



SOURCE: Manatee County

STAFF MAP: BARRY MCCARTHY

Plan splits commission

By DALE WHITE

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MANATEE COUNTY — Two redevelopment zones Manatee County created 12 years ago to tackle blight are now absorbed into a larger one that spans most of mainland Bradenton and includes several affluent neighborhoods.

And the County Commission is not of one mind as to whether that is an entirely good idea.

Commissioners Michael Gallen, whose district included the former 14th Street Community Redevelopment Area, and Robin DiSabatino, whose district included the former South County CRA, say there are no guarantees that taxes collected from the new, larger zone will go toward eradicating blight.

They express concerns that money from the new Southwest County Tax Increment Financing District will instead get channeled into upper-class or middle-class neighborhoods that need help the least.

This summer, the commissioners voted 5-2 to dissolve the two CRAs. DiSabatino and Gallen cast the dissenting votes.

The commission replaced those 12-year-old redevelopment zones with the new Southwest County Tax Increment Financing District (TIF District), which includes the area south of Manatee Avenue between Palma Sola Bay and the Cortez fishing village to the west and an eastern boundary that mostly follows U.S. 301.

The TIF District functions the same way as a

INTERESTED?

A community meeting about the new Southwest County Tax Increment Financing District will be Aug. 12, at 5:30 p.m., at the South County Library, 6081 26th St. W., Bradenton.

CRA. As real estate values rise within its boundaries, the extra property taxes collected within a CRA or a TIF District are to be reinvested there for upgrades such as sidewalks, streetlights and parks.

Yet there is a significant difference.

While state law makes the requirement of a CRA, "a TIF does not have to be a blighted area," Commissioner Robin DiSabatino said.

The new TIF District includes poorer affluent neighborhoods from Palma Sola Boulevard to Whitfield Estates — as well as potential development areas such as the future Long Bar Pointe and Lake Flores.

The TIF District will have "the benefit of higher-priced properties" and can "allocate money in areas where necessary," DiSabatino said. "A lot more money will be coming in. ... That's a positive."

The commission decided that the new district will receive 50 percent of the revenue from future increases in its tax base, with the rest going to the regular county budget.

The base year for the TIF is 2013-14. So, it can start collecting money in the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

Based on a prior estimate that the tax base within the TIF District would increase about 3 percent,

county budget officials initially presumed it would bring in \$400,000 in its first year.

With the property appraiser now saying the countywide tax base will be up 7.4 percent, that dollar figure may be higher.

DiSabatino and Commissioner Michael Gallen did not want to disband the two CRA advisory boards. Spending decisions for the TIF are to be made by the elected commissioners.

Still, Gallen and DiSabatino acknowledge why the Urban Land Institute recommended the county consider replacing the smaller redevelopment areas with the larger TIF District.

Both CRAs have been struggling in recent years.

In 2002, the county created the two CRAs. Gradually, as property values rose, the two redevelopment areas could invest in improvements.

The South County CRA, for example, installed streetlights, sidewalks and crime prevention cameras, upgraded Pride Park and paid for additional law enforcement patrols.

The smaller 14th Street CRA devoted its resources to improving appearances in its business district.

When the recession hit and property values started plummeting, so did the CRAs' income — forcing them to indefinitely postpone projects.

In seven years, the 14th

Street CRA saw its tax base increase as much as \$54 million — which generated more than \$357,000. That increase in value over the 2002 tax base gradually dropped to \$25 million, bringing the CRA's income down to about \$165,000.

Funding for the South County CRA, where taxable properties are mostly rental housing, "completely collapsed," said Cheri Coryea, the county's director of neighborhood services.

The South County CRA saw its tax base increase more than \$230 million, generating a peak of \$1.5 million for the agency in 2008. By 2014, its declining tax base was worth just \$11.9 million more than it was in 2002 — bringing in \$78,000 for the CRA.

Gallen and DiSabatino want firmer guarantees about where future TIF allocations will be spent.

DiSabatino said, after learning they are in the TIF District, more affluent neighborhoods are likely to come before the commission and insist they want their share of TIF money saying: "Pick me. Pick me. I want a project."

"There's no stopping a future board from investing it all on 75th Street or Manatee Avenue," said Gallen, who would have preferred to assist the 14th Street CRA by expanding its boundaries to incorporate more properties.

Gallen said he still wants to see stricter rules about TIF spending priorities. "As an attorney, I want it in writing. ... I'm still going to fight to have those dollars spent on the (U.S.) 41 corridor."

