz and her husband and business partner, Jeff Meyer, live right on the Imperial River in old Bonita. Their son, Randy Meyer, owns Everglades Shirt Factory and Outfitters in Lighthouse Square west of new U.S. 41, which the Meyer-Manz team owns and leases, along with a Mediterranean-style professional and retail building she designed herself, called Oak Creek Crossing, west of old U.S. 41.

There is commercial space for rent in both locations, and although they're sticking to their list prices more or less, she says, now everything is more negotiable than it might have been a few years ago.

"We have two or three units available at Oak Creek Crossing, for example, and our asking price is \$17.50 per square foot, with a \$4 (charge for insurance and upkeep)," she says.

Manz moved to Bonita from Fort Lauderdale when her son was just a year old, in 1979, "because I wanted to raise him in a community that I was a part of, where neighbors knew each other," she recalls. "Now the population has more than doubled — and I didn't just stand back and watch, I participated in that. So it's a good thing, not a bad thing."

She also tried the gated community life that distinguishes parts of Bonita Springs in such developments as Bonita Bay, and farther east in Quail Ridge, Worthington, Huntington and Palmira — but she did it in Collier County.

"When Randy was ready to go into

middle school, I thought, 'Maybe he should go to Collier schools,' so I sold a property in Bonita Springs and moved to Imperial golf course gated community.

"For me, it was like living in no place. The neighbors left in the summer, and all they wanted to talk about was what they wanted to do up north. There was no history in those communities, and I'd never live in one again."

What she loves about Bonita, she says, is its history and small-town personality.

"Some people in my neighborhood are not in a higher economic level, but we're rich in diversity, people care about the neighborhood and the town, and they don't want to have somebody dictate to them whether they can do this or that."

The biggest dictator

But in or out of gated communities, the biggest dictator these days is the economy.

And in economic and business terms, it is a larger world here, now. Few business owners or investors are merely Bonitans selling to and buying from other Bonitans, anymore.

To reach an owner of the Hickory Bay Boathouse off Bonita Beach Road where boat slips are for sale, for example, you might have to call the boat house, where a manager will tell you to call the number of an owner on the east coast, Ed Markowitz, who will in turn politely ask you to call his partner back in Lee County, Ted Schiafone.

That's the model of contemporary Bonita Springs, where economic ties, investments and information are spread out across the state, and beyond.

Markowitz and Schiafone own the Back Bay Improvement Group, which did the financing, bought the property and restored it, then began selling the 108 slips before the market sputtered, says Schiafone.

"We've sold 77, we have 31 left, and we've been at it about three years," he says.

All the indoor slips but one have been sold — that's listed at \$129,000, with space to accommodate a 30-foot boat. The 30 more expensive outside slips, suitable for 35-foot boats, list from \$139,000 to \$189,000.

"We haven't dropped the list price much since we started," says Schiafone, "but the market has definitely slowed. There's as much curiosity, but fewer buyers. People feel like they have to sell a second house first, or do something else, before they buy."

And the list price is definitely negotiable, which is the case across the board in business here, from the arts to real estate to food.

In the lustrous gem of Riverside Park, for example, tucked on the south bank of the Imperial River across from the historic Everglades Wonder Gardens, six heart-pine cottages that were resurrected, restored and moved to the park center by the city are rented to artists for \$250 a month (one is open for rent, now).

It's there, in cottage number 6, that Beverly Fox, a Maine native and decade-long Fort Myers resident, put the public front on her business two years ago (she makes and sells fine jewelry in galleries from Long Island to Sanibel Island, she says).

On a Friday morning in June, with the two-story, high-ceilinged Liles Hotel — now the city code enforcement office — devoid of activity, Fox worked in solitude nearby. There were no visitors in the park and none among the cottages, nor were any of the other artists in their cottages.

Like any business person in Bonita, Fox is making major adjustments to survive, and she remains brightly,